

**STUDIES****Region as Ecology in the Works of  
Rita Joe****By Susie DeCosta**

The poet, memoirist, and editor Rita Joe (1932-2007) is an accomplished and significant figure in Atlantic Canadian literature. In her lifetime, Joe published four collections of poetry and a memoir entitled *Song of Rita Joe: An Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet* (1996) that features poems and photographs interwoven with a prose text about her life. She also co-edited and contributed to *The Mi'kmaq Anthology* (1997), a collection of poetry, short fiction, memoirs, and essays by Mi'kmaq writers; a second volume of *The Mi'kmaq Anthology* dedicated to her memory was published following her death. Several of her works are still in print, and new selections have been published posthumously including a recent collection of selected poetry, *The Blind Man's Eyes* (2015), as well as *For the Children* (2009). Among Joe's many accolades is her induction into The Order of Canada, as well as several honorary doctorates. The National Arts Centre in Ottawa hosted a setting of Joe's poem "I Lost My Talk" to film and music in early 2016, highlighting Joe's experience as a student in a residential school in Shubenacadie Nova Scotia. Joe's writing is included in several anthologies of Indigenous and feminist Canadian and Atlantic Canadian literature such as *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), *Words out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada* (1999), and *Kelusultiek: Original Women's Voices of Atlantic Canada* (1994). Yet little critical work has been done on Joe's writing to date.

Of the little attention paid to her works, much of the focus has been on Joe's "gentle" approach. The critics Kirsten Sandrock, Danielle Fuller, Herb Wyile, and Sam McKegey all argue that Joe's poetry proposes reconciliation and a peaceful relationship between the groups who currently live on the region's land. According to these scholars, Joe wants not only to reclaim and affirm the historical connections between the land and her own people, but also to encourage understanding between the settlers who currently live on the land and First Nations more generally. For instance, Wyile argues that "Joe's philosophy is very much a positive, conciliatory, and healing one, stressing the need for Native peoples to assert their pres-

ence, their story, and their culture, but gently rather than radically or polemically” (107). Similarly, McKegney coins the term “affirmativism” to describe Joe’s “gentle” stance, explaining that it “is neither a trite attempt to ‘look on the bright side’ nor [a] stoic Christian endurance. Joe . . . actively pursues a scenario in which she can achieve some joy” (107). For her part, Fuller (2004) believes that Joe’s attempts to include positivity in her writing “reverse[s]” negative stereotypes of First Nations people by “providing a ‘Native version’ of Mi’kmaq history” (170), while Sandrock sees Joe’s “nonviolent” stance as resistant to standard approaches to both postcolonial and regional discourse; she explains how this stance “challenges us to rethink . . . continuing paradigms of power in postcolonial and gender criticism by pointing the way towards a nonviolent revolution” (90). To Sandrock, Joe’s writing takes a different approach to the postcolonial method of “writing back,” which she sees as actively resisting colonial powers; in contrast, Joe had a “dictum of kindness” in her personal life and a “[p]attern of being a good girl” evident through her relationships especially in her marriage (88). In other words, Sandrock believes that Joe’s kindness kept her from asserting her stance against colonizing power structures in Canadian society.

I agree with these assessments, and I can understand why Wyile, McKegney, Sandrock, and Fuller all wish to apply the term “conciliatory” to Joe and her writing, since the term suggests a desire to forgive and move forward. Moreover, this body of scholarship on Joe’s writing provides a succinct characterization of some of her poems and interests. Overall, however, it tends to overlook her critiques of European colonizers’ uses of land. Critics who share the view that Joe’s poetry is “gentle” or “conciliatory” may risk containing her writing in a position of subordination to a settler-defined region and the larger nation. Further, these views restrict interpretations of her work to a Eurocentric theory and reinforce the worldview of what James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson and Marie Battiste (2000) have named diffusionism. As Henderson explains, Eurocentric diffusionism is based on the idea that there are only a “few human communities (or places or cultures) [that] are inventive and thus remain permanent centres of cultural change or progress” (*Mi’kmaw* 21). The present analysis will move beyond these readings of Joe and her writing in order to describe the subversive ways Joe resists and disrupts the dominant discourse of Maritime regionalism through her affirmation of traditional ways of knowing.

In many of her poems, Joe affirms a longer-term presence of Mi’kmaq people in the region by modifying the colonial narratives that have dis-

torted that history. Joe's poetry about local geographic formations sustains a connection to the land that began long prior to European exploration and colonization. Some of Joe's poems demonstrate that a relationship with a place necessitates direct experience with the land as well as the plants, animals, humans, and spirits of that land. These poems resignify Maritime space as continually inhabited from past to present by Mi'kmaq people, thereby challenging settler narratives of the region that depict it as empty. Moreover, they depart from the anthropocentric version of regionalism that situates human beings at the top of a hierarchy of living things by demonstrating relationships to land beyond possession, control, and occupation, and emphasizing a collaborative, interconnected, and ongoing relationship between all living things on the land. Within this interconnected relationship, there is no need for a human-made claim over land, and there is no need for a claim of a certain group occupying the land first. Instead, Joe's poems frame connections between all living things that coexist in an area and have done so over time.

Given the colonial history of First Nations and European relations in Canada, I deploy the term "regional" as a referent for a Mi'kmaq writer tentatively, provisionally, and with some important caveats. First, Mi'kmaq "regions" do not equate with Canadian or Maritime regions, as they have different political, cultural, and geographical boundaries. Mi'kmaq territory, called Mi'kma'ki, overlaps with the lands that are referred to as the Maritime provinces, and it extends beyond them into Quebec, Newfoundland, and the American state of Maine (Battiste, *Mi'kmaq* 146). In an essay on literary regionalism and First Nations literature of the Prairies, Mareike Neuhaus explores the idea of studying Native writers within a regionalist critical framework. As she points out in relation to Prairie regionalism and Cree writing, the "Prairies" refers to a "region whose very political, cultural, and social specificities always also imply a colonial project. More specifically, the word conjures up the politics of regionalism in a modern settler nation-state and, by implication, the histories of colonialism and settlement" (89). Certainly, "the Maritimes" invokes a similar political region with an analogous history of violent and coercive invasion, settlement, and forced assimilation. According to Neuhaus's reading, I too may be engaging in a colonial activity by writing about Joe as a "regional" Maritime writer, where "Nova Scotia" or "the Maritimes" may not be the region with which Joe identifies.

## **Ecosystems and Indigenous Knowledge**

In their collaborative work *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge* (2000), Battiste and Henderson prefer to use the term “ecology” rather than “place” because

[t]he ecologies in which we live are more to us than settings or places; they are more than homelands or promised homelands. These ecologies do not surround Indigenous peoples; we are an integral part of them and we inherently belong to them. The ecologies are alive with the enduring processes of creation itself. As Indigenous peoples, we invest the ecologies with deep respect, and from them we unfold our structure of Indigenous life and thought. (*Protecting* Ch.1)

This idea of ecology differs significantly from the ideas of place settlers use. Whereas settlers stake a claim to land that they perceive as previously unoccupied and without history, Mi’kmaq people need not stake a “claim” to land that is part of a system with which they are already integrated. This model is not one of possession, rather, it is centred on a relationship with land and all of its inhabitants and elements. In applying this idea of ecology from Battiste and Henderson’s explication of Indigenous worldviews to an understanding of Joe’s poems, one might consider that she, unlike her Euro-settler predecessors in Maritime literature, does not need to make a “claim to the land” because she already belongs to it. In contrast to a Euro-centric view, which dictates that humans and nature are separate (Battiste and Henderson, *Protecting* Ch.1), Indigenous peoples maintain a sense of connection to lands no matter how those lands have changed.

Dispossessing Mi’kmaq people from their lands was and is part and parcel of destroying their ways of life and knowledge base, as traditional practices may seem to become less possible after changes are made to the land. Battiste makes this point in her essay “Structural Unemployment: the Mi’kmaq Experience.” She argues that the beginnings of “‘reserved’ lands ...acknowledged as exclusively for the use of Indians” coincided with changes in the Maritime economy and Mi’kmaq economy that occurred at a “point that the traditional Mi’kmaq way of life was no longer possible at all” (139). Yet, as Joe demonstrates in her poems, changes to the land cannot destroy her culture, identity, or her sense of belonging. Within the Indigenous worldview Battiste and Henderson describe, the ecosystem is “the ultimate source of knowledge” (*Protecting* Ch. 2); it is located in a particular geographic area, and everything within that area is interconnected and impossible to understand separately. As Battiste and Henderson explain, “traditional ecological knowledge is highly localized and it is

social. Its focus is the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, spirits, and land forms in a particular locality” (*Protecting* Ch. 2). Flux and change are part of the world, and no ecosystem remains the same over time. The structure of Indigenous knowledge allows Indigenous people to “reunify the world or at least reconcile the world to itself” as a way to deal with “flux, paradox, and tension,” and they do so through applying their traditional knowledge in the understanding that all living things are on equal footing (Battiste and Henderson, *Protecting* Ch. 2).

Joe’s poem “Graphics of Life” provides a good model with which to understand the concept of Indigenous ecology. In the poem, the speaker affirms her Aboriginal identity by viewing and interpreting changes that have occurred in the ecosystem through forces of nature. She reflects on ancient Mi’kmaq “sketches” in the land, rock drawings that Mi’kmaq ancestors created to depict Mi’kmaq history and legends. She affirms the resilience that traditional ways of knowing provide for Mi’kmaq people while also making implicit arguments about written Aboriginal history. The speaker describes how the land has changed over time, erasing any obvious visual presence of the Mi’kmaq history of that place:

The graphics of life are firm  
Identity comes from view  
Brothers we are  
The honoured Micmac of Nova Scotia.  
The erased trail across the deep  
Dry sea where people once lived.  
A rooted dream  
Taken away and rewritten.  
The sketches of life show  
those who lived  
arose by toil  
their shade left behind in picture-writing.  
(*Song of Eskasoni* 33)

The poem is brief and spare; the short lines indicate a careful and attentive voice. Lally Grauer believes that Joe’s “pared down syntax and diction [and the] plainness of [her] language create a penetrating directness” (xxv). The placement of line breaks obstructs the poem’s sentences, slows down the pace, and encourages the reader to carefully contemplate one small portion of the poem at a time, highlighting the poem’s imagery of a trail slowly changing over centuries. Each line offers only a portion of the

bigger picture and depends on those before or after in order to gain a more complete image, reflecting a slow change in the landscape. Moreover, the “penetrating directness” (Grauer xxv) of the short lines brings readers in contact with the ancient history of the land, a history that seems to mingle with the land’s present state. “Graphics of Life” gestures toward the length of time the Mi’kmaq have inhabited this area, as people who have been part of the ecology since the sea was dry.

Joe’s speaker recounts nature’s erasure of a trail over centuries of shifting and changing earth, as a sea becomes dry land over time beyond the control of any human. Yet the words “erased” and “rewritten” imply an active agent behind these phenomena. As the movement of the sea rewrites the people’s dream, it suggests that the people and nature share the same dream, affirming the ecological approach that Battiste and Henderson describe. As Joe writes in her introduction to *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*, “I have often told my children that if we recorded our own history through writing, it would be different. Who knows, maybe someday a record will be discovered written by Aboriginals in the many lands they lived” (8). In her creative work, including “Graphics of Life,” Joe refers to this written Aboriginal history as one inscribed directly on and in the land itself. Her affirmation is situated in a history of arguments that Indigenous peoples have long possessed the technology of writing. Kahgegahbowh (George Copway) (1818-1869), an Ojibwa writer of the nineteenth century, describes the complexities of the Ojibwa language for a European audience in his book *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* (1851). He explains that others before him have “followed too much the English idiom in forming a grammar of the Ojibway language” (126). He refers to what critics call Eurocentrism, a dominant worldview that permeates “many smaller historical, geographical, psychological, sociological and philosophical theories” (Battiste, “You Can’t” 6), and specifically to twentieth-century Eurocentric theories on the supposed superiority of written and alphabetic languages over oral and pictorial ones.

Copway also describes in detail the many forms of written records of community history “written on slate rock, copper, lead, and on the back of birch trees” and deposited in certain locations where they are regularly updated by knowledgeable community elders (132). He argues that “An Indian well versed in [written Ojibwa figures] can send a communication to another Indian, and by them make himself as well understood as a pale face can by letter” (132)—that is, that written Ojibwa language is just as effective as written European languages. The point disputes the prevailing

belief that Indigenous peoples lacked the technology or ability to produce written histories, a belief that Joe challenges through “Graphics of Life.”

The speaker in “Graphics of Life” describes the written and rewritten “dream” of the people who once lived on the land as physically “rooted” in the ground like a plant, signifying a historic connection between Mi’kmaq people and specific land. Even though their trail is altered over time, it still manages to leave remnants of marks upon the land, a “shade...in picture writing” (*Song of Eskasoni* 33), evidence of the past that appears in written form. The idea that the people had “a rooted dream” established for a long period of time that was later “taken away and rewritten” emphasizes the change in the land and its inhabitants over time and a continual evolution of Mi’kmaq people in relation to their ecosystem and its changes, including the presence of Europeans and their alternative histories. It also emphasizes a fundamental Mi’kmaq stake in the land established in part through a written Mi’kmaq history. Writing is not simply a metaphor for Mi’kmaq presence on the land in this poem. It is a technology that Mi’kmaq people possess. Since the alleged lack of such technology is often part of the justification for displacing and dispossessing Indigenous people, Joe’s contention that it exists rejects this rationale for dispossessing Mi’kmaq people in the first place.

### **Buildings, Structures, and an Alien Landscape**

The idea of dispossession also appears in poems about Euro-settler-constructed buildings and physical structures that visibly and physically alter the land. Joe’s speakers comment on the experience of their community losing land from under its feet while still standing on it; the “alien ... culture” (*Song of Rita Joe* 113) represented in “Your Buildings” and “Hated Structure: Indian Residential School, Shubenacadie” by colonial architecture temporarily disorients speakers on the land even as they continue to inhabit it. Images of modern buildings highlight the dissolution of a way of life distorted by the altered landscape of “alien” (*Poems* 4) architecture and building materials. Joe’s poems about physical structures show how the buildings are a human-made change that has serious implications for the Mi’kmaq; this change, however, does not destroy the ecology Joe describes in her poems. Even though they physically bar speakers from direct contact with the land and temporarily dislocate and disorient them by drawing other boundaries over Mi’kmaq territory, the speakers’ traditional ways of knowing nonetheless connect them to the ecosystem no matter what changes occur. The buildings in the poems are material reminders of Canadian society’s racism and intolerance toward Mi’kmaq

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people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The buildings may fall in the future as the speakers suggest, but as they have not yet done so, their power to evoke pain remains palpable for those who had to live and work in them.

In “Your Buildings,” for instance, Joe’s speaker treats land as a permanent and stable source of knowledge, yet she also sees that the landscape has changed with the addition of the buildings and structures. The poem contains four stanzas, each shorter than the last, and each reflecting changes in the speaker’s attitude toward the buildings as it shifts from reverence to indifference. In the first stanza, the speaker establishes that she has no affiliation with these buildings—distinguished as “yours” as opposed to “mine” or “ours”—but she nonetheless seeks a connection to the land underneath them. She addresses the group of people that the buildings represent, European others:

Your buildings, tall, alien  
Cover the land;  
Unfeeling concrete smothers, windows glint.  
Like water to the sun.  
No breezes blow  
Through standing trees;  
No scent of pine lightens my burden.

I see your buildings rising skyward, majestic,  
Over the trails where once men walked,  
Significant rulers of this land  
Who still hold the aboriginal title  
In their hearts  
By traditions known  
Through eons of time.

Relearning our culture is not difficult,  
Because those trails I remember  
And their meaning I understand.

While skyscrapers hide the heavens,  
They can fall.

*(Dreamers 59)*

The poem delivers Joe’s characteristic concrete visual imagery in short lines. The line breaks and commas introduce a staccato effect as they interrupt the poem’s sentences, mirroring the disruption within the speaker’s



ecosystem, as the speaker finds herself blocked from land in part by the presence of concrete and skyscrapers.

The land is “cover[ed]” and “smother[ed]” by the physical structures placed on top of it. The buildings deflect by “glint[ing]” the light, as well as any living thing in their vicinity, away. The “glint” keeps viewers from seeing inside the building, and by extension, it represents a barrier to the building and the power it represents. Joe’s speaker portrays the structures as barriers between her and the land and nature. They not only “cover the land” (*Dreamers* 59) but stifle the area surrounding them. Evoking a sense of claustrophobia and suffocation in the speaker, the buildings seem to suppress the sense of nature for which the speaker longs as she visits the site; and the building materials appear to block her connection with the many elements of the ecosystem. In the second stanza, however, the poem begins to turn. The speaker acknowledges the “majestic” power of the buildings and begins with an expression of reverence for them in the stanza’s first line, “I see your buildings rising skyward, majestic” (8). Yet in the following line, she adds that the buildings have been erected on previously occupied lands, lands owned by “significant rulers” who mark their title in ways more permanent than the physical structures placed on the land’s surface. They “hold the aboriginal title / In their hearts / By traditions known / Through eons of time” (11-14). The “traditions” of land title can last for “eons” but, unlike the large and obtrusive buildings that mark an implicit claim over the land they cover, the aboriginal title does not require any physical material to affirm.

Through the poem itself, in articulating her traditional knowledge, the speaker begins to restore harmony to the disruptions within the ecology, disruptions that have led to a sense of “disharmony.” Even though the ecology is always present and indestructible, elements of the ecology may be pushed out of balance. As Battiste and Henderson explain, “Indigenous peoples view harmony as a dynamic and multidimensional balancing of interrelationships in their ecologies. Disturbing these interrelationships creates disharmony; balance is restored by applying appropriate actions and knowledge” (*Protecting* Ch. 2). The speaker is in possession of the knowledge and memory of her culture through the land under and around the buildings. In applying her knowledge to the presence of buildings in the ecosystem, the speaker emphasizes ways of thinking about changes in the ecology and its effects on her sense of identity and belonging. Even though the land is covered, all of its meaning and power are still present. At the poem’s end, the speaker suggests that the structures, while large and seemingly all-encompassing as they “hide the heavens,” “can fall”

(*Dreamers* 59). The buildings have not robbed her of her identity because she carries that within herself, within her ways of knowing, ways that inherently connect to the ecosystem. In this vision, even though the land is completely changed, and even though Mi'kmaq identity and the ecology are linked, the speaker's identity, culture, and history are unshakable. While the land is still important, it is not important that it stay the same in order for Joe's speakers to feel a connection or sense of belonging to it. Thus, the poem configures belonging as a way of remembering and experiencing Mi'kmaq memory and culture.

While it may seem as if the buildings have barred the speaker's access to land, her argument is that they do nothing to alter her identity or heritage. Instead, the buildings reflect an aspect of the Eurocentric worldview of human beings' separation from nature. Battiste and Henderson explicate this Eurocentric view: "people do not have a predetermined place in the natural world, their knowledge of the natural world is necessarily incomplete, and they must overcome the separation between self and the natural world using subjective, artificial structures" (*Protecting*, Ch. 2). In the poem, the buildings act as the "artificial structures" that Maritime Euro-settlers have created in order to justify and overcome their sense of separation from the land. By contrast, the speaker's significantly different understanding of her relationships within nature allows her to experience connections between Mi'kmaq knowledge and heritage and Mi'kmaq lands in the post-contact world she inhabits. In fact, the poem offers a much more sophisticated land "claim" than the buildings implicitly do, even as they cover the land and "deflect" everything around it. The speaker's connection to the land is patient, confident, and permanent. Even though the topography is completely changed by "you"—the "you" who have built skyscrapers and covered over ancient trails with concrete—these are only superficial changes to the site. Belief in the power of skyscrapers to alter a landscape would reflect a fallible and transient mentality. As the speaker suggests, the buildings will not last forever; they are merely impermanent physical objects. In negating the impact of the buildings on her worldview, Joe also strips away some of the power the buildings implicitly claim for the people who built them and their artificial assertion of control over the land.

Reading Joe's poems through the ecological approach described by Battiste and Henderson suggests that Joe's connection to land is based on a deep, inherited knowledge and ways of knowing informed by a complex web of the many interrelationships of plants, animals, humans, and forces within this given geographic area. The Mi'kmaq ecosystem extends to the

boundaries of Mi'kmaq territory and makes up what may be called a "region." In fact, Joe is so connected to an ecology that she will address and seek to reconcile any changes that occur within the ecology, whether those changes occur by forces of nature, time, or human beings from other geographic areas with entirely different worldviews. As a result, her land "claims" reveal that she does not need to stake a "claim" in the first place. This is the Mi'kmaq ecosystem, the area in which her ancestors lived, from which her knowledge of the world originates, and to which her knowledge applies. Joe's intrinsic partnership with the land is so much a part of the ecology that it immediately forces a rethinking of other kinds of regional land claims, such as the implicit claim in "Your Buildings" of the physical structures placed on top of land that mark it in a gesture of ownership and control.

Joe continues to create these complex land "claims" in "Hated Structure: Indian Residential School, Shubenacadie," a poem concerning a former residential school building in Nova Scotia. In her autobiography, Joe explains that she and her daughter both attended school there, the only residential school building in the province of Nova Scotia (*Song of Rita Joe* 145). The speaker begins by innocently beckoning the reader to imagine "If you are on Highway 104 / In a Shubenacadie town / There is a hill / Where a structure stands" (1-4). She locates the structure first and then moves in the next stanza to describe how this otherwise nondescript structure is "A reminder to many senses / To respond with demented ones" (5-6). The reader becomes aware of a shift in tone as the building is suddenly much more menacing than it first appeared. After all, the nature of a "demented" sense and ways that a building could inspire it seem sinister and threatening. The speaker continues to describe her connection with the building and the disturbing emotional meaning it has for her:

I for one looked in the window  
And there on the floor  
Was a deluge of misery  
Of a building I held in awe  
Since the day I walked in the ornamented door.  
(7-12)

The speaker reflects on her conflicted senses of the building as on one hand an object of "awe" and beauty, and on the other a house of unspeakable pain and despair. This sense of awe is double-edged; as the poem progresses, the speaker encourages readers to reflect on the type of people and society that could allow, even endorse, the horrific injustices of child abuse

and cultural genocide that occurred in the building and others like it. She gives the reader access to the pain of the past by peering inside the structure herself first, and then inviting the reader to join her. As the speaker looks into the structure, she is also peering into her own personal memory, and the collective memory of the children who lived there “in laughter, or abuse” (*Song of Eskasoni* 75), again evoking two opposite experiences within her memory. In the final stanza, a zeugma ties two more experiences together with another specific inference drawn by the speaker’s memory:

I had no wish to enter  
Nor to walk the halls  
I had no wish to feel the floors  
Where I felt fear  
A beating heart of episodes  
I care not to recall

(17-22)

The zeugma occurs at the line break between “fear” and “A beating heart,” where the speaker uses the word “beating” to refer to both her heart as it felt the fear, as well as the beatings of children that occurred on those floors every day. Like the opposites of despair and awe, laughter and abuse, the poem ends with two more opposing reflections on the power of the structure to affect memory: “I remind / Until I fall” (26-27). This line links through rhyme to “halls,” and the speaker’s “care not to recall.” With the rhyming words, the poem suggests that the building’s power to evoke memory is related closely to its power to evoke the fear and pain of the traumatic past events that occurred in its walls. At this point, readers are better able to understand the so-called “demented” senses the building inspires at the poem’s opening.

McKegney interprets this poem as hopeful and in line with what he calls Joe’s “affirmative” stance (107). He contends that

With the absence of the physical structure that embodied the regimented disciplinary impulse of the system, gone is the compulsion to relive the traumatic experiences that system produced ... Yet the potential freedom augured by the building’s eventual demolition asserts its relevance throughout the poem, even in the building’s presence ... ‘Hated Structure’ executes Joe’s positive literary methodology by liberating the speaker-poet to render history and memory in a manner consistent with the ideals of an empowered future. (46)

In McKegney’s argument, Joe’s “positive” emphasis on her residential school experience has a significant impact on Mi’kmaq culture and iden-

tity in that it inspires hope and redemption despite a bleak picture of the past. His argument seems especially compelling if we read the building as a metaphor for forced assimilation with the colonizers of Canada and as a symbol of the broader barriers to land use and access that Mi'kmaq people have faced throughout their post-contact history. As the speaker affirms in the final stanza of the poem, "The structure stands as if to say: / I was just a base for theory / To bend the will of children" (23-25). When the building falls, as the speaker suggests it will, not only does the "compulsion to live traumatic experiences" disappear (McKegney 46), but so too does the whole "theory" behind the building itself, as it serves as a foundation of the cultural divisions between Mi'kmaq people and the dominant cultural system that produced the school.

Read in this way, "Hated Structure" offers past, present, and future visions of the geographic site; yet the speaker posits that none of the three perspectives on that site is the only way from which to understand its significance or its historical context. In the poem, the physical structure of the residential school building stands as a marker of a collective colonial past, and it serves as a reminder of the terrors of the specific past that Joe and her daughter Phyllis experienced in the residential school. Joe affirms in her autobiography that "Still, today, I do not regret going into the Residential School" (*Song of Rita Joe* 49), perhaps because of her desire to write positive depictions of Mi'kmaq history and literature for her children and other young members of Native communities. As she notes in an interview with Jeanette Lynes, she believes that positive affirmations of her culture serve as a kind of activism that she can practice for her children's sake: "I worked and created beauty so my children will see that it was not all bad" (Lynes 130). But "Hated Structure" certainly does not paint a completely positive portrait. Despite the "empowered future" that McKegney imagines awaits the community when the building falls, the building that stands empty in the poem nonetheless serves as a painful reminder of the horrors that took place within its walls. The speaker refuses to enter the building and must face its continued existence. The poem "Hated Structure" therefore comprises part of Joe's ongoing effort to "[apply] appropriate actions and knowledge" (Battiste and Henderson, *Protecting* Ch. 2) to restore balance and harmony to the Mi'kmaq ecology. The building no longer exists in physical form today; it was destroyed in a fire during Joe's lifetime. By choosing to keep it standing in the poem, Joe affirms that aspects of the ecology remain out of balance, and this part of the land's history still needs to be reconciled.

## **The Ecological Consequences of Losing Mi'kmaq Language**

The residential school building represents a significant source of disharmony in the Mi'kmaq ecosystem not only for its presence on the land, but also for its symbolic and practical role in the destruction of Mi'kmaq language. Correspondingly, the need to restore balance and harmony to Joe's speakers' ecology emerges not only in the descriptions of changes to the ecology, but also to her speakers' ability to operate in the Mi'kmaq language. In the poem "I Lost My Talk," the speaker's self-conscious use of the English language draws attention to its limited capacity to articulate her experience and worldview. Moreover, Mi'kmaq language is fundamentally a part of the ecology, and it is a means by which Mi'kmaq people maintain their relationship to it. As Murdena Marshall explains,

We believe our language is holy and sacred. The Creator gave it to the Mi'kmaq people for the transmission of all the knowledge our Creator gave to us and for our survival. Our language has its origin in the Maritimes, in the Land of Mikmakik, and it is here that it must remain to flourish among the people or we become extinct. The sacred knowledge within our language provides wisdom and understanding. It focuses on the processes of knowledge, the action or verb consciousness, and not on the nouns or material accumulation. It has no curse words, but rather only words to describe all of nature. When one wants to curse or damn anything or anyone, they must use the English language. (54)

Marshall's description also alludes to the significant differences in the structures of English versus Mi'kmaq, for the concept of cursing or damning is not part of Mi'kmaq language or worldview at all. The difference highlights the respect for all living things inherent in Mi'kmaq language, and the contrasting hierarchical structure of the English language and the Eurocentric worldview it reflects.

Joe's speakers point toward a need to move beyond that Eurocentric discourse and language toward new ways of including, decolonizing, and "dealienating" (Henderson, "Ayukpachi" 249) Indigenous peoples through speech. Henderson notes that

the colonized must break their silence and struggle to retake possession of their humanity and identity. To speak initially, they have to share Eurocentric thought and discourse with their oppressors; however, to exist with dignity and integrity, they must renounce Eurocentric models and live with the ambiguity of thinking against themselves. They must learn to create models to help them take their bearings in unexplored territory. ("Ayukpachi" 249-50)

The “ambiguity of thinking against themselves” is part of Eurocentric diffusionism, the idea embedded in Eurocentric culture that Indigenous people are inferior and in need of European guidance in many facets of their existence. It is also an idea embedded in Eurocentric language and thought (Henderson, “Ayukpachi” 253). Thus even speaking in English can be difficult because the thought patterns and logic that the language uses negates the Aboriginal worldview that Joe’s speakers hold and distances them from their ecology by doing so. Even though this approach may counter Eurocentric thought, it does not come without a price. The English language still distances Mi’kmaq people from their own language. As Battiste and Henderson explain, “we carry the mysteries of ecologies and their diversity in our oral traditions, in our ceremonies, and in our art; we unite these mysteries in the structure of our languages and our ways of knowing” (*Protecting* ch. 1). In other words, the ability to access a Mi’kmaq worldview in relation to the ecology is found first and foremost through Mi’kmaq language. Without that language, Mi’kmaq people lose the knowledge that they pass down through oral tradition, and the structure of a distinct worldview. Importantly, they lose understanding of the Mi’kmaq ecology. Retaining and maintaining language, then, is perhaps the most crucial way that Joe’s speakers can name their “regionalism” or connection to the ecology.

During her years in residential school, Joe was not permitted to speak in Mi’kmaq. Part of the purpose of residential schools across Canada, according to the researchers for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was to assimilate and “civilize” First Nations children (Canada). Teachers forbade First Nations languages and enforced English as the only language of the residential school in Nova Scotia. As Isabelle Knockwood writes in her memoir about her experience in the Shubenacadie residential school, “someone telling the nun in charge that you’d been heard speaking Mi’kmaw was a way to ensure that ‘you’d get the shit beat out of you’” (174). Knockwood relates the story of Joe Julian, who remembers getting “hit over the head” for speaking Mi’kmaq (qtd. in Knockwood 180). Knockwood also remembers that “[w]hen little children first arrived at the school we would see bruises on their throats and cheeks that told us that they had been caught speaking Mi’kmaw. Once we saw the bruises begin to fade, we knew they’d stopped talking” (182).

In “I Lost My Talk,” Joe’s speaker addresses her time at the Shubenacadie residential school, a time in her life when authorities there forced her to speak only in English:

I lost my talk  
The talk you took away.  
When I was a little girl  
At Shubenacadie school.  
You snatched it away:  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you  
The scrambled ballad, about my world.  
Two ways I talk  
Both ways I say,  
Your way is more powerful.  
So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.

*(Song of Eskasoni 32)*

The short and fragmented lines call attention to the speaker's use of very simple, basic phrases. They contrast visually with the poem's longest line, a line that describes the poem as a "scrambled ballad, about [her] world" (9). It is "scrambled" because the speaker cannot use her own language to describe her point of view. The self-referential title and first line of the poem serve as reminders that all of the poems the reader encounters are written in Joe's second language, and many are addressed to members of a culture outside of her own. The "two ways" (10) the speaker talks represent not only the words she is capable of using but more importantly the two distinct ways that the speaker may perceive and describe the world. As Henderson notes, "[t]he discord between Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews is dramatic," and the configuration of those worldviews is embedded in differences in European and Aboriginal linguistic structures ("Ayukpachi" 261). For instance, "[i]n Eurocentric thought, there are two origins of knowing: curiosity and control. Both ways of European knowing create polarities of the self as knower and the world as the known, with training or education as the mediator. This corresponds to the ideal English sentence: subject-verb-object. The self is the subject (agent/character) seeking to know (verb/action) the object (goal)" ("Ayukpachi" 267). Mi'kmaq ways of knowing and seeing the world are vastly different from this European model, and they correspond to a distinct language structure. Without access to that structure, Joe's speaker's ballad becomes "scrambled" because it must make use of the logic of a worldview she does not share in order to describe her experience.



In her exploration of the poem, Sandrock argues that Joe “turns the broken dreams of the colonial past into a dream for a genuinely post-colonial future. What Joe does, then, is not simply reverse existing hierarchies. Rather, she tries to counteract the very existence of cultural and linguistic hierarchies and to illustrate that the region belongs to everybody equally” (89). Fuller also interprets the final stanza in the poem as “conciliatory” (*Writing* 179). She believes that by the end of the poem, Joe “[invites] her oppressor to be a listener rather than a stealer of ‘talk,’ a partner in dialogue and self-recovery” (179). By focusing on the latter part of the poem in their analyses, however, Sandrock and Fuller overlook the tension between the “Two ways I talk” (10) and the corresponding double meaning to the speaker’s seemingly gentle plea.

Joe’s use of a European language is strategic in this poem, for she uses it to deploy the rhetorical strategy of mimicry. In *The Location of Culture* (1991), Homi Bhabha defines mimicry as “a form of colonial discourse that is uttered inter dicta: a discourse at a crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (130). With mimicry, a “subaltern” may still speak with the words of a European language and in a Eurocentric discourse, but she does so with an attitude that mocks those words and their intended meaning. A new meaning emerges from the speech that allows the “subaltern” to resist the colonial power and counter it with another point of view. Before she reaches out to the colonizer at the end of the poem, the speaker reminds readers of the voice in which she actually speaks. There are “Two ways I talk [and] / Both ways I say / Your way is more powerful” (10-12). These “two ways” represent the dominant, Eurocentric discourse, and her position within that discourse as a subaltern or the other. The voice readers encounter is not the speaker’s own voice; she speaks in the voice of an other. She establishes through epistrophe that she speaks, thinks, and creates “like you,” “you” being the colonizing instructors at the residential school. In speaking “your way” in the final stanza where she “gently... offer[s] her hand” (13), Joe’s speaker operates within the discourse she was taught when her own voice was taken from her. She now speaks in the discourse that instructed her to act politely, appear benign, and treat the Eurocentric worldview and language as superior. This voice uses words and phrases acceptable to a Eurocentric worldview, and sets up a division between two groups, one “more powerful” than the other. Yet, the speaker is able to draw attention to the gaps and flaws in that worldview when it comes to Mi’kmaq people because although she speaks words that indicate

she needs help from the group she addresses, she simultaneously proves that she has the agency and capability to speak without any help at all. The ending of the poem mocks the Eurocentric group, as it implies that there is no way it can truly give back what it took from the Mi'kmaq. Instead, the speaker's final remarks expose the injustice of the colonizing Europeans' abuse of power over Mi'kmaq life. Within a Eurocentric framework, Indigenous people are understood as inferior and in need of guidance, as Battiste ("You Can't" 6-7) and Henderson ("Ayukpachi" 253) have indicated. Joe's speaker acts out this false binary in the poem, calling attention to the polarity between herself and the implied reader as an illusion created by Eurocentric power. The poem's final lines reveal a speaker who appears anxious to reconcile with those who "took" her ability to communicate in her primary language. In the gesture of holding out her hand, she explains that she wants to not only have her "talk" back, she also wants to use it to "teach" those who were unjust to her.

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In poems about changes to the land, Joe outlines the dangers and fallacies of an idea of an anthropocentric "region" that sees (some) human beings at the top of an artificial and destructive hierarchy. Joe's "regional" writing is centred on a holistic and interconnected sense of territory as ecology. This ecology informs Mi'kmaq knowledge, language, and life. Mi'kmaq people belong to Mi'kmaq territory, and they are integrated with all the living things contained within it; they can maintain that connection through the application of their knowledge and use of their sacred language. The significance of Joe's ecological approach for Maritime regionalism is that it exposes how settler narratives that focus on maintaining certain human beings' possession of the land has worked to maintain colonization of Mi'kmaq people by imagining the land as previously empty. Her ecological approach rejects the idea that human beings can make claims over areas based on a moment when they decide history has begun, or the moment of first contact with a piece of land. Further, Joe's approach rejects the anthropocentrism of the settler claim and exposes the ways in which it is used to exclude some human beings from that claim altogether.

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