

Regionalisms 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, and Beyond: Reading Maritime Poetry Anthologies Backwards

by Shane Neilson

Because the debate over “regionalism” in the field of Canadian literature occurred over most of the twentieth century to the present, the number of Canadian critics who have considered regionalism is long. As arguments by Northrop Frye, A.J.M. Smith, Eli Mandel, W.H. New, Robert Kroetsch, Alison Calder, Ursula Kelly, Laurie Ricou, and Susan DeCoste reveal, the all-purpose quality of the term has the advantage of choosing specificity in one moment and then telescoping into generality and multiplicity if the critical moment is more receptive to that switch, reflecting a definitional fluidity that serves the needs of the moment of usage.

Perhaps because of the intentional homogenizing catch-all inherent to regionalism, many scholars since have rejected the idea of a single theoretical model with which to incorporate the region’s writers and writings. In 2006, Marta Dvorak and Coral Ann Howells wrote in their introduction to the special issue of *Canadian Literature* devoted to east coast writing that there is a “richness of social and cultural histories, such a multiplicity of voices speaking from so many different angles and in such a variety of literary modes that what is produced amounts to far more than a mapping of region.” Instead, ‘any definition of regional specificity’ is both comprehended but also exceeded” (7). As Wolfgang Hochbruck writes in his Introduction to *Down East: Critical Essays on Contemporary Maritime Canadian Literature*, “[N]o one perspective will ever suffice to explain everything” and “summarizing and centring statements will always be made at the expense of margins, fringes, and diversity” (19).

Yet the problem with shrugging one’s shoulders and rejecting the possibility of defining Maritimity is that the people who live in the Maritimes do consider it a culturally specific entity, and so do some academics who write on the region’s literature. For example, as

Gwendolyn Davies puts it in her Introduction to *Studies in Maritime Literary History*,

In writing about Maritime literature, one is inevitably faced with the question: Is there a distinctive Maritime culture? For the average Maritimer, this is probably not a significant question. Being a Maritimer is a matter of knowing, of being. It is something “bred in the bone,” or as writers Charles Bruce and Alistair MacLeod variously put it, it is the “salt in the blood” or the “salt gift of blood.” (10)

If the idea that Maritimity is like an essentiality, a quantum, seems off-putting, then perhaps a rephrase by another settler critic is more palatable. When writing on prairie regionalism, Alison Calder writes that “relation to place, what place means, is determined by race, class, gender, and a host of other factors. These factors combine uniquely in particular locations” (113). This paper contributes to the ongoing academic conversation about regionalism in Canadian literature by summarizing the theoretical instantiations of regionalism over time, eventually positing a new one — from the settler perspective, at least — by wondering if old centrist-margin binaries can be productively complicated or supplemented with the lens of Indigenous place-thought (non-hostile to essentialism) as articulated by Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw/Cheyenne). I make a dialectical argument about accepting and rejecting the idea of regional specificity in literature, refusing to codify Maritimity while also arguing that there is a productive difference between region and region, as well as region and nation, that should be respected. Because the genre of poetry has been underrepresented in these arguments, I apply a specific critical reading practice that I call constructive regionalism to selected poetry anthologies from the Maritime region produced over the past forty years. Because the “Maritimes” construct has been subsumed under the sign of the “Atlantic” in most of the scholarship conducted on these quite different formulations, and because the one of the main anthologies tracked by this essay has as its catchment the Atlantic region, this essay will use the terms interchangeably when this is appropriate, but it should be kept in mind that the relatively greater cultural autonomy of Newfoundland (and the related circumstance of its later entry into the Canadian nation) with respect to centres of literary power make it worthy

of study as a distinct zone. My main interest pertains to Maritimity, but to study it, one must make allowances for the “Atlantic.”

Tony Tremblay wisely avoids postulating a definition of New Brunswickness in his *New Brunswick at the Crossroads*, opting instead for an invocation of cultural studies figure Raymond Williams on the way to writing that “culture” is an “admixture of language, history, ethnicity, and social and economic factors that coalesce to form signifying and symbolic patterns that change over time” (1). For his part, the poet Alden Nowlan was similarly circumspect about the question of Maritime identity: “People are affected by the place in which they live — societies of people as well as individuals . . . don’t write about Maritime people in capital letters, as if they were some special species” (Cook 36). This may be a productive definitional ambiguity and ambivalence, a holding-place-in-mind while also keeping less savoury identity atavisms in check. Specific explanations are difficult, but as presented already, the condition of Maritimity is real to academics who study the region and to writers who come from the region and create its imaginary. The paradox of actuality but non-specificity creates certain problems, including the problem of regionalism itself, by which I mean the chauvinistic effects of nation when thinking region.¹ As will be seen, a problem with regionalism is that it’s comprehended by, but also exceeded by, what it can mean to two different people. The problem with the problem is that this can also be a generative position for the region’s writers, should they wish to work within this paradox. The same holds for scholars: much more work needs to be done working outside of colonial paradigms with regards to the region’s literature.

Yet the work in literary studies that has brought us to the current vantage point was important and should be thought through in order to better understand the current generative position. Perhaps the dominant colonial literary paradigm operating in the nation can be considered a sub-colonial one that went by the name regionalism, and the various skirmishes held under that category have complicated the current prospects of continuing to argue fully within it. In order to contest the paradigm, one of the basic steps was to establish the phenomenon of national neglect for the region’s writers, a message that continues to be sent for good reason. For example, Dvorak and Howells write that “the East Coast is a geographical location marginalized from centres of political and economic power in Canada, yet it is against the dynamics of marginalization that Maritime writers have struggled” (7). Specifically concerned with the case of poetry, Thomas Hodd writes in his

Introduction to a special issue of *Canadian Poetry* devoted to poetry of the Maritimes region that

. . . not much has changed in the last thirty years in terms of Atlantic representation on the national stage and, to some extent, the region's literary treatment of its poets. Maritime writers are still underrepresented in larger, national anthologies, despite an increasing number of them either winning or being finalists for major awards; instead, the majority of their contribution comes via the large number of regional anthologies that now litter our tourist shops and airport bookstores. (6)

Hodd adds that scholarly focus upon Maritime writers of the past half-century is also sorely lacking. Hodd, Howells, and Dvorak make compelling arguments, but I also think that though it is important to reinforce the centre-region argument infrastructure in order to prevent slippage and to possibly improve literary fates in the region, I also think that such arguments play power's game.

Drawing on the thought of Ian McKay in *The Quest of the Folk*, Herb Wylie and Jeanette Lynes seem to make a different argument when bringing neoliberalism to bear upon Atlantic Canadian life and literature in their Introduction to a *Studies in Canadian Literature* issue that focuses on the region:

[T]he region's contemporary status as the nation's dependent help[s] to explain what is perhaps most distinctive about contemporary Atlantic-Canadian writing: its more determined — and not infrequently defiant — tone. Especially because that modernization has been structurally and materially disadvantageous to so many people in the Atlantic provinces . . . At the same time, however, while this anxiety is routinely coupled with a sense of having been exploited, denigrated, and dismissed, that sense of grievance has also been leavened, particularly in the literature of the region, by a more subversive and resistant skepticism about the region's marginal position. (11)

This argument eventually came to full fruition in Wylie's scholarly monograph *Anne of Tim Hortons*, a book that has energized the field of Maritime Literary Studies by pointing out the various beak-tweaking methods the region's prose writers have made with regards to clichés about the region's perception on behalf of nation as tourist paradise. Yet,

again, such arguments stick within the old regionalist infrastructure, no matter how complexly ironized they are.

Over the past decade, scholars who sensed the regionalism problematic as subcolonial organizing force tried to break with placing the entities of region and centre on an axis. Anne Compton wrote in this vein in her Introduction to *Meetings With Maritime Poets*, pointing out that some Maritime poets are “transatlantic” by “[p]articipating in a European writing community as well as a North American one.” The poets she presents as examples are Luxembourg-born Liliane Welch and Irish-born Thomas O’Grady. Compton also identifies a “Boston-PEI axis” and a “New York-Nova Scotia axis” of poetic activity. Yet for Compton, these axes are anchored by the familiar governing imagery: “In more than one sense, these poets are seaboard . . . If climate, culture, and topography constitute the ‘bedrock’ of Maritime poetry, the sea – and the poet’s sea gaze, poetically speaking — preclude insularity” (15).

Another recent proponent of off-axis-ism is Susan DeCoste, who writes in her PhD dissertation *Rethinking Maritime Literary Regionalism: Place, Identity, and Belonging in the Works of Elizabeth Bishop, Maxine Tynes, and Rita Joe*, “If the globalized world makes up a network of local places that depend on one another for meaning and definition, perhaps critics can view Canada as a set of local places within that network” (39). Admittedly, this argument complicates regional identity by reconceiving identity in terms of global transfers and exchanges due to immigration patterns. DeCoste contends that “By considering regionalisms within a global network rather than within a national one, scholars may decolonize regions from national authority. The outmoded centre-margin model of Canadian nationalism and regionalism mirrors the centre-margin model of empires during New World colonization” (3). But to think for a moment like an old infrastructuralist might, how does valorizing a different axis produce results that improve the plight of authors from the region? If tweaking the beak of literary expectations (as the region’s prose writers do) is to reinforce oppositions and reinscribe definitions of self in terms of other places — in other words, to play power’s game — then how is getting off the national axis any different? Will such a globalist position turn out to be toxic capitalism in the end, a more stratified and intense colonialism?

To critique the multidimensional-axis model on its own terms, DeCoste’s thesis is a throwback to the much-criticized “cosmopolitan” valorizations of A.J.M. Smith conducted to support the centre. As Amanda Anderson writes, that kind of cosmopolitanism “frequently

advances itself as a specifically intellectual ideal, or depends on a mobility that is the luxury of social, economic, or cultural privilege” (73). We should be skeptical of such a state of affairs because this is neoliberalism at work, and at bottom is an argument for taste in national costume. At best, statements like the following could be called wishful thinking: “Scholars need not define Canada as having a centre and margins that replicate or even relate to that centre. Breaking away from the view that the regions of Canada are part of a centre-periphery model helps critics to diffuse any real power the ‘centre’ has over the region” (DeCoste 31). At worst, this is a dangerously utopic construction. Calder warns against such an opinion when she writes, “At a time when we are being told that place and referentiality no longer matter, that there is no national literature, and that we are living in a world without boundaries, those of us who call the have-not political regions home are becoming aware that placing ourselves, and our literatures, is more important than ever” (“Reassessing Prairie Realism” 60).

In their work, Compton and DeCoste take some preliminary steps towards what is now known as spatial theory. Tony Tremblay writes in “Globalization and Cultural Memory: Perspectives from the Periphery on the Post-National Disassembly of Place” that there has been a “fundamental shift in spatial ethos that has resulted in an epidemic of devaluation, both of ‘place’ and of ‘people . . . [w]hen place, especially rural or marginal place, is devalued to the extent that it has been in recent years, then the abuse of persons within that place follows easily” (24). Tremblay argues that the new way of accomplishing devaluation of the margins occurs under neoliberal mobilization of capital and through the workings of globalization. The project is to enforce precarious working conditions and internal migration within nations through valorization of placelessness, to encourage people to lose their connection with land and home such that they can experience digital freedom and feel at home in the globe. He argues that this is accomplished through language that constantly suggests that “place is merely a trope, a sentimental attachment we’re meant to outgrow on our way to a more fashionable urbanity” (24). Elaborating on the point, he writes that “We now exist under the dictates of a new “place” referent — in a time of *placelessness* when media and the intellectual class actively abet strategies of de-territorialization, championing that which is deracinated, nomadic, and non-material” (29). Tremblay is calling out the colonial project on its logic, for its logical end-point of making colonial subjects of former colonial masters. What is liberating about spatial theory as deployed by Tremblay is that one can

perceive so much deeper into history. The irony that Tremblay doesn't point out is that the nation, which Canadian literature has been skeptical about as an organizing and thematizing force since at least the dawn of the twenty-first century, was much more hospitable to place-based criticism and essentialism than our current post-national focus, yet the equally-rapid rise of Indigenous literatures and critical inquiry stands as a countervailing force and possible remediation — if engaged with using humility, respect, and a non-expert, non-coopting stance.

A further problem complicates the Regionalism 3.0 (spatial theory) arguments, and this is the problem of genre. How do the comedic, beak-tweaking ironies of the novelist and short story writer Lynn Coady, for example, apply to poetry? Tremblay's work owes a debt to Wyile, who in *Anne of Tim Hortons* argues that "Atlantic Canadian literature in English is characterized by the sophisticated response to the double-edged and disempowering vision of the region" that is an identity constructed by the centre with the hallmarks of "leisure space" and "drain on the economy" (7). This argument considers the work of many prose writers, including Coady's Cape Breton-based *Strange Heaven*. With spatial theory, Tremblay builds upon Wyile's use of neoliberalism as a kind of Rosetta stone for interpretation of Atlantic Canadian literature. Yet to mobilize poetry along such lines seems strange because the thematics of the region's poetry transcend such limitations. Poems are not necessarily "about" anything in the same way a novel often is.

Indeed, Regionalism 1.0 (centre-margin & neoliberalism), 2.0 (off-axis-ism), and 3.0 (spatial theory) demand representation of identity concerns in restricted terms, but a poem is an assertion of identity in excess of any claim placed upon it. Poems are a genre built to wriggle free of unidirectional interpretation, defying the critics who wish to pin them down like they can the prose written in response to real market forces. Prose by Coady sells, so it is understandable enough that novelists vend what the nation wants, albeit on their own beak-tweaking terms.

In summary, the paradox posed by "region" — Maritimers tend to agree that the region is a thing — unavoidably creates an impetus for definitions, including the larger definitions that comprise literary theory. By agreeing we are from a region, we are condemned to suffer the haunting requirement of what region means, though it might be possible to use the ghost for our own gain. A refinement on Regionalism 1.0 that is more productive has been proposed by Tremblay as "reading regionalism backwards — that is, as a construction of the centre rather than the margins" ("Lest on too close sight" 24). This strikes me as not only a

weaponizing of the old power differential, but also as a useful refinement of identity for Maritimers. With such a reading practice in mind, I will now discuss several regional poetry anthologies and their reception by the nation in order to bring poetry into a conversation that has largely been held — and especially of late — with prose fiction in mind.

Maritime Poetry Anthologies and the Post-Nation

The first Canadian poetry anthology ever published, Edward Hartley Dewart's *Selections from Canadian Poets* (1864), got the national project rolling in its Introductory Essay: "A national literature is an essential element in the formation of national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy" (ix). Though what would become Canada was at the time of publication arrayed as Canada West, Canada East, and the Eastern Colonies, the anthology still does not include poets from the area that now comprises the Maritimes, a circumstance that is odd considering that Dewart's stated aim is to effect "political unification" through the development of the "powerful cement of a patriotic literature" when, a page later, he admits awareness of differing "geographical situations." (ix-x).

About once a decade in our more recent history, the Maritimes anthologizes its own poets. The 1970s entry is *Ninety Seasons: Modern Poems From the Maritimes* (McClelland & Stewart, 1974); in the '80s, there was Fred Cogswell's *The Atlantic Anthology* (Ragweed, 1984); in the '90s, Alison Mitcham and Teresa Quigley edited *Poetic Voices of the Maritimes* (Lancelot, 1996); but the most recent iteration is *Coastlines: The Poetry of Atlantic Canada* (Goose Lane, 2002.)² Apparently well aware of the pitfalls of the frame of region, Malcolm Ross wrote a satiric omnibus review (including *Ninety Seasons*) in *Acadiensis* titled "Fort, Fog and Fiddlehead: Some New Atlantic Writing":

And have not some of us some of the time been half-willing to allow that "Canadian literature" is really nothing more than a loose aggregate of regional literatures — West Coast, Maritime, Ontario, Prairie, Quebec — each with its own unmistakable and non-transferable, finger-print, birth-mark and blood-type? But surely there can be no trouble in locating "the specifically Atlantic quality" of a batch of stories and poems, in several volumes, from

the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland. All fort, fog and fiddlehead, it might be supposed! But as an old unreconstructed Maritimer, back at last from the long night of wandering in the Great Ontario Desert, I find the task not easy at all. (116-17)

In his humourously ambivalent piece, Ross proceeds to trouble the idea of Maritimity as “mark” while also guardedly supporting it. Although the “mark” is never specifically defined, it is (recalling Gwendolyn Davies, and possibly Indigenous place-thought) identified as real and is perhaps most manifest in a nostalgically progressive outlook:

The young Maritimer, whether Maritimer by birth or by conversion, may seem to resemble his counterpart in Ontario or in Arizona. Certainly he is more the Canadian now and less the New Englander. But if he stays for a spell in one of Bailey's river valleys or along the Fundy or in Lunenburg or Fredericton or Annapolis Royal, he will be Canadian with a difference. For he surely will wear the Mark. And I have a hunch that if he has come to us from Tallahassee or Tennessee or even from the Great Ontario Desert, he will battle the Wrecker and the Developer with a zeal too often lacking in folk whose names ‘stretch back through graveyards to political events and even battles.’ For it may be that only the incomer, the new man with our ancient Mark upon him, will be able to reveal to us out of a wisdom of our own which we have now forgotten, that prosperity and progress are not made out of self-destruction, and that Chicago, Detroit, Jersey City, Hoboken and even Hamilton, Ont. look nothing at all like the New Jerusalem. (121)

Any interpretation of Ross's ambivalence, no matter how skeptical, should proceed by acknowledging Ross's subject position: he himself is a Maritimer. For Ross, the idea of nostalgia as a not-necessarily negative force, as constituting progress, is at least possible. For others, this is backward. Frank Davey reviewed *Ninety Seasons* in the *Toronto Star*:

If a reader expects this anthology to announce a rebirth of poetic creativity in the Atlantic provinces, he will be disappointed . . . [i]t is difficult to discuss many of the poets as individuals, because their language, rhythms, and subject matter so little distinguish them . . . [i]f it has any interest, it is as a local colour anthology —

the editors offer from every poet a Maritime scenery or rural life poem. (MTL Private Collection)

If Davey were speaking about black people, or queer people, or women only, the prejudice might be more obvious.

Just like the critics did not kill Keats, the prejudice by post-national critics will not kill the poets in the Maritimes. Yet a serious problem with regionalism is that it can come as self-inflicted wound. Consider this review of *The Atlantic Anthology*, Volume 1 by Clare Darby, a secondary school teacher in Prince Edward Island: “The problem with *The Atlantic Anthology* is that it is not Atlantic enough . . . [m]ost of the other stories are universal but present little or nothing of Atlantic life” (251). For Davey, there is too much Maritimes and for Darby, there is not enough. No matter who is reading, the expectation of region must be filled like a secret ingredient, like Ross’s “mark.” That secret sauce is rejected like ipecac in Kathleen Hickey’s *Quill and Quire* review of *Poetic Voices of the Maritimes*: “Fortunately, care has been taken to provide enough variety of experience to prevent the book from turning into 250 pages of fog, sea, forest, and pasture” (46). Must pasture, fog, or sea be symbols of backwardness?

Because it is the most recently published anthology, the reception of *Coastlines* indicates that the prejudice catalogued so far remains operative into the twenty-first century. Consider this *Quill and Quire* review carefully while keeping the governing metaphor and sobriquet of “backwardness” front of mind:

In his poem “The Squall,” P.E.I. poet Milton Acorn muses on the odd fact that rowers must face backwards, “taking direction from where they’d been, / With only quick-snatched glances at where they’re going.” It is fitting that his lines appear in *Coastlines*, for they describe the peculiarity of an anthology that claims to represent “the present renaissance in Atlantic poetry” while presenting 60 poets, only four of whom were born since 1970. An effort to be forward-looking was part of the collection’s mandate. Yet the anthology seems to issue from an earlier era. In form, the majority of the poems are expertly crafted modernist lyrics, untouched by post-modernist experiment. The poets’ subjects are largely drawn from a domestic and rural world unblemished by highways, bereft of computers or cell phones, unharassed by the rhythms or urban attitude of rap music. The Atlantic Canada of its poets still appears to be a land of fish, forests, and weather, whose

inhabitants have a familiar feeling for nature, a long-cultivated facility with language and rare insight into human relationships . . . [y]et the sense of the future seems outweighed by admiration for the past, and whole aspects of life, whole handbooks of formal possibilities, whole mountain ranges of subjects remain unvisited. (Vandervlist 40)

The cunning Acorn deployment characterizes the region as rube. And, once again, what could be thought of as a progressive nostalgia is instead criticized as a dated literary politics. Davey, Vandervlist, et al. are not alone in their centre-centrism. The problem is not only within Canada, but without. Jane Monson in the *British Journal of Canadian Studies* writes,

If you read this collection of poems for anything, read it for a celebration of how poets can translate nature into words and through that translation endow landscape, seascape and wildlife with a voice, not only metaphorical, but literal. The result is a memorable and quotable compilation of poems written by poets with a drive to tell stories and not merely harangue the reader with loosely juxtaposed images. The anthology assumes an honest tone, free of pretension. For me the collection is guided by two messages: “Ringed by dark palisades / of spruce and this cold, black / bowl of water, I understand again / about words” (180) and “Poetry is an island breaking away from the main” (118). In the predominant focus on nature, and its personification, poets from each island rediscover and realize nature as a powerful resource and point of departure from which to argue their identity. The immediacy and drama of nature's beauty and brutality is significant; the combination of hostility, butchery, grace and companionship play an intrinsic part of daily patterns and rituals, and the language ricochets accordingly (410).

Though a review that considers all the Atlantic provinces as “islands” is in error, I point out that the *Coastlines* editors themselves are somewhat responsible for the misconception:

The Atlantic coastline includes many small islands such as Pictou, Grand Manan, and Merasheen, as well as the island provinces of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island . . . [i]n many ways the Atlantic region *is* an island, a small outcrop far from the centres of power in Quebec, Ontario, and the West, but is also a place unto itself with a vista onto the farthest reaches of the sea. (18)

The misconception of Island Isle — a cliché, utterly; New Brunswick and most of Nova Scotia are not islands — is unlikely to be rectified in centres of literary power when the misconception is recast as the self-conception vended by the region's flagship anthologies. Such self-inflicted representations seep out internationally due to the selections regional anthologies make, and perhaps the only natural effect on a reader to think of the Maritimes as Island Isle. Publications from outside the region certainly vend the region to the nation this way: in a review published in the Toronto-based *THIS Magazine*, Sue McCluskey writes “oceans, bays and shores, and the resulting influence on people's livelihood, are the wellspring from which most Atlantic Canadian poetry pours” (43). To use poetics terminology for a moment, it appears that “fort-fog-fiddlehead identity” is readymade for critics and well-meaning anthologists both.

Ian McKay diagnosed what's at work in opinions like those of Davey, Hickey, Vandervlist, Monson, and McCluskey in his *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, demonstrating not only the ubiquity of romantic and pastoral images of the region, but also how these same images influence the construction of identity. McKay argues that a romance of the rural Folk is one peddled to assuage the destabilizing problems of neoliberalism. In other words, the Maritimes are known as a safe touristic haven for the rest of Canada so that the rest of Canada can continue to function as it undergoes the perversions of neoliberalism. For example, Toronto needs stereotypes about Maritimers that Maritimers themselves would find inaccurate because the same forces affecting Ontarians are those at work in the Maritimes. Due to the power differential between regions that ultimately benefit the centre, the Maritimes must remain an ocean playground so that Torontonians can retain the faith that they are not only transformatively productive, but also that there will always be an unchanging Never Never Land with which to reassure themselves come vacation time. McKay argues that the perpetuation of Maritimes as stereotypically pastoral simulacrum makes asymmetries in power a seemingly natural outcome. Although I am about to make a simplification, the point is still accurate: Gary Geddes' inability to think beyond Alden Nowlan and E.J. Pratt in his influential *15 Canadian Poets* anthology series is evidence-through-absence as to how things work quietly to exclude a whole region. The following objection, written by a Maritime poet in the form of review with the conceit a direct epistolary address to Geddes, will foreshadow this paper's intervention. In the Fall

2001 issue of *The Malahat Review*, Brian Bartlett reviewed *15 Canadian Poets X 3*. He criticized Geddes for including only two poets from Atlantic Canada, asking: “Of the forty-five poets in *Fifteen Canadian Poets X 3*, only *two* — Pratt and Nowlan — can be classified as Atlantic. Surely Atlantic poetry isn’t that inconsequential. At the end of your preface, you thank twenty-three ‘friends and acquaintances’ for having ‘advised, cajoled, and challenged’ you to make a ‘vibrant collection of poets and poems for the classroom.’ Only *one* of those readers is from the Atlantic region” (109). Maritimers are of course the natural cohort to voice such objections, knowing the place as they do and knowing the bias arrayed against that place. In his review, Bartlett goes on to nominate several names (Milton Acorn; M.T. Lane; Don Domanski; John Thompson) that seem even more obvious now than they did when the review was published.

The Intervention

I arrive at a possible intervention. In “Reviewing as Spiritual Practice: The Way of the Tithe,” a piece published in the *Malahat Review* in 2015, I call for poets to devote 10% of their writing practice to producing critical prose on the work of others. I suggest that for Maritime poets to secure an audience within and without the region, they should write criticism about one another. The results are less likely to be as haunted by the backwards ghost as reviews would be from outside the region. The results might change the frame of regionalism altogether, for rather than the voices of anthologists nominating a few sentries to staff fort, get lost in fog, and eat fiddleheads, our own critics could create a framework for interpreting our literature that doesn’t invoke the ghost at all. In “Globalization and Cultural Memory,” Tremblay insists that writing out our place “can have agency outside the terms of its cultural necessity if we as intellectual workers wish it to have” (italics removed, 30). The solution seems simple: “our own intellectual labour, debate, and resistance is key . . . for it is part of a larger ecological system in which meaning is contested. In that sense, place is claimed in its affirmation, and the bias of place can be reclaimed discursively in the same way” (31). Doing good work, though, is not easy. Like Tremblay, I call for a criticism that uses the biography of the critic to internalize, contextualize, and augment the work under review. My dream of such a criticism would,

for example, reconcile the high modernist work of Travis Lane with: the exuberantly beautiful excess of George Elliott Clarke; the hybrid poems of Rachel Lebowitz; the stacked sonics of Danny Jacobs; the sexuality and marital discord of Sharon McCartney's lyrics; Zach Wells' ultra-formal performances; the translation work of Jo-Anne Elder; David Hickey's lyric meditations; and Wayne Clifford's renovation of the sonnet cycle writ epically large. Such a field of writers becomes so varied that a unifying thematics or theory is impossible, yet it is useful for our critics to establish this point so that the salty poets from the region cannot be so easily marginalized.

In fact, such a strategy is in keeping with an originary regionalism. Returning once more to Davies' metaphor of essentialism ("salt gift of blood") when it comes to Maritime identity, there is a regionalism-like theoretical model that has been relatively understudied. Though the general habit of Western thought is to reject essentialism as a problematic, othering technique that gives rise to destructive forces like nationalism, colonialism, misogyny, racism, ableism, etc., it can be argued that for a place to think that it is distinct and separate, for it to have specificity in the minds of those who live there, then perhaps there is something unique about that place. I bring into my argument the tradition of Indigenous place-thought, in which essentialism is not a bugbear but is instead a condition of life. Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson write that "Since most modern Eurocentric contexts reject the idea of intelligible essences in an ecology, they rely on arbitrary definitions that have no relationship with the life forces that Indigenous peoples use to understand life" (36). They continue: "Eurocentrism rejects the idea that the human mind can understand an ecology through these life forces" (36). In other words, and to make an analogy, centrism refutes the idea of distinct identity for Maritimity — unless one adopts centrist ways of thinking, within which "there are numberless ways in which they can classify ideas, objects, and events in an ecology." Battiste and Henderson know this game: "The system of classification and the definitions used within it are based on the desires or purposes of those who created the system. The definitions are judged to be valid if they advance the desires or purposes of the people who fabricated them, allowing them to measure, predict, or control events" (36). I reject defining a Maritimity so that the definition can inform the apparatus of nation, yet I mention that Indigenous knowledge presupposes the need for such a statement on its

own terms. “Where is here?” is no longer a dominant paradigm if the current “here” is central to one’s intellectual cosmology.

Notes

- 1 For an early polemical argument concerning the destructive effects of centrism on the region’s literature, see Kulyk Keefer’s *Under Eastern Eyes*.
- 2 Owing to scope, I have not included review commentary about splinter anthologies from the regions such as George Elliott Clarke’s two *Fire on the Water* texts or Jeanette Lynes’ interview and poem anthology *Words Out There*.

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