

Radical Ambivalence
In Atlantic Canadian Literature

By Jessica Woodman

A Thesis Submitted to
Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Master of Arts in Atlantic Canada Studies

July 2010, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-72008-0
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-72008-0

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Abstract

Radical Ambivalence In Atlantic Canadian Literature

By Jessica Woodman

Radical Ambivalence in Atlantic Canadian Literature studies the relationship between history, aesthetics, and social discourse in the writings of Anne-Marie MacDonald, Rita Joe, George Elliott Clarke, and Alistair MacLeod. Although these writers come from vastly different cultural communities and backgrounds, their writings are all marked by the conflicted ‘dual vision’ of radical ambivalence. In the four chapters of this thesis, I examine the ways that MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod, allow a new reading of the myth of multiculturalism, the experience of assimilation, the history of Black-Canadians, and the original effects of globalization. Although some might argue that these writers form the coherent and universally recognized regionalist canon of Atlantic Canadian literature, my research shows how they strain against such classifications and effectively “write back” against the colonial heritage of the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland (Said 3).

July 19, 2010

I would like to thank Dr. Alexander MacLeod
for showing incredible patience and helping me finish this Master's Thesis.
I also would like to thank Nasser Al Shammari, my greatest friend,
who taught me to never give up on my dreams.

Chapter 1

A Troubled Resistance: Atlantic Canadian Literature

In *Postcolonial Studies—The Key Concepts*, the editors recognize Homi Bhabha as the first critic to use the term “ambivalence” to refer to the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. They argue that rather than “assuming that some colonized subjects are ‘complicit’ and some ‘resistant,’ ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 12). When we extend this term to describe a more generalized colonial discourse and the effects this discourse has on the colonized subject, we see that the important and inescapable duality of this term becomes more clear and we begin to understand that ambivalence “may be both exploitative and nurturing, or represent itself as nurturing, at the same time” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 13). For the colonial subject, the relationship with colonialism can never be a simple matter of complete opposition (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 13). As Cynthia Sugars has demonstrated, if we apply Bhabha’s term to the study of postcolonial resistance writing, we see that many contemporary literary texts demonstrate what might be called a “radical ambivalence” to colonial forces (Sugars, 150). This literature, in many different forms, may show a “fluctuating relationship” with colonialism that may mimic or even mock colonial styles while maintaining a subversive critique of colonialism (Sugars, 150. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 13). The messages within this literature often challenge the normalcy and legitimacy of

colonial dominance and ideology and this challenge can, in turn, eventually become a public forum to empower the marginalized.

As Sugars has recently argued, representations of resistance in Canadian literature register a “radical ambivalence” that undermines imperialist discourse (150). Although this kind of writing explores colonial language and literary styles, at the same time, these texts challenge colonial discourse (Wiebe 100). Texts which repel and simultaneously are attracted to colonial ideology have fascinating ambivalent qualities and their duality is a unique resistance to the political status quo. Examples of this type of resistance can be found in literature by Ann-Marie MacDonald, Rita Joe, George Elliott Clarke, and Alistair MacLeod. In unique ways, each of these writers displays a radical political view about Canada that juxtaposes a “national illusion” with the suppressed voices of lived experience (Bhabha 309). The effect of this juxtaposition creates a counter narrative to the “imagined community” of the nation (Bhabha 315). Atlantic Canadian literature, like the society it investigates, may not appear, at first, to be as troubled or as extreme, as the more explicitly postcolonial texts and situations created in other colonies such as India, Africa, or the Middle East, but the fiction and poetry these writers have produced certainly does grapple with many of the same issues, and, as Sugars and others have demonstrated, the critical debates surrounding who should be considered “authentically” postcolonial is still ongoing and active. Though Atlantic Canadian literature is not typically studied as a postcolonial literature, the texts I analyze in this thesis display anti-colonial messages that subvert the homogenizing rhetoric of national discourse (Loriggio 17). The body of Atlantic literature studied here is powerful and it explores many of the “epistemologic and economic” forces that support and sustain the inequalities faced by

people in Atlantic Canada (Brydon 173). These writings register the radical ambivalence Sugars describes by displaying both an investment and a repulsion for Canadian national discourse (Sugars 150, Wiebe 100). This creates a powerful interruption in the weight and influence of colonial discourse that has existed for so long within Canada (Wiebe 100).

Colonial discourse, in the realm of literature, stems from the way that history and literature intertwine with politics. Historians and their research are in a completely separate field from historical fiction. While history can be studied, modified, and corrected so that multitudes of perspectives exist about a certain cultural group, for example, this research is not always reflected in a literary canon. In fact, tons of research about a certain person, event, or cultural group may exist within a historical category but that does not mean that these perspectives are always part of the general public. Historians could well have spent years of time and effort to collect information, however, this research may not be factually represented in a piece of fiction. Also, historians cannot predict or control the way that research is used or even suppressed within Canadian political discourse. While a historical novel may be interesting and easier to read than a history book, however, the novel will always be a particular representation of art with a particular political view. It is even quite possible that one could read a factual piece of history within a fictional piece of literature, but there would be no way to guarantee that this narrative represents the "truth." Colonial discourse, within literature, emanates when colonial ideologies are embedded in the text. If the semantics and ontology of the author are entrenched with colonial bias, then the literature often reflects a view that is not related to the actual research of historians. Even worse, the literature

becomes a tool of oppression that could never be predicted by anyone. Therefore, the most important way to take back historical representation and colonial bias, from the political forum of literature, comes from resistance literature. This powerful agency holds information that is crucial to understanding the way the power and domination is maintained and also how it can be overcome.

By including the literature of resistance from various different cultural groups, it is possible to create a broader dialogue about the impact of colonialism in Atlantic Canada. Ann-Marie MacDonald, Rita Joe, George Elliott Clarke, and Alistair MacLeod are dissimilar authors who write about fictional communities in Nova Scotia. However, the subjects that they address collectively and aptly represent conditions that are specific to life in Atlantic Canada. Race, globalization, multi-culturalism and assimilation are some of the major issues that these authors incorporate into their texts, and though it is true that these forces have shaped contemporary life across the country and around the world, this poetry and prose leads us to a better understanding of the social and political contours that are unique to the Atlantic Canadian experience. Each of these voices represents a suppressed narrative of lived experience that is not commonly known or understood about a specific community's experience with colonialism. So much can be learned about marginalization and the ways that the local, global, and colonial forces shape and operate on the people in this region. Each text is distinctive because of the creative ways that these authors have empowered themselves through literature to find creative ways to resist the status quo. These authors use various postcolonial literary devices to disagree with the popular progress narratives of Atlantic Canadian literature and this allows the reader to discover a more realistic and more accurate version of the

social and political conditions of Atlantic Canada today. Academic critics and general readers alike need to take time to discuss the unique ways that the literature from these different authors in this region artistically addresses, illustrates, and even aggressively resists the cultural forces that have shaped this region as a whole.

All too often, consideration for the impacts of colonialism on Native communities and Black-Canadian communities get separated and channeled into isolated discussions that seem distinct from the rest of Atlantic Canada. Literature that represents these people and places is often labeled with terms like “minority writing” and it is treated as a minor matter that can be ignored or excused by an empty gesture or the phrase “time does not permit a more complete discussion.” However, in many ways, Native communities and Black-Canadian communities have been directly impacted by colonialism in the most severe ways. Additionally, their communities represent the most long-standing groups of people that have ever inhabited this region. These communities are significant and important and their literature is fascinating because it allows us to initiate new dialogues about how to overcome such marginalization. This “minority” literature should not be discredited or separated because the people it represents come from small communities. In reality, apart from basing counts on skin color, which would hardly be fair, there is no majority community in Atlantic Canada. And even if one could find a majority group in Atlantic Canada, the numbers of any Atlantic majority group based on ancestry or language would always be insignificant when compared to the rest of Canada. Therefore, it is important to look at the impact of colonialism in Atlantic Canada from a broad perspective and, even more interestingly, it is important to look at the ways that authors have used their artistic abilities to challenge the political and social status quo.

Radical ambivalence is recognized as a result of the duality of dominating and being dominated throughout Canadian history. Through an examination of this conflicted dual vision of literary resistance within Atlantic Canada, one can see how Canadians, at times, are intimately implicated in colonialism. In different ways, the writings of MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod are often considered as conventional forms of literature; in actuality, however, the content of these narratives acts as a forum for agency and resistance. Although the texts from these four authors take on the forms of a traditional novel, short story, or poem, they represent suppressed experiences of Atlantic Canada and the information they convey works to counter some of the negative ways that marginalized groups have been portrayed in literature and history as a result of Canada's colonial legacy. MacDonald's narrative has the appearance of a historical novel but the text includes suppressed experiences of racism and oppression that are not commonly known about Atlantic Canada. This is the duality of her literature: a text that can appear traditional and imperial in form can, in its content, be subversive. Often, the political dualism of Atlantic Canadian literature has been misunderstood and underappreciated.

In the same way, the duality of Rita Joe's poetry is subversive because it challenges colonial conventions and imperial discourse. Joe radically opposes conventions by homogenizing rhetoric of national discourse in Atlantic Canada. In unique ways, she displays a political view about Canada that juxtaposes the Canadian national illusion with the suppressed voices of her lived experience. Her perspective sometimes shows the absorption of colonial attitudes in Joe's poem "Indian Residential School," which interestingly reflects the duality of her politics. As will be shown further in this broad discussion of colonialism in Atlantic Canada, diversity, ambivalence, and

even outright hostility are often a part of the ways that some cultural groups display their political views on this subject.

MacLeod and Clarke employ similar techniques by creating texts which appear to be conventional and traditional on the surface but the content is subversive and highly controversial. Clarke's narrator in *George and Rue* has a dual voice and the subversive history that is embedded within this narrative challenges European conventions for realist novels. As an example of the novels duality, the narrator tells different versions of the same story and interprets events from different points of view. This unique narrator is an important tool for Clarke to decolonize by subverting the literary devices that are often embedded in the wording of colonial texts. While Clarke's narrator, at first, seems to be narrating the story "normally" and appears to follow the conventions of a traditional novel, this voice soon begins to evolve into a "dual voice" that provides a subversive source of information for the reader. The duplicity of Clarke's narration unfolds when one compares *George and Rue* with its contextualized information about Black-Canadians with the narrative literary past from Atlantic Canada which often contained racist and biased information about this cultural group. Similarly, Alistair MacLeod displays a similar duplicity and ambivalence by, on one level, 'impersonating' the traditional regionalist text and, on another, simultaneously subverting the "normalcy" of Canada's national myths (Tremblay 36). Although these writers come from vastly different cultural communities and backgrounds, their writings are all marked by the conflicted 'dual vision' of radical ambivalence.

The ability of MacLeod to maintain a "dual vision" that remakes the current social systems in Canada makes his fiction an important mechanism of political agency and

resistance. MacLeod's fiction is able to summarize and animate a political discussion about the economic changes that have affected the Cape Breton region for a century and continue to present challenges in the present day. The narration soon begins to evolve into the "dual voice" of Canadian resistance where the story shows an unfolding dilemma between the past ways of doing things, and the present benefits of change. Each text encases a unique example of postcolonial resistance which shows highly creative and complicated narratives of subversion. These four authors show, in some ways, that they have been shaped by local, global, and colonial forces of Atlantic Canada. At the same time, their literature is also resistant to these same forces and even angry about how they operate upon their identities and their ability to affect change. This creates a body of work that acts as a counter to the present socially progressive narratives about this region that often overwhelm and distort the reality of Atlantic Canada.

It is unfortunate that many of the same people that have been historically marginalized and oppressed since Canada's founding have never been able to leave the political margins and establish a well deserved, positive place in Canadian society. By "writing back" and addressing some of these issues within literature, the marginalized have resisted the dominant discourses of their time and place and have been able to work for empowerment and agency (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Empire*, 6). Thus, there is great social benefit in examining Atlantic Canadian literature and the way that this fiction resists Eurocentricism with coded messages of resistance. Atlantic Canadian authors have produced a crop of fictional performances that radically reimagine the social constructions of their world. This alternate type of resistance to colonialism, within the Canadian "settler-invader" dynamic, is often controversial because of its instability

(Brydon qtd. in Sugars 173). Resistant writing is incredibly important whether it is intimately implicated in its heritage, or not, because it works to change the political climate and contests the almost axiomatic belief that Canada is socially progressive (Bhabha 315). The duality of this literature is subversive because it challenges colonial conventions and imperial discourse, but at the same time fluctuates with political agency. As Sugars points out, the “second world of postcolonial literary resistance” has been overlooked for its value to Canadian society (150).

Political Dualism in Atlantic Canadian Fiction

In order to reduce and eliminate the barriers that block freedom and equality in Canadian society, Canadians must first eliminate the processes that create and support such divisions. However, simply recognizing the mechanisms of division is not always the easiest thing to do and at times, such divisions seem invisible because they have been a part of this country since its founding. Understanding the historical, social, and political processes that have acted upon marginal groups of people in Atlantic Canada provides a shocking counter narrative to stories that celebrate the triumphs of “progress” of Canadian history. In Yvonne Burgess’s *The Myth of Progress*, she discusses an interesting perspective on the illusions that North Americans hold about their culture. Burgess argues that “Western racism...is firmly based on the myth of our superior Progress” and that Western society has tied itself in “moral knots...over colonialism, slavery, South Africa, human rights” (8). Burgess suggests that all these social ills are a “result of our unquestioned and unrepentant conviction that our society is the most advanced on earth” (8). Why does the myth of progress exist in North America? What are the roots of this cultural belief and could this myth actually be harmful? And when we look particularly at Atlantic Canada, are there groups of people who would disagree with this myth?

Certain marginal groups in Atlantic Canada argue that the myth of progress is only sustained by the suppression or elimination of many personal and social narratives of

Canadian history. To use just one example, George Elliott Clarke suggests that there is a closed dialogue about many aspects of Canadian history:

I think that Canadians find it difficult to assess literature by writers of color because we abhor any suggestion that we may be racist or that racism, I mean Eurocentricism, has always guided our culture. We find this fact embarrassing and we rush to deny its relevance, or we excuse our exclusionist practices by reminding ourselves incessantly, 'at least we are not like the Americans' (Clarke, *Harris, Phillip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism*, 2).

Canadian politicians have had a running practice of dealing with the embarrassing or uncomfortable facts about the historic disenfranchisement of Black-Canadians, the Indigenous people, and many other marginalized groups by covering up or even ignoring this history. Clarke goes on to discuss the historic way that Canadian hegemony and the myth of progress is maintained:

With this holiest of mantras, we exorcise our own history of First Nations and African slavery; banishments of First Nations and Métis people; racial segregation in public schools; the imposition of a head tax upon Chinese immigrants; the enactment of anti-colored immigration laws; the racist application of capital punishment; the barring of Jews fleeing Hitler; the theft of Japanese-Canadians property and their forced relocation from their West Coast homes; the frequent white riots against 'Oriental' and 'Negro' Canadians; the strenuous effort to erase First Nations cultures in assimilationist residential schools and patriarchal bestowals—or denials—of Indian status; the promulgation of restrictive immigration regimes; the promotion of white papers abolishing Aboriginal rights;

the stereotyping of visible minorities in mass media; the structural displacement of visible minorities from many sectors of the society and the economy (including the academy); the homicidal deployment of a neo-Nazi regiment to Africa; and the inequitable use of deadly police force against First Nations peoples and visible minorities (Clarke, Harris, Phillip, Brand: *Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism*, 2).

Canada has maintained the myth of progress through denial and then it has used coercion, suppression, and even violence to sustain this position. While all of these subjects have been discussed by historians in the academy, they also make important appearances in contemporary fictional literature. The publicizing of suppressed history in film and literature has been an important tool used by the marginalized to engage with the legacy of colonialism. In particular, Atlantic Canadian literature that explicitly addresses these issues has become increasingly popular with high volumes of book sales and notoriety (Fuller, "*Crest of the Wave*," 43). Works of contemporary fiction that accurately represent the varied culture of Atlantic Canada should be a source of great pride for this region. There is much to be learned by examining these narratives because they contain important information about the political duality that exists in Atlantic Canada.

The political dualism of Atlantic Canadian literature has been often misunderstood and underappreciated for its important function as a site of political agency and resistance. Atlantic Canadian literature, in the past, has been defined as having a "common regional identity," as being a "marginal" literature, or as a collection of texts containing a "subtext of conservative assumptions" (Creelman 4-24). According to some literary critics, Atlantic Canadian writing has been dominated by literary realism, while others disagree

and call it “conservative idealism,” “nostalgic,” “naturalist fiction,” or even a “celebration of traditional values and ideals” (Creelman 4-24). At times, this body of literature has been linked with its geographic and economic identity—a group of texts which are categorized as being “traditional” and “regional” (Keefer 7). Within literary criticism, literature from this region has previously been discounted as either not “post-colonial” or not even politically radical. Worse yet, it has been said that Atlantic Canada reflects the colonial backwardness of the “have-not” region that has been accused of failing to modernize (Creelman 5). However, there is a new wave of literary criticism that suggests that Atlantic Canadian literature is politically active and radical. Many contemporary critics have demonstrated that Atlantic Canadian literature is often deceptively complex and that several texts which previously received only generalized descriptions from critics, turn out to have deeper meanings and radical politics that have often gone underappreciated. To some readers, the politics of Ann-Marie MacDonald, Rita Joe, George Elliott Clarke, and Alistair MacLeod may seem unexpectedly subversive (Wyile, *Speaking*, 21, Fuller, “*Crest of the Wave*,” 42). These authors may share a geographic space but they do not inhabit a common cultural space and each text produced sheds light upon a different social process of Atlantic Canadian society that has politically shaped this geography (Blair 544). The generalized descriptions that exist about this body of literature are combative and often without resolution because they draw on the region’s own powerful divisions and its fluctuations of radical politics. While these writers seem to demonstrate a colonial literary style, their texts “write back” against the colonial heritage of the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 3).

The Power of Regional Fiction in Literary Studies

Literature is a powerful tool for oppression or for liberty depending on how it is used. As Blair argues, an understanding of the potential uses of literature opens the possibility for “reclaiming that horizon of agency from its long history of uses, misuses, and effects” (561). There is more opportunity, presently, for writers to empower themselves and their social positions through literature than ever before (Wyile, *Speaking*, 4). As Blair demonstrates, there is a surprising power in the fiction of American literary studies that suggests that “literary historians are still in the business of reading imaginative texts *as* texts” and that “alternate-world fiction forces us to experience radically altered but entirely plausible versions of the spatial constructions foundational to collective notational life” which exposes the “the geopolitical shape of America as a space of illusion” (562). Blair further argues:

If such claims strike critical readers inured to the dismantling of literary studies as naïve, they also suggest what we give up when we cede the province of imaginative production to anxieties of cultural hegemony or romances of marginality (562).

North American literature wields cultural power by sustaining and/or resisting hegemony. The examination of the inner workings of art or the ways of seeing and knowing that actually contribute to political division in Atlantic Canada is of great benefit for literary studies (Diane Brydon qtd. in Sugars 173). Only by deconstructing how the political

dimensions of this region interplay, can new attempts be made to change the entrenched social and political systems that exist in Canada (Moss 58).

American literary regionalism originated as a tool of national and cultural hegemony, in an effort to create a separate nation from European control. The regional text became popular beginning in the late 1800's in the United States, with the presence of William Dean Howells (qtd. in Jordan 102). Howells encouraged a new generation of writers and he largely led the editorial surge that encouraged American writers to break free from their "British ancestry" (qtd in Jordan 102). The importance of turning to the everyday people for a "democratic" look at America was crucial in creating a new nation that would break away from colonial impersonation (qtd. in Jordan 102). It could be argued that this kind of fiction and its subsequent regional narratives originated with national identity. As David Jordan observes:

The surge of nationalist fiction in the United States at that time was fueled by rising nationalist sentiment and the belief that verisimilar depictions of diverse rural communities would capture a uniquely American national identity. To Howells, realism, regionalism, and nationalism were inseparable...he praised authors who chronicled the daily lives of common citizens (102).

Howells influenced a literary genre that has, in turn, influenced the critical histories of the American and Canadian literary regional traditions (qtd in Jordan 102). In the past thirty years, some American authors have used regional literature as a tool to subvert nationalist unity. Jordan argues that "Faulkner, Steinbeck and Barth" have experimented with regional fiction by producing "alternate means of depicting regional identity" and by distorting the traditional regional narrative with literary techniques which "self-

consciously subvert traditional perceptions of their region's contribution to a unified national identity" (Jordan 112). The regional narrative is often expected to perform and restore the illusions of the nation but authors classified under this heading often subvert this regionalism to question the distortion of national discourse. This technique allows regionalism, a historical cultural apparatus of national hegemony, to be reclaimed for a different purpose.

Similar to American regionalism, Canadian regional fiction has evolved over time. There is an abundance of literature from PEI, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland which has a distinctive flavor of the culture and lives of the people who inhabit their geographical regions (Keefer 7). As Creelman notes:

Realism arrived comparatively late to the Maritime Provinces. Though it had governed European narrative codes for much of the nineteenth century, realism emerged as the Maritime region's dominant literary genre only after the First World War....The best known realist writers of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick—Thomas Raddall, Hugh MacLennan, Charles Bruce, Ernest Buckler, Alden Nowlan, Alistair MacLeod, and David Adams Richards—all matured as artists and produced their best fiction in the midst of the cultural shifts of the last sixty years (5).

Regional literature, as Creelman argues, was dominated by male authors and influenced by the school brand of realist representation which became popular much later in Atlantic Canada than the rest of North America. Representational fiction from Atlantic Canada materialized in the last part of the nineteenth century and was influenced by colonial literary styles.

The complexity of Atlantic Canadian literature has been misunderstood, at times, because the form of this writing is often influenced by colonial literary styles. However, when we read more closely, we often see that the content presented in this colonial style is very subversive and fueled by an aggressive political agency. Most literary critics note the colonial form of this literature and have often considered it old fashioned. Janice Kulyk Keefer argues that the realist fiction of Atlantic Canada is popular but different:

The texts which make up a Maritime canon, however, suffer from a double disadvantage within the context of contemporary criticism: many of the genres they favor are, paradoxically, both critically outmoded and commercially popular: the idyll, historical romance, and that current literary leper—the realist or representational novel (7).

Some of this literature may appear to be non-threatening, backwards, palatable, popular, and even outdated. The broad analysis by Keefer, however, only scratches the surface. Keefer is correct about the form that Atlantic regionalism has taken, but there is so much more to be analyzed about the content. This is the duality of the literature: a text which can appear traditional and imperial in form can, in its content, be subversive. These texts challenge the “dominant myths” in the narrative of the Canadian experience and shed a new light on the imagined community of the nation (Wyile, *Speaking*, 9, Bhabha 315). As was mentioned earlier, American authors subverted forms of regionalism to produce counter narratives to the illusionary patriotic myths of their nation. Similar to the American evolution of regionalism, Atlantic Canadian literature has also used regionalism in subversive ways against the distortions of multicultural discourse and the illusionary myth of progress. In their different ways, the works of Ann-Marie

MacDonald, Rita Joe, Elliott Clarke, and Alistair MacLeod further display a similar ambivalence by, on one level, 'impersonating' the traditional regionalist text and, on another, simultaneously subverting the "normalcy" of such national myths (Tremblay 36). Although these writers come from vastly different cultural communities and backgrounds, their writings are all marked by the conflicted 'dual vision' of radical ambivalence.

Radical Ambivalence

Radical ambivalence, within Canadian literature, is recognized to be a result of the duality of dominating and being dominated throughout Canadian history. Some critics have debated whether Canadian literature is “authentic post-colonialism” (Brydon qtd. in Sugars 173). Homi Bhabha and Stephen Slemon argue that the literary resistance to colonialism in the settler-countries is an “ambivalent” action of the “Second world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 65). Other critics have determined that Canada is an “invader-settler society” or a “settler-invader society” and should be disqualified from post-colonial categories (Brydon qtd. in Sugars 173). This issue is difficult to grapple with for many reasons because, as Brydon notes, “the authentic colony (has been) implicitly defined as poor, nonwhite, and resistant and the inauthentic as rich, white and complicit” (qtd. in Sugars 173). Under the restrictions of this kind of categorization, a post-colonial reading of Canadian literature is defined “out of existence by characterizing its development as the opposite of that presumed for those unnamed colonies that they term ‘the actual colonies’ (qtd. in Sugars 173).

Critics suggest that Canada should not be studied as a true colony because of its affluence and because the skin color of the majority of Canadians is white. However, as Brydon argues, such exclusion ignores the important contributions made by Black writers, Native writers, and immigrant writers:

Ironically, withholding the status of ‘authentic’ colonialism from countries such as Canada makes the editors complicit in the continuing denial and marginalization

of Native people's experience of colonialism as well as of the invader-settler and immigrant experiences. This disqualification of Canadian colonialism seems to contradict the editors' earlier definition of colonialism as 'the conquest and direct control of other people's land' (qtd. in Sugars 173).

The "settler-invader" argument negates the experience and diversity of Canadian literature and again homogenizes many Canadian people and their experiences. Canadian people live within a unique set of political circumstances and their literature reflects an indirect form of social agency. The literature offers a unique type of "resistance" to colonialism, even if it is considered a troubled resistance (Nurse 13). Stephen Slemon states that the "Second World" of writing "within the ambit of colonialism is in danger of disappearing because it does not offer up an experiential grounding in a common 'Third World' aesthetics" and "its modalities of post-coloniality are too ambivalent, too occasional and uncommon, for inclusion within the field" (qtd. in Sugars 144-5). Compared to post-colonial texts from other parts of the world, the resistance to domination and to colonial discourse in Canadian literature has been marked by its own aesthetic properties.

The struggle for power in Canada under colonialism, and what Moss calls the "contestation of complicit modes of knowledge and philosophy," create a precarious political situation for Canadian society (2). Diana Brydon argues that this literature reflects the threatening position of postcolonial discourse for Canadian authors who attempt to engage with the complexities of inheriting a Canadian history that has been traditionally narrated from the dominating point of view in an invader-settler colony:

Non-Native Canadians have moved from denying to acknowledging guilt for the invasion and theft of First Nations lands, but that move is easier than recognizing current, continued complicity in imperialist patterns of domination, both epistemological and economic...This kind of post colonialism does not allow Canadians to be merely observers, academic students of a phenomenon that happens elsewhere. This kind of post colonialism is about all of us: whether we have inherited identities as First Nations, Métis, Quebecois, invader-settler, immigrant, or 'ethnic' (qtd. in Sugars 171).

Reflected in Atlantic Canadian texts is an ambivalent or fluctuating relationship with colonialism but its relevance stands on its own as an effective political resistance against imperialism (Sugars 150). This fiction is subversive when the authors are concerned with the "questioning of the artificial boundaries between truth and lie, history and fiction, reality and imagination" (Wyile, *Speaking*, 12). Placing Canada in its own category allows ethnic minorities, refugees, immigrants, descendants of Black slaves, and the Indigenous people to display their own unique experience of colonization within post-colonial discourse. Clarifying this situation, Cynthia Sugars and Alan Lawson use the term "Second world" when describing the settler cultures of Australia, Canada, southern Africa, and New Zealand. The reason for this category is described by Sugars in her book *Unhomely States*:

At bottom, the argument here is...in order to avoid essentialism and to escape theoretical absolutism, we might profitably think of the settler cultures of Australia, Canada, southern Africa, and New Zealand as inhabiting a 'Second World' of discursive polemics—of inhabiting, that is, the space of dynamic

relation between those ‘apparently antagonistic, static, aggressive, [and] disjunctive’ binaries such as colonizer, colonized, foreign and native, settler and indigene, home and away (148-9).

Canadians must grapple with a unique set of cultural codes that have sometimes absorbed and sometimes resisted the country’s colonial inheritance. And, in turn, these codes have produced and sustained a unique fictional dialogue that addresses the ways these forces of attraction and repulsion have shaped the nation (Bhabha 315). The unique brand of radical ambivalence we find in Canadian fiction has created a complex tapestry of art, implication, and resistance.

This debate surrounding what constitutes an “authentic post-colonialism” appears to have evolved into a red herring which may have obscured the real reasons behind oppression and inequality in Canada. The heterogeneous mass of Canadians that now inhabit these geographical borders and react to each other in unordered ways combine to create the complex jumble of social and political processes that now structure this country (Brydon qtd. in Sugars 171). Emile Durkheim suggested that society is “not a metaphysical whole; rather, it [is] composed of individuals and it [is] they and they alone who ‘[are] the factors in social life’” (Thom 38). The economic power of certain cultural groups allows certain political ideas to be privileged and this has at times overwhelmed the concerns of marginalized or minority groups in Canada (Wyile, *Speaking*, 9). As Sugars states, part of the reform from a colonial legacy will come when we, Canadians, can identify power and the way that resistance has been made to this power (150). Similarly, Bhabha famously asked postcolonial critics to try “to recognize the ubiquity of resistances and to understand their incompleteness, their strengths, their losses, and their

gains” (Eustace 64). All of these processes are a part of historical creation and they are often maintained by individuals with political motivation to change, reform or in many cases, maintain the status quo (Massey 159). Calling Canada a settler-invader society presents a false picture of Canadian politics. As was mentioned earlier, it is not easy to define and understand the roots of social and political divisions or how all these processes act together to create cultural hegemony (Moss 2). Only by examining the different social realities of many different marginalized cultural groups in Atlantic Canada can we identify some of the inner workings of this society. As Sugars argues: “There is also a *second* world of postcolonial literary resistance, but it inhabits a place—a place of radical ambivalence—where too much post colonial criticism in the First world has so far forgotten to look” (150). This is exactly the site or space where Atlantic Canadian literary criticism needs to direct its attention in order to better understand its own particular blend of colonialism.

Chapter 2

The Myth of the Multicultural in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on your Knees*

Fall on your Knees, by Ann-Marie MacDonald, is a narrative that focuses on the forces of social exclusion and also functions as a wide-ranging negotiation with a version of Canadian history that is not commonly remembered. MacDonald's text registers the radical ambivalence that Sugars describes and it is certainly dominated by a competing fascination and repulsion for certain aspects of Canadian national discourse (Bhabha 315). The novel re-traces the long legacy of racism in Canadian society, and it examines the effects of a colonialism that lingered throughout the 20th century, long after slavery had been abolished. This act of remembrance is subversive because the novel directs attention towards a subject that is often kept closed: the damage inflicted upon non-white members of society in early twentieth-century Nova Scotia. Many Canadians have had difficulty understanding this particular aspect of the past and the way that colonialism has affected certain communities because of the homogenizing rhetoric of Canadian nationalism. *Fall on your Knees* radically destabilizes the traditional constructions of Canadian history by using the suppressed voices of Black-Canadians, Lebanese-Canadians, and other marginal groups to question the actual existence of Canada's glossy imagined community (Bhabha 315). This narrative conflicts with the myth of progress and spotlights the flaws of the so-called progressive religious community of Canada. The dialogue of the characters focuses on the subjects of racism and intolerance and this counters the many patriotic notions that exist about "multi-cultural" Canada. The subjects and dialogue in this novel speak of racism and function as radical reactions to

Canada's exclusionary past. By remembering the past, the novel also highlights current patterns of domination that exist in Canadian society today.

Cultural amnesia is an inherent part of Canadian history and there is an epistemological reason for this trend. By inventing falsely patriotic "progress" narratives that exclude unfavorable events of the past, the public is only exposed to history from a distorted lens. As a result, it is only with difficulty that marginal cultures and their experiences become recognized. Cultures without privilege fall into a place of invisibility and, ultimately, their political and social concerns become ignored (Henry & Tator 1). By writing a counter narrative about the inner workings of racism and essentialism in *Fall on your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald is able to radically question the problems of cultural amnesia in Canada.

Fall on your Knees is a deliberate recollection and reiteration that counters dominant discourses of a "cleansed" history of inclusion and progress (Burgess 8). The novel portrays the historical marginalization of Black-Canadians and Lebanese people within a fictional representation of Cape Breton during the early 1900's (Laouyene 134). The narrative vividly demonstrates the way that culture was affected by theories of social Darwinism for the people of that era¹. According to theories of cultural studies; marginalization is the "process or result of becoming or making marginal...the process of

¹ Similarly, marginalization has been understood as the act of rendering or treating one "as marginal; to remove from the centre or mainstream; to force (an individual, minority group, etc.) to the periphery of a dominant social group...to belittle, depreciate, discount, or dismiss"¹

making an individual or minority group marginal in relation to a dominant social group.² *Fall on your Knees* is radically concerned with showing the experience of being an “other” as a result of social marginalization and racism within the culture of Cape Breton in the 20th century.

In *Fall on your Knees*, the dominant justification for the mistreatment of Black-Canadians at the time, years after slavery, was the belief that people with the darker skin types were part of an inferior race (Sullivan 1). To understand the meaning of racism and race, it is important to understand the socially constructed meaning of these terms. Stephen Cornell and Douglass Hartmann state that race is defined as:

a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent. A race is a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics. Determining which characteristics constitute the race – the selection of markers and therefore the construction of the racial category itself – is a choice human beings make. Neither markers nor categories are predetermined by any biological factors (24).

Thus, as Cornell and Hartmann explain, there is no biological basis for racial definitions, only a social construction based on the collective notions of a particular time and place.³

² "other." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2008. Oxford University Press. Date accessed: May 19, 2010. http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00301993?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=marginalization&first=1&max_to_show=10

³ Additionally, the term “race” should not be confused with “ethnicity” which refers to an individual and “pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics...designating a racial or other group within a larger system³. Cornell and Hartmann define ethnicity as a “sense of common ancestry based on largely symbolic cultural attachments, past linguistic heritage, religious affiliations, claimed kinship, or some physical traits” (Cornell & Hartmann 19).

“Racism,” according to Lawrence Blum, should be restricted to two terms: “*inferiorization*,” or the “denigration of a group due to its putative biological inferiority” and “*antipathy*,” or the “bigotry, hostility, and hatred” towards another group defined by its generally accepted inherited physical traits (Blum 8). The dominant negative ideas of race and inferiority have been used to justify the historic mistreatment of Black-Canadians and other groups of people in Canadian history.

Racism has influenced fiction in many ways and certain types of narratives have privileged negative representations of Black-Canadians and other minority groups that represent the colonial ideologies of this time period. In discussing the experience of being a Black person, Frantz Fanon argues that his self and schema were “provided by the *other*, the White,” who effectively wove him “out of a thousand fictions, anecdotes, and stories” (185). The political discussion of race within *Fall on your Knees* is unique because MacDonald refuses to weave out Black-Canadian characters and she frankly opens the subject of “color” and the historical mistreatment of certain minorities along with many other controversial aspects of Canadian history.

In many ways, *Fall on your Knees* may seem to mimic a 19th century historical novel. However, this narrative is actually an example of an ambivalent site of resistance to the dominant settler-colony perspective of history. During the 19th century, the historical novel worked as a tool in the act of creating and maintaining colonial domination. As Stuart Hall argues, the novel, along with other mechanisms, such as oral histories, government records, archives, literature, music, educational systems, and news sources combined to create powerful discourses which created the common beliefs people hold about Canada as a nation (613). In his article, “Question of Cultural Identity,” he

formerly observed that national histories provide society with “a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or represent, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation” (613). Similarly, Herb Wyile states that the historical novel has often been complicit in the attempt to conceal “colonial erasure, contributing to a confirmation of the project of colonialism that has at its complement the marginalization or caricature of native characters” (*Speculative*, 37). For example, Wyile cites Thomas Raddall’s novel *His Majesty’s Yankees* as a narrative which has played a part in suppressing local history of Atlantic Canada (*Speculative*, 37). Canada, like all countries, has a national history that is provided by many sources and, of late, this narrative has been re-evaluated by contemporary scholarship to contribute to a decolonization of Canadian history (Wyile, *Speculative*, 37). Contemporary historical novels from Atlantic Canada have tended to display and highlight colonial erasures and recover previously silenced experiences. Wyile argues that “contemporary Canadian novelists are much less inclined to construct patriotic narratives of the building of a nation and of a unitary Canadian character than to dramatize the exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion that such narratives of nation have often served to efface (*Speculative*, 7). In *Fall on your Knees*, MacDonald brings up the subject of nation within what one might consider a “safe” fictional world where these explosive subjects can be discussed and uncovered. This type of dialogue is crucial if the nation of Canada wants to uncover racism, eliminate the roots of racism, and help the people who have been traumatized by racism to heal (Wyile, *Speculative*, 69). The narrative registers the radical ambivalence that Sugars

describes by using the form of what appears to be an imperial novel to challenge the record of Canada's exclusionary history (Sugars 151).

Fall on your Knees presents a variety of marginalized characters living in a small community in Cape Breton spanning the years from 1900-1950. Beginning with an alliance between a Scottish/Lebanese couple-- James and Materia, the story opens with family conflict (MacDonald 16). Patriarchal Mahmoud, father to Materia, kidnaps James, beats him, tortures him and threatens to murder him unless he agrees to marry Materia and convert to Catholicism (MacDonald 17). Mahmoud, a Lebanese immigrant whose belief system is strongly influenced by the values he learned in the "Old Country" casts off his daughter and never forgives her (MacDonald 19). Materia finds herself isolated and unhappily married to James who does his best to make her miserable. James and Materia have three daughters, Kathleen, Mercedes, and Frances, who all become marginalized women in different ways. Kathleen, her father's favored child, travels to New York to become a famous singer and eventually begins a lesbian relationship (MacDonald 479). James finds out about Kathleen and comes to New York and rapes his own daughter (MacDonald 549). Kathleen returns home and Materia tries to deliver her twins. During complications, Materia is forced to take Kathleen's life in order to save the babies (MacDonald 251). Left alone with the twins, young Frances accidentally injures infant Lilly and kills infant Ambrose in a hurried baptism in the creek behind the house. Materia, who is already mentally ill, commits suicide in a fit of guilt and grief (MacDonald 137). Frances and Mercedes lose their sister, mother, and Ambrose in one day. James appoints young Mercedes to become the replacement mother. Frances is haunted by the accident and later is abused and raped by her father (MacDonald 446). By

the time she is a teenager, Frances is a prostitute in a local speak easy and eventually is impregnated by Leo Taylor (MacDonald 315). Mercedes takes the baby to the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children and Frances never knows that her son was born alive (MacDonald 554). All three girls are marginalized from society and suffer isolation and self-destruction at the hands of their father and within a community that has no regard or interest for their well-being.

Within its fictional framework, the novel examines the effects of the ugly theories of social Darwinism which were used to justify slavery and exploitation during this period. The conflict of the novel is fueled by intolerance. James fundamentally believes that his wife is inferior because of her race. He asks:

How had he been ensnared by a child? Normal children didn't run away with men.

He knew from his reading that clinical simpletons necessarily had an overdeveloped animal nature. She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one. It was queer.

Sick, even. Perhaps it was a racial flaw. He would read up on it (MacDonald 34).

James is able to justify his incestuous feelings for Materia by blaming her and rationalizing that all their troubles can be linked to the fact that she belongs to an inferior race. The idea that people who had dark skin were animals or morally flawed was an important social belief in the early 1900's. These flaws refer to "scientific" ideas about Social Darwinism that were historically used to justify the mistreatment of slaves (Henry & Tator 35). In *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*, Frances Henry and Carol Tator argue that "throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth, the term 'race' was used not only to distinguish between groups but also to establish a

hierarchical division of races” (35). At the time, “physical appearances were thought to correlate with social, psychological, intellectual, moral, and cultural difference” (Henry & Tator 35). Thus, “characteristics such as skin color were used to establish a racial classification system” and this “racial order and discourse was then used to rationalize and legitimize the exploitation and oppression of racial minorities” (Henry & Tator 35).

While science has done many good things for the advancement of mankind, *Fall on your Knees* reminds Canadians about racial theories that justified and encouraged the violation of racial minorities. For the Canadians who lived this experience, this text represents a brave move of political agency because the story allows an open acknowledgement of this aspect of Canadian history (Nurse 31). James views himself as blameless because he is white and Scottish. James says: “For on top of everything else, Materia was dark. He tried not to see it, but it was one of those things that was always before his eyes, now that the scales had fallen from them” (MacDonald 37). James believes that he is superior because he is Scottish: “What James resented most was that *enklese* nonsense. He wasn’t English, not a drop of English blood in him, he was Scottish and Irish, like ninety percent of this God-forsaken-island, not to mention Canadian. *Filthy black Syrians*” (MacDonald 19). The rationalization of his abusive treatment of his wife stems from James’ belief that his color makes him superior. This exposes the ugly nature of racist ideologies and how they affected people who were subsequently classified and oppressed.

The racist conversation that the school girls have about Kathleen provides another illustration of the dominant social views surrounding morality and skin color in the early 20th century. When the school girls feel jealous of Kathleen, they make racist remarks:

The other girls salve their corrosive envy and allay their fear of Kathleen, the antisocial prodigy, with an invigorating dose of racial hatred:

‘She may be peaches and cream but you should see her mother...black as the ace of spades, my dear.’

‘You know that sort of thing stays in the blood. Evangeline Campbell’s mother’s cousin knows a girl had a baby in Louisburg. Black as coal, my dear, and the both their families white as snow and blond blonde.’

‘We should’ve never let the coloureds into this country in the first place.’

‘My uncle saw a coloured woman driving a cart with a load of coal, the next morning he was dead.’

‘They have a smell, they do.’

‘Kathleen Piper belongs in The Coke Ovens!’

...And they laugh (MacDonald 97).

The conversation above and the dialogue of other characters in this novel show the inner thought processes expressive of an intolerance based on the ideology of racial classification. The view that a race has inferior fixed traits which could be passed on genetically was a common social viewpoint in this era. This “scientific” reasoning justified abuse, slavery, and oppression of many non-white Canadians of this time period.

Mahmoud is the ultimate example of intolerance. This patriarchal father has no regret for casting his 13 year old daughter out of his home and forcing her to marry James Piper. When Mahmoud hears that Kathleen, his granddaughter, has returned from New York pregnant he states:

Where did she do it, who did she let do it to her and how often, who was it, some Anglo dog son-of-an-*enklese*-bitch with no respect for people's daughters, or worse, a Jew, New York is full with them, or worse, a coloured man—likewise thronging in that city—and once that's in the blood it sleeps there for generations until you least expect it, where was her father when his daughter was being ruined in the worst city in the world, where people mate like mongrels? And now a bastard in the family, another girl to boot, my son-in-law is truly cursed. Bad from the beginning, bad in the end, I wash my hands (MacDonald 166).

Ironically, while Mahmoud treats his daughter so badly for marrying someone English, he justifies his actions with a disturbing hierarchy of prejudice which fluctuates with colonial bias, illustrating exactly how the influence of colonialism can be so pervasive and blinding. This idea that good bloodlines could be contaminated by making alliances with someone who was not white was still a predominant belief in the early 1900's. Mahmoud's monologue exposes the truth about racism which is that crude ideas about "miscegenation" lingered for generations after slavery was abolished in cultural and social attitudes (Breton, Isajiw, Kalbach & Reitz 43). From a contemporary perspective, it may be easy to imagine that prejudice disappeared in 1830 when slavery was abolished. However, the novel counters this idea and demonstrates that even in the 1950's cultural attitudes still needed improvement.⁴

⁴ The cultural amnesia of Canadian history about the subject of slavery will be discussed later in this paper with George Elliot Clarke's novel George and Rue.

Fall on your Knees examines the inner workings of racism and essentialism, and their effects on the Black community, through the character Teresa. When things go missing in the house, Mahmoud assumes Teresa is a thief:

He should have never forgotten her colour. They can be the nicest people in the world but, like children, they mustn't be overburdened with responsibility. They're like the worse sort of woman in that way, even the man—which reminds me, I wonder if the brother was in cahoots (MacDonald 326).

When Teresa is discriminated against, her instinctive reaction is to think racist thoughts about Mahmoud, and to almost echo his model of racial intolerance (MacDonald 329). However, these two versions of racism produce opposite outcomes. Mahmoud ruins Teresa's reputation because he is a rich and prominent figure in the town and the result is a real material deprivation for Teresa her and her whole family. After Teresa's dismissal, Adelaide loses her income because the townspeople no longer trust Teresa's relatives (MacDonald 331). This passage summarizes the ugly truth about intolerance: people with economic privilege or political power are able to discriminate freely, but those confined to a lower social standing must suffer through devastating consequences. Social power was related to class standing in Nova Scotia during the 1930's and was sometimes limited to a dominant social group. Economics could improve one's class standing and this type of situation is illustrated by Mahmoud's position in the community. The narrator of the novel discusses the experience of being an "other" in Atlantic Canadian culture:

The old standby about the strangeness of white people doesn't really apply here because, although you'd take your life in your hands if you said it, the Mahmouds

aren't really white, are they? They're something else. They are somewhat coloured. What this means in Nova Scotia at this time is that, for the Mahmouds, the colour bar that guards access to most aspects of society tends to be negotiable. It helps that they have money (MacDonald 118).

While one may prefer not to see the way that economic power preserves the status quo, the reality is that marginalized groups have to struggle against these types of social forces which dominate their everyday life.

The reality of prejudice is demonstrated through the character Ginger. Ginger, a Black-Canadian character, has high morals, is hard working, and acts like a decent person, compared to Mahmoud or some of the other characters. Ginger describes his feelings about trying to live among a society that sees only his skin color:

Whenever Ginger is in a place that's filled with other black people it's as though he is relieved of a weight that he was unaware of until it came off him. He walked up Lenox Avenue feeling light. In Harlem Ginger felt happy but lonely too. Home and not home. He entered a small club on 135th Street that welcomed Negroes in the audience, not just on stage (MacDonald 323)

Once again, the narrator of the novel discusses the experience of being an "other" in Atlantic Canadian culture and provides readers with a character who stands against standardized colonial portrayals of Black characters in literature (Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 2).⁵ Although the novel is a fictional text it actually provides a more accurate portrayal of the lived experience of Black Atlantic-Canadians than what is

⁵ An example of a disputed portrayal of a black character in colonial literature would be "Tin Tin in the Congo" where the portrayal of black characters is derogatory (Beckford 1).

usually found in historical analysis (Wylie, *Speculative*, 37). While MacDonald's representation of a Black-Canadian is radical, Ginger's personality reflects an absorption of an essentialized discourse that Ginger can feel a freedom with other minorities. This type of discourse is troubled and reflects the idea that there would be no difference between large group of people who happen to share the same skin color.

Fall on your Knees opposes widely held notions that marginalized groups were victims and not heroes. The heroes of this narrative do not preserve the status quo by being white, Christian, and heterosexual. Rather, a lesbian, a prostitute, a Black maid, and truck driver prove to be the heroes in an oppressive intolerant society. Thus, these types of novels make possible "the unearthing of the larger suppressed story" and put "into context the racist discourse of public opinion and official pronouncements" (Wylie, *Speculative*, 70). This literature provides Canadian society with an "opportunity to deconstruct the assumptions" underlying the dominant discourse and to "highlight the sweeping violation of human rights it represents" (Wylie, *Speculative*, 70). When MacDonald exposes the untold suffering and violence that were a part of the cultural forces of Social Darwinism during the early 20th century, she is deconstructing dominant discourse through her fictional representations. Through this disclosure, the novel becomes an act of political agency against the "progressive" narratives of imperial settler history (Wylie, *Speculative*, 37). By discussing racial conflict, class conflict, religious intolerance and violence, the novel helps to illustrate alternate experiences which may not be well known or understood. It is extremely important not to forget these types of experiences and to examine the roots of racism in order to work towards reconciliation for the victims of racism. For people who lived these experiences, this type of dialogue is

even more crucial because it prevents their experiences from going unnoticed. When one has been victimized and then silenced or suppressed for any reason, this prevents healing or mediation.

The inclusion of a lesbian and a prostitute within the narrative challenges the literary status quo by representing women who have been historically marginalized and written out of historical novels. In dominant discourse, their experiences have tended to be “hushed up” or considered a private matter. Gay history and women’s history are two relatively new fields of study that have gained prominence with the increased interest in gender relations. However, MacDonald does not forget this subject in the interactions between Frances and her aunt Camille:

Tonight she [Frances] gets a bit of a start: a flaccid female voice plops against her like a jellyfish, ‘You’re no good.’

Frances looks up. The darker patch of gloom is unmistakably Camille.

‘Oh hi, Aunt Camille.’

‘You’re trash.’

Frances pulls on her ripe woolen stockings. ‘We’re all sisters under the mink, honey.’

‘Why don’t you kill yourself.’

Frances bursts out laughing and leaves (MacDonald 315).

Frances thinks it is funny that her aunt is horrified by her conduct and is not ashamed of herself (MacDonald 316). Frances is a crazy teenager and her views on sexuality and virginity contrast enormously from the dominant view in Atlantic Canadian society during this era. Classic texts of female heroines, such as Anne of Green Gables, were

sexually bare and conservative with moral implications built into the narrative (Wyile, *Speculative*, 49). Frances is not the typical prostitute character and she represents an alternate version of sexuality. Her lack of moral conflict contrasts strongly with the conformist twentieth century ethics of decency (Hamilton 2). The character, Kathleen is also the antithesis of the virtuous teenager from early fiction. Kathleen falls in love with a woman and then is raped and murdered by her father (MacDonald 378). MacDonald includes two groups of women who would have been rendered invisible by the moral and political discourses that were coursing through the society of the 1930's-1950's (Wyile, *Speculative*, 49).

In an interesting literary trick, MacDonald also teaches a lesson about essentialism through the most intolerant character, Mahmoud. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines essentialism as the "practice of regarding something (as a presumed human trait) as having innate existence or universal validity rather than as being a social, ideological, or intellectual construct." When an argument is considered essentialist then it means, for example, that one has lumped an entire ethnic group into the same category without taking into consideration the differences between the group members in regards to ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. MacDonald exposes the problems of essentialist reasoning through the most intolerant character, Mahmoud. Frightened by Materia's marriage with the Scottish James Piper, Mahmoud marries his next daughter Camille to Arabic speaking Tommy Jameel. Mahmoud speaks disparagingly about Jameel, his daughter's husband: "When Mahmoud's eldest daughter Materia ran off with the *enklese* bastard, Mahmoud gave his second eldest daughter to Tommy Jameel, thinking that his being Lebanese was enough. It was not enough. Mahmoud knows that now; Jameel is no son-in-law of his"

(MacDonald 315). Mahmoud's justification for disowning Jameel shows an interesting insight into race and essentialism and his thoughts show the influence of Social Darwinism:

Mahmoud blames himself. In the Old Country he never would have given a daughter to Jameel because there the crucial distinction between their two families would have been clear. The Jameels are arabs. We Mahmouds are Mediterranean. Closer to being European, really. Such distinctions are apt to get blurred in the new country...And after all, to the *enklese* you are all "black Syrians" (MacDonald 315).

While "white society" considered all Lebanese people the same—*black Syrians*—Mahmoud cannot identify with the people that he is being grouped into by the dominant social view. Though Jameel and Mahmoud speak the same language and come from the same country, they are very different culturally and morally. Thus, MacDonald, through this character, has made an important point: Just because one has been identified as Lebanese does not mean that one is the exact same as every Lebanese person in Canada. Mahmoud is not the same as Jameel even though he shares a region and a language. This is an interesting way to illustrate the problem with racist or essentialist thinking where a dominant group tends to lump all the people of one cultural group into the same category without identifying the differences in gender, ethnicity, religious background, class or geography. It is a sign of ignorance to believe that it is possible to classify an ethnic group and then proclaim that the entire group will exhibit certain characteristics. As MacDonald craftily illustrates, even within a small ethnic group there is diversity and variety.

Intolerance was part of systemic racism in the early 20th century, and this is shown through the character, Hector, who testifies to important truths about Canadian race relations during WWI. Teresa relates to the reader an interesting point about Hector: "In 1914 he volunteered to go overseas and fight but the army wouldn't have him: This was a white man's war, they didn't want a 'checkerboard army'" (MacDonald 118). While some Black men were allowed to enlist in the Canadian army during World War I and served with great pride and valor, others were turned away based on personal opinions of certain racist enlistment officers (Boileau 1). MacDonald uses Hector to show the sting of racism that many Black men felt when they attempted to enlist but were turned away. In examining the historical event that MacDonald is obviously referring to, it can be noted that some Black men were considered inferior in the early 1900's. In "Black Ribbon, Red Poppy," Erica Phillips explains: "Despite the fact that the military did not officially sanction discrimination in recruitment, local recruiting stations sometimes turned away qualified men for racist reasons. Officers told them it was 'a white man's war,' or 'we don't want a checkerboard army'" (1). Phillips further quotes Major General W. G. Gwatkin, chief of the general staff in Ottawa during this period, about the reasoning behind this decision. In 1916, he wrote:

Nothing is to be gained by blinking facts[...]The civilized negro is vain and imitative; in Canada, he is not being impelled to enlist by a high sense of duty; in the trenches he is not likely to make a good fighter; and the average white man will not associate with him on terms of equality (qtd. in Phillips 1).

Military policy reflected social attitudes which produced discriminatory treatment of Black-Canadians in the army. This piece of history took place barely 80 years ago and

while this information is available to the public, it is a very hurtful memory to the men who were treated as inferior based on their skin color (Boileau 1). While historians have studied this event, some events in Canadian history, such as the lack of pensions for Black soldiers, are not well known among the general public. These soldiers had to return from the violence and injuries of War and then were left to fend for themselves. These decisions negatively affected the soldiers, their families, and their communities. MacDonald reminds the readers of a shameful chapter in Canadian history. Dialogues about the effects of systemic racism need to be opened in order to foster a more inclusive society in Canada (Sullivan 76).⁶ When MacDonald, through Hector's character, publicizes these events and the experiences of Black men during World War I, this allows Black-Canadians an opportunity to gain access to an alternate historical narrative that the dominant class of the period could not have understood in the same way. This passage also shows the troubled resistance of MacDonald's narrative. MacDonald chooses to narrate the difficulties for Black-Canadian soldiers but shows little resistance to a national World War which historically benefitted colonial Europe. Often, the ways that Canadians, at times, are intimately implicated in colonial ideology offers a literary resistance that is troubled but nevertheless, a resistance (Bhabha 315).

Colonialism is an experience that many Canadians are unaware of or have put into an experience of the past. As the generations of people who have been affected by trauma will attest, the contemporary effects of colonialism are an experience that should

⁶ The difficulty for black Canadian soldiers to receive pensions even after serving in World War 1 is discussed by George Elliot Clarke further on in this paper.

not be suppressed. Buck-Morss explains the reasons why this delusion is still perpetuated:

The reasons do not need to be intentional. When national histories are conceived as self-contained, or when the separate aspects of history are treated in disciplinary isolation, counterevidence is pushed to the margins as irrelevant. The greater the specialization of knowledge, the more advanced the level of research, the longer and more venerable the scholarly tradition, the easier it is to ignore discordant facts (832).

The problem with some aspects of contemporary national narratives stems from the act of trying to fashion logical and rational narratives that are totalizing and misleading. These modern philosophies which assist nationalistic rhetoric to attest to the superiority of Western civilization, however, do not assist in creating accurate representations for all cultural groups in Canada. There is a tremendous amount of pain associated with cultural suppression for those who live as if their history is invisible. In George Elliott Clarke's case, he argues:

I try to struggle against the general absence and repression of the existence of Black Nova Scotians or Africadians in every major discourse in this province[...].I feel I am constantly writing against here, a history full of trials, triumphs, struggles, etc..., and there is just no legitimate way that we can be excluded from the history of this place (*Mapping*, 73).

There can be no healing, if there is no acknowledgement of hurt. Black-Canadians are forced to live every day without representation and have the momentous task of trying to write themselves back into a historical narrative that did not allow them to take their

rightful place. Their work and successes have been written out as too uncomfortable to acknowledge because their existence contradicts the national myths of progress. This lack of investment creates a nation of ignorance and a body of people that are ungrateful for the tremendous sacrifices that Black-Canadians made in building this nation.

MacDonald uses the character Ambrose to illustrate the difficulty of being marginalized within Canadian discourse. Ambrose is a stillborn baby who haunts the other characters in the book and he provides another illustration of cultural suppression. The ghost of Ambrose is an important figure and this character confuses the reader by changing the narrative from realism to illusion and creating an “element of uncertainty” within the text (Laouyene 134). Atef Laouyene argues that Ambrose is representational of the untold story of Canada:

In postcolonial narrative discourse, the apparition of the ghost is often related to the trope of the return of an oppressed Other that haunts the oppressor. Read within the larger context of Canadian settler history, such narrativization of the gothic ghost may be said to mark both the manifestation of the white settler’s fear of interracial mixing and the will—on the contemporary author’s part at least—to re-imagine more constructive ways of re-scripting Canada’s inevitable settler-invader history of displacement, abjection, and absentification (136).

There is a lot to be learned about Canadian prejudices when one looks at not only what is included in our “imagined nation” but also what information is excluded. Ambrose is the character who manifests himself and his presence reflects the “voice of a narrative that yearns to be told but is arrested and silenced precisely at the instant of its conception” or a metaphorical stillbirth of a voice who is not allowed to appear (Laouyene 136). This

character makes a statement about Canada's imagined community as being illusive and suppressive (Bhabha 315, Wyile, *Speaking*, 9).

It is as if Ambrose, standing in for the Other, wishes to appear in the narrative of national realism, but his presence is suppressed by the fabrication of realist literature which does not allow the telling of certain narratives. The problematic term "realist" literature suggests that this type of fiction is without cultural fabrication and this is distressing for the narratives of people who lived experiences that are purposely omitted, forgotten, or distorted (Wyile, *Speaking*, 69). As Buck-Morss argues, it is irrelevant whether the act of suppression is intentional or not, all that matters is beginning the process of correcting these mistakes (834). The literature that belongs to Canada is an expression of the culture of the nation. As Edward Hartley Dewart claimed, in 1864, a national literature is "not merely the record of a country's mental progress" but "the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity and the guide of national energy" (qtd in Calder 57). Dewart shows the clear link between national, political, and cultural unity where nationalist agendas are produced as a result of cultural expressions. There is no doubt that the "imagined community of the nation" of Canada would like to exhibit a progressive, inclusive attitude towards all cultural groups by obtaining and introducing a multicultural policy (Bhabha 315). However, many marginalized groups protest against the dominant Canadian myths and suggest that the Canadian social reality has been a history of assimilation, slavery, and even cultural genocide (Clarke, *Appeal* 1). So much information can be learned about the prejudices, fears, and politics of the people in a nation by examining not what Canada upholds but what Canada has excluded. The unity of thought, in this case, seems to be that Canada is united in tolerating a fabricated

picture of the “authentic” Canadian. By allowing the united consensus of the nation to be inauthentic and even perhaps a fictional representation of history, this paints an unflattering portrait of the “national energy” of this country (Calder 57).

MacDonald uses the appearance and reappearance of Ambrose in the narrative to include a group of people that have been excluded from literature and from acknowledgement in the dominant myths about the history of Canada. By doing this, the novel also illustrates problems with the “psychic geography” of contemporary Canadian realist literature (Laouyene 139). Laouyene argues that Ambrose illustrates the “spectral liminality of Canadian immigrant populations (Arabs, Jews, and Africans)” and this character “betrays the othering process upon which Canadian settler politics was originally founded” (Laouyene 140). Further she states:

By turning Ambrose into a returning spectre of incestuous rape, MacDonald gestures towards the failure of two myths: maintaining a pure, patriarchal genealogy and constructing a national identity based on a totalizing, exclusionary ideology. MacDonald’s narrativization of the ghosts undercuts the racial, sexual, and religious oppression that have shaped inter-settler relationships in early twentieth-century Canada, all the while underscoring the lasting traumatic impact that such oppression may have on its victims (140).

While the exclusion of certain marginalized people from fiction may have been previously discounted as unimportant, or even trivialized as an oversight, it is clear from Laouyene that this suppression is more likely a purposeful act of cultural oppression. Thus, by addressing the settler-invader issue through Ambrose, MacDonald counters the cultural amnesia in Canada (Henry & Tator 1).

Fall on your Knees works as a cultural mechanism to give a voice to the marginalized that are often denied their history and rendered invisible or silenced. The remembrance of these marginal people and their history acts as a counter narrative to the totalizing and powerful discourses that exist in Canadian society presently. *Fall on your Knees* exposes political and social mechanisms that historically created racial intolerance, class struggle, and religious oppression. Discussing systemic racism or examining the policies of exploitation by the Canadian government may be uncomfortable to some citizens. However, it has been argued by social anthropologists that Canada has gone to an extreme in avoiding these issues. Henry and Tator argue that:

Canada suffers from historical amnesia. Its citizens and institutions function in a state of collective denial. Canadians have obliterated from their collective memory the racist laws, policies, and practices that have shaped their major social, cultural, political, and economic institutions for three hundred years (1).

This united consensus about history makes a statement about the domination and power of historical discourse. Downplaying past events that harmed marginalized groups may be an instinctive coping mechanism that allows many people to believe in a “patriotic” version of Canadian history (Wyile, *Speculative*, 7). However, for the people who have been affected by these events and by racism, one can only imagine how difficult it would be to live inside a country that collectively pretends that these events or people did not exist.

Denial is still being used as a political strategy today to deal with embarrassing aspects of Canadian history. The way that the Canadian government dealt with the internment of Italian-Canadians in WWII was brought up in the 1980’s and Canadian

politicians were reluctant to respond and deal with this issue. When Italian-Canadians asked the Canadian government to respond and “cleanse the past,” politicians remained silent (Iacovetta, Perin & Principe 396). About this dark period in Canadian history, Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi states:

You and your colleagues are silent[...]. While usually silence is golden, this time silence is not an option[...]. The generation that then wanted to forget now wants to remember, the children who once ignored now want...to know what happened [and] make sure that it will not happen again...Our community is at a crossroads: it can disappear into nothing or become one identity capable of contributing to Canada’s growth. And a nation grows when its government guarantees equality for all and not distinct society for a few (qtd. in Iacovetta, Perin & Principe 396).

Discussing the internment may counter some of the most cherished collective beliefs about Canada. However, the process of truth and reconciliation is extremely important to victims of human rights violations (Martin & Tirman 157). As many scholars have argued, the process of “unearthing the past” and opening a dialogue about these events is absolutely necessary for a “culturally and racially harmonious society” (Wyile, *Speculative*, 69). Canadian society cannot improve or advance without being willing to discuss, acknowledge, and apologize for past wrongs and then collectively work to create new policies which will ensure that these situations never happen again.

Canada’s future depends upon recognizing past failings and then collectively working to ensure that they never happen again. *Fall on your Knees* exposes and reminds contemporary society that racism is not a thing of the past. Marginalized groups have even been silenced and, unfortunately, the influence of racial classifications still lingers in

cultural attitudes (Sullivan 1). During the Donald Marshall Inquiry in Nova Scotia, E. Thornhill notes:

By some unspoken societal consensus, a generalized negativity towards Blackness persistently links Black skin to criminality. All too frequently Black skin colour becomes the initiating catalytic factor which jettisons Black people into the criminal justice system. It is also Black pigmentation that colours and preconditions and plots the quality of our trajectory through a system seemingly inimical to our interests (68).

Cultural attitudes today still reflect these old theories where justice systems treat minorities differently than the rest of Canadians and this is not limited to Nova Scotia. *The Report on the Commission of Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System* (1995) states that “racist behavior, both systemic and individual was directed primarily against Black prisoners and was rampant in the prisons” (Henry & Tator 130). Unfortunately, time does not permit a full examination of the many different ways that cultural attitudes have reflected racist attitudes despite the denial of its existence. One can conclude from the infamous Marshall Report, however, that more work needs to be done to foster inclusivity in Canada.

Unfortunately, the false belief that people of “color” were genetically inferior, stemming from Social Darwinism has not been eliminated from Canadian society. In *The Color of Democracy*, Frances Henry and Carol Tator argue that Canada intolerance still exists within contemporary society:

‘I am not a racist.’ ‘She/he is not a racist.’ ‘This is not a racist institution.’
‘Canada is not a racist society.’ In spite of the historical and contemporary

evidence of racism as a pervasive and intractable reality in Canada, the above statements have become mantras, which, when repeated cast an illusory spell that has allowed Canadians to ignore the harsh reality of a society divided by color and ethnicity (1).

Many social anthropologists in the field of racism and anti-racist research argue that Canada needs to do more to foster inclusiveness for all people. The old theories about racial classification have been rejected by scientists but the reality of racism based on skin color still exists today (Henry & Tator 35). By opening the subject of racial intolerance, *Fall on your Knees* makes an important point about Canada and the fundamental denial of equality in society (Henry & Tator 297).

Fall on your Knees provides a troubled resistance to the exclusively positive claims of national rhetoric in Canada. The novel is definitely a political act and it makes a clear statement about the lack of authentic representation for marginalized cultures inside Canada's imagined community (Bhabha 315). By portraying the experiences of marginalized groups of people in the past century, the text gives a voice to the suppressed parts of Canadian history. MacDonald includes parts of gay history, women's history, and multicultural history and portrays people who are often misunderstood and left out of the official historical record. While amnesia and silence have often been the response to intolerance and its effects, this novel puts these issues directly into the public forum. The characters reveal the inner workings of a brand of racism that was certainly present in Canada's past and still lingers on in the culture today. By opening these subjects, the novel opposes contemporary political strategies to deny the existence of racial conflict

and intolerance that exists in Canada today. In searching for a resolution, MacDonald shows that democracy will never be achieved with silence and suppression.

Fall on your Knees is politically active in resisting many aspects of colonialism that are present in Canadian society and MacDonald radically chooses to use the form of a traditional novel to explore suppressed aspects of history. Although the novel has often been used as a tool to serve imperial discourse and has often been considered complicit in the spread of imperialist bias, *Fall on your Knees* is still able to provide a forum for agency and resistance (Eustace 74). Its recollection and reiteration of the experience of the marginalized is a deliberate “misperformance” or rupture of the normative patriotic discourses of Canada. The radical potential of the novel emerges from the dialogue of the characters who suffer from a racism that is rooted in theories of social Darwinism that still linger in Canadian culture. In a similar way, the text also functions as a concurrent radical and ambivalent reiteration of the conventional historical novel because it deconstructs the historical accounts of immigrant experience in Canada in the 20th century. *Fall on your Knees* provides an opportunity for outsiders to understand how racism has affected certain communities and what it is like to be marginalized. The dialogue it initiates encourages readers to reconsider the progressive myths of the country’s multicultural history and encourages them to create a greater social inclusivity for all Canadians.

Chapter 3

“I Lost My Talk:” Resisting Native Assimilation in Rita Joe’s Poetry

Rita Joe’s poetry provides us with another very different, but equally important, example of radical ambivalence in Atlantic Canadian Literature. This writing subverts the homogenizing positive rhetoric of national discourse by discussing controversial issues such as cultural genocide and the systemic racism of the Residential School and using a style that, at least on one level seems like conservative English poetry. Joe’s “misperformance” of this conventional poetic apparatus should be considered subversive because it effectively interrupts the mythology of multicultural discourse and replaces that narrative with the actual lived experience of an Aboriginal Canadian. The experiences of the First Nations people who suffered through the discrimination and the assimilation tactics in the Residential Schools have often been treated as an “invisible” part of the Canadian historical narrative.⁷ By countering this situation and creating visibility for the often violent way that Canada established and maintains its hegemonic authority, Joe’s voice provides a powerful alternative to the widely held North American myths of social, economic, and political progress. The cultural genocide of First Nations

⁷ The Residential Schools in Canada, created to assimilate First Nations communities, have been considered a systemic act of cultural genocide. According to the definition, cultural genocide refers to physical dispossession of Indigenous people and also to any form of assimilation practices as a result of government policies. It can be assumed, therefore, that the children of the Shubenacadie Residential Schools and their families were subjected to human right violation at the hands of these government policies. The impact of Residential Schools is an important cultural memory that still creates serious difficulties for the Native people and their relationship with non-Native Canadians (Knockwood 4).

people is a shocking counter narrative to the widely held progressive ideology of Canadian experience, especially when one considers the fact that Joe's experience occurred only in the last fifty years.

The radical ambivalence of Joe's poetry is evident in her willingness to take an oppositional position against the existing state of marginalization that the First Nations people face every day in Canada. Speaking from an intimately personal point of view, Joe explores the experience of colonization and the real effects of government policies which forced the English language upon her community. This horrific denial of culture and the forced assimilation of Indigenous Nova Scotians in the 1960's in Residential Schools had grave repercussions for the Native communities who are still attempting to deal with the aftermath of these colonial policies. Joe's examinations of colonization, assimilation, and nationalism, are an attempt to negotiate the challenges of a community that never benefitted from the great Canadian Liberal Order but instead spent the last sixty years suffering at the hands of the federal and provincial governments.

Joe's perspective originates in her struggles with her identity as a member of the Mi'kmaq community and her growing awareness of the impacts of colonialism upon her experience. The poetry is direct and unique. This is a significant device because her poetry brings agency to the Mi'kmaq people and encourages her people to support each other by cultural reconnection. Empowerment is Joe's strength and she opens up a dialogue with non-Native people about trying to heal from the cultural effects of forced assimilation. While addressing the horrific effects of cultural genocide, Joe still gently tries to foster communication between her community and the non-Native communities

that may read her poems.⁸ This poetry offers a very important perspective on the roots of division between the Native and non-Native communities of Nova Scotia. Her texts emphasize how important it is for Indigenous people to retain their cultural independence and to be allowed to preserve their language, their culture, their religion, and their way of life without having to worry about outside threats to this autonomy. Joe highlights the difficulties that her communities face when trying to unite as a people amid the products of colonization such as the racism, poverty, and ill health that continue to plague the Mi'kmaq communities of Atlantic Canada. This poetry is part of a growing body of literature among Indigenous people around the world that is concerned with rewriting and recovering their history.⁹

“Decolonization” is a term used to describe the way that Indigenous people have been challenging dominant discourses about history, colonization, and their place in the

⁸ The term “cultural genocide” was carefully defined by the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations with regard to Indigenous People in 1994. In Article 7, the High Commission of the United Nations stipulated: “Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right not to be subjected to ethnocide and cultural genocide, including prevention of and redress for: (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities; (b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources; (c) Any form of population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights; (d) Any form of assimilation or integration by other cultures or ways of life imposed on them by legislative, administrative or other measures; (e) Any form of propaganda directed against them (United Nations Human Rights High Commission).”

⁹ “Aboriginal peoples” is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. The Canadian constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people: Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis and Inuit. These are three distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. More than one million people in Canada identify themselves as an Aboriginal person, according to the 2006 Census (Indian and Northern Affairs 2006).

world as well as the ways they have been working towards reclaiming their cultural and political heritage. Winona Wheeler defines “decolonization” as a positive process:

A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. Decolonization requires auto-criticism, self-reflection and a rejection of victimage[...].It is about transforming negative reactionary energy into the more positive rebuilding energy needed in our communities (qtd. in Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 14).

Wheeler asserts that decolonization is a strategy Indigenous people use to reclaim their history and to develop a better understanding of the ways that colonization has acted upon the people in these communities (qtd. in Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 14). Through decolonization, Indigenous people have been able to take back their dignity and work toward restoring cultural and political inequities for their communities.

Joe’s poem “The Battered Woman” negotiates with the silence of her Native culture as they are impacted by colonialism while simultaneously trying to deal with the colonial influences of patriarchy and dominance within family structures (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). This is an aesthetically complex text with powerful images that show compassion and sympathy for the abused woman and Joe addresses women from all walks of life. She illustrates the healing that comes from sharing with other women. By speaking out against national and international issues that affect the Native communities, she takes the lead in opposing the “silencing” of indigenous people (Wyile, *Speculative*, 43). The theme of silence and the healing power of communication are apparent in the first lines of

the poem as it begins: “The battered women in all walks of life are there/ The ill-treatment we undergo psyches us out” (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). In the first line, Joe significantly uses the pronoun “we” when discussing battered women and this discloses that she is discussing abuse that she has experienced firsthand (Joe & Choyce *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*, 253). This poem immediately places the reader in a close association with Joe while simultaneously pointing out that this situation is not just a situation within the Mi’kmaq community. Next, Joe says that she stayed silent about the abuse: “At first I hid my hurt in long-sleeve blouses/ The ache in my heart driving lonely thoughts inward” (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). Joe suggests that the abuse affected her personality but she kept silent because of the “ill-treatment (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). Further, Joe admits her dependency: “Believing the love-words, dependent/ Our children there looking up to me; Wanting to believe so very much, the love reward (Joe, *Lnu*, 56).” Joe explains how it was difficult when her abuser would apologize for abuse and admits that she wanted to believe that the situation would stop. Joe also admits that it was not easy to leave and that she wanted to stay for her children. As many Native communities have received sensationalized press coverage and distorted representation in the media, sensitive issues like domestic abuse have been difficult to manage and often these issues are represented as another example of the social inferiority of the Mi’kmaq culture (Chan & Mirchandani 70). This subject of this poem, the silence of women openly displays the legacy of colonialism in Native family structures, but also contextualizes the situation in a positive manner.

“The Battered Woman” alternates between drawing invisible cultural lines between women and then dropping those dividing lines in the face of the universality of patriarchy. Joe acknowledges that her culture gives her a special strength but it is not an

exclusionary perspective. Joe explains that over time she changed: "After a while I began to search for safety, / In the mind as well as the physical, /With other people/ Sharing my story with anyone listening/ Especially with other women, searching for outlets" (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). While it was not easy for Joe to get the courage to disclose her feelings to other women or take the next step of writing down her experience, she begins to change her perspective. Her husband or the "He" of the poem "makes fun" but Joe relates that her defense was built up through her understanding of her Native culture. When she was down and began talking to others she discovered that she could build her spirit back up: "Our togetherness unsettled, I began to write/ He made fun but I built my spirit, using culture (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). Soon, Joe relates to her audience in the form of an oral dialogue, sharing with the reader her personal thoughts through her choice of language: "Today I share my story with you/ The building comes down sometimes/ But we women, by association, / Always stand together" (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). This is a painful topic and Joe encourages women to keep their dignity by acknowledging the experience openly. Self-forgiveness is encouraged with the words: "The building comes down sometimes" (Joe, *Lnu*, 56). The final encouragement is to remember that "we women by association" will be able to cope with this circumstance by sharing and standing together. The revelation that Joe herself underwent abuse and that she had been confused and caught up in the cycles of abuse allows the reader to have a closer look at the intricacies of this situation. While didactic at times, Joe reaches out to women and she is able to instruct from firsthand experience not to stay silent and suffer alone.

Native culture is a source of strength during oppression but Joe is inclusive in her encouragement and wishes for all women to gather together over this issue. As the legacy

of colonialism affects the Native community, it impacts all women, and Joe is able to accommodate both audiences. The ability to accommodate this difficult perspective with such brevity should be acknowledged and the poem should be recognized as a remarkable and complex piece of literature.

“We Are Who We Are” provides a political and revealing look at colonial history. Joe’s voice opens ambiguously by using open ended sentences that seem to have no apparent subject with an assertion about the Native people: “The people speak legends/ Brave deeds told to the children” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). These legends, about the Native people, are represented as an oral tradition and Joe emphasizes speaking and telling as most important. Then, in the next few lines, Joe attacks the negative portrayal of Native people in colonial history with a few simple metaphors. Joe asserts that the “habits of old/ Identifies who we are/ Relating what should be taught to others/ In gentle trust/ So that we may bring to reason/ We are who we are” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). At first, it is not clear what the “habits are of old” are or what needs to be taught to others (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). As Hartmut Lutz suggests, the subject of the poem is ambiguous and Joe’s position as the “we” makes her like a “spokesperson for Native people in general” (281). Joe places her own point of view carefully in the middle of the text: “No amount of undervalue/ Will ever bend that road to nowhere/ That you have offered, ever since you found us,” (*Eskasoni*, 37). Immediately, there is a significant reference to first European contact as being a time when her people were undervalued and offered a “road to nowhere” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). Joe delicately navigates her way through history by reworking colonial history, as if she is starting right from the beginning of a Canadian history book (Wyile, *Speaking*, 36). This is a good example of Joe’s tact and her gentle

way of exposing colonial wrongs by calling it a “road to nowhere” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). Further, she identifies her people as the “gentle savage” and as the “fur trader” and as the “simple soul” which became “enclosed by the advantaged” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). This renaming of the native as “gentle savage” opposes the myths that Canada was an empty country at the point of European contact (Joe, *Native Poetry in Canada*, 14). She asserts that the simple people were apprehended and enclosed, alluding to the enclosure of native people onto Reserve lands by the Canadian government (Wyile, *Speculative*, 36). In a minimal amount of words, Joe is able to lead the reader gently into a very emotional issue and then express her viewpoint in metaphors and she repeats that her people are the same today as they were at the time of contact despite their treatment by the “advantaged” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). Joe repeats for the second time “We are who we are, / The closed pattern remains/ The search made it a masterpiece” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). The poem concludes that the enclosing of the Native people on the “road to nowhere” has made her people even more beautiful (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). Joe’s positive comments about her people directly negotiate with the process of decolonization where she “takes back” the historical representations of the Mi’kmaq culture (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Empire*, 194).

Literature has been a powerful part of colonial domination and literary texts have served to maintain the dominant hegemonic discourses about the historical legitimacy of colonial power over Indigenous people. Herb Wyile states that the historical novel and other literary forms have been complicit in the attempt to conceal “colonial erasure, contributing to a confirmation of the project of colonialism that has at its complement the marginalization or caricature of native characters” (Wyile, *Speculative*, 37). With this in mind, it is no wonder that Indigenous people in Canada have been concerned with writing

Native versions of history and cultural stories in order to counter this hegemonic discourse. Linda Tuhwai Smith argues that recovering lost narratives and rewriting their own versions of history has been an extremely important part of regaining autonomy for Indigenous people:

A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to rewriting and righing our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell their own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes...It is very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying (Smith 3).

Thus, the concern with writing down oral narratives and testifying to the effects of colonial oppression has been an important way to unite the Mi'kmaq people in Indigenous communities. Taking these narratives and exposing colonial oppression has been a healthy way to gain agency rather than be passive victims under the constructed forces of colonialism (Smith 3). The poetry of Joe has literary merit for all readers—Native and non-Native alike and her poetry is part of a growing global body of literature that is concerned with the process of decolonization (Wilson, Wilson & Tyler 2).

The absorption of colonial attitudes in the poem “Indian Residential School,” for example reflects the duality of Joe’s perspective and shows the ambivalence of her politics. This poem has a troubled type of resistance to the benefits of colonial education:

I know for a fact people who came from schools

Have turned into productive persons.
 Even women who had it hard have become nuns
 And men across the country their dreams realized.
 In my case I've nobody to blame for being there.
 I put myself where I would receive training.
 The four years have given me strength.
 My life to this day has gained courage.
 I know who I am, and my people are the prize. (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 49).

This perspective shows the duality of Joe's perspectives as she expresses her own experience within the Residential School. Mirroring the dominant discourse about assimilation and the "benefits" of becoming a positive member of society, Joe's initial attitude towards the Residential School is that it helped her and other members of her community to find their potential. Joe's ability to see assimilation as a negative experience on her people as a whole had not come to fruition yet. This dual examination of the school is another example of radical ambivalence in Atlantic Canadian literature because Joe simultaneously absorbs some parts of dominant discourse - for example, the belief that First Nations people would benefit from an education in English - into a poem which ends as a fundamental critique of the institution (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 31). In looking at Joe's fluctuations in attitude about assimilation, one can see how Canadians, at times, are intimately implicated in colonialism and their ways of looking at themselves often create a fluctuating resistance and an unstable relationship between the colonizer and the colonized (Bhabha 315).

“Hated Structure: The Indian Residential School” once again illustrates an interesting fluctuation in Joe’s opinion about this controversial place. As time goes on, it is evident that Joe changes her perspective about the benefits of a colonial education. Joe uses imagery of dirt and abandonment as a metaphor to portray negativity towards the building. Carefully, Joe represents herself only, using the pronoun “I” in almost every line, obviously emphasizing that this poem reflects only a personal belief and that she is not representing the Native community:

If you are on Highway 104 in a Shubenacadie town
 There is a hill where a structure stands
 A reminder to many senses
 To respond like demented ones
 I for one looked into the window
 And there on the floor
 Was a deluge of misery
 Of a building I held in awe
 Since the day I walked into the ornamented door (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 75).

Joe is able to see the problems that this School caused to the other children who attended, illustrated by the act of trying to look through the windows of the school and seeing large amounts of pain and suffering. She admits that she admired the school from her first day in attendance and she does not recant her own personal experience as being somewhat positive. There is ambiguity in Joe’s voice and she has a dual opinion about the experience: “There was grime everywhere/ As in buildings left alone or unused/ Maybe to the related tales of long ago/ Where the children lived in laughter or abused” (Joe, *Songs*

of *Eskasoni*, 75). There is an uncertainty in her expression about the experience, and she adds that some children were abused but others may have also had good experiences at this School. While the title starts with “Hated Structure” and might lead the reader to believe that this would be a flat out condemnation of Residential School, Joe’s perspective is nuanced and somewhat unsure (Fuller, *Writing*, 170). There is no mention of the “productive persons” in “Hated Structure” as there was in “Indian Residential Schools,” but Joe consciously makes an effort not to diminish the suffering of her cohorts (Fuller, *Writing*, 170). While Joe wished to look into the school, through the window, she does not wish to “walk the halls” or “feel the floors” and reminds the reader that the school was “just a base for theory” (Joe *Songs of Eskasoni* 75). Joe refuses to express her feelings about the school as if there were good and bad experiences, but it is also obvious that her text fluctuates with her own personal ambivalence.

In “I Lost my Talk,” Joe is able to forcefully speak about her side of the story when it comes to the way that the Mi’kmaq people have been represented in history after European contact. Her poem acts as a response to the “suppression of indigenous local history” or the “writing over” and misrepresentation of the appropriation of the aboriginal lands during first contact (Wyile, *Speculative*, 36). Joe attempts to carefully “reopen” the history of colonialism because this is too often seen as a “closed book” by national discourses (Wyile, *Speculative*, 36). Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that this type of discussion within literature is a form of resistance to colonialism and is part of the larger effort towards the decolonization of many Native groups in the world:

Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate

but also serve to tell an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized. These counter-stories are powerful forms of resistance which are repeated and shared across diverse indigenous communities (2).

Opening up this discussion acts as a literary resistance to the dominant historical discourse that pertains to the “dispossession” of the native people from their habitats and the marginalization of the communities which has resulted from such ideologies (Lutz 281). Joe addresses larger national and international issues but at the same time she extends to the “white readers an open hand of forgiveness and even friendship” (Lutz 281). This poem shows Joe’s dual efforts towards cultural reconciliation, while simultaneously resisting the suppression of the history of Native people. Lutz states:

In the case of Rita Joe and other authors the writers seem rather to take their history and culture back into their own hands in order to give them back to their own people, while also teaching the outside world, independent of church and colonizer (284).

Joe asserts that her people have been fundamentally changed by colonial activities and labels her people as a “masterpiece” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 37). This leaves the reader with a positive image of the inner strength of Native people who have endured despite oppression and enclosure (Joe & Choyce *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*, 6).

“I Lost My Talk” uses language as a tool of resistance. Because of its simple phrasing and metaphors, the reader may underestimate the powerful politics that are embedded in this poem. The narrator sounds like the simple voice of a child and it is evident that Joe is addressing the attempt of the Canadian government to “assimilate” the Native people into Canadian society (Miller 4). “I Lost my Talk,” is aesthetically

deceptive because it uses child-like language to explain the sense of violation that the Native people still feel about this experience and it refutes the dominant discourse that the assimilation tactics were beneficial. As Lutz observes:

Some of the sentences are open-ended or even incomplete, and punctuation provides only partial clues. This ambiguity may deceive readers into a feeling of superiority, reading texts where the syntax seems to be at times lacking in structure or awkward. The deceptive linguistic image of the humble and 'uneducated Indian,' however, is only a mask behind which stands an adamant insistence on the aboriginality of the Native presence in Canada, entailing an inherited title to 'this country' which other participants in the multi-cultural mosaic lack. The 'simple' language of Rita Joe's poems can be read as a refusal to even mimic the colonizer's language while, instead of mimicry (to use Homi Bhaba's term) it employs another type of subversive masking (282).

The language is inviting and deceptive and lulls the reader into a false sense of security that these poems are just aesthetic or entertaining. Quickly, Joe makes her point about the flaws of colonization by using clear and simple images.

In "I Lost my Talk" Joe quickly explains how the Shubenacadie Residential School impacted her life. Joe discloses in the first lines that her language was stolen from her and that it hampered her ability to express her own cultural identities. The language Joe uses is neutral and comes across as a simple statement of fact: "I lost my talk/ The talk you took away/ When I was a little girl/ At Shubenacadie school (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 32). Without her language, Joe asserts that being forced to learn English forced her to assimilate: "You snatched it away:/ I speak like you/ I think like you/ I create like you/

The scrambled ballad, about my word” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 32). When her language was “snatched” from her, Joe asserts that this was traumatic. Joe presents the treatment of the Native children who experienced beatings and severe punishments for speaking their native language at the Residential School with a neutral voice that allows a tactful discussion of this sensitive issue (Knockwood 14). While she can be gentle and positive, her poetry can also be “poignantly direct” (Armstrong & Grauer 13). Joe herself writes “the early work that I did from 1969 and onward is a comment, a protestation, or even a correction aimed at history” (Armstrong & Grauer 13). She is addressing the society that is responsible for the forced assimilation and purposely uses the word “you” to illustrate the accountability of the individual, not just a government policy. Joe’s presentation of the situation is radical and politically savvy (Joe & Choyce *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*, 6). The radical ambivalence of the poem is shown when Joe is able to house anti-colonial messages about the devastation of cultural genocide from the perspective of the First Nations community within a text written in the language of the colonizer.

“I Lost my Talk” and “We are Who we Are” illustrate the complexities of assimilation policies. In both poems, Joe asks that she be allowed to think and speak in her own language so that she can preserve her autonomy as a Native person. In “We are Who we Are,” Joe states that the conditioning process was successful and that while she can speak her own language, English thoughts and ways overpower her ability to be herself as a Native: “Two ways I talk/ Both ways I say,/ Your way is more powerful” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 32). Joe asserts that the dominant culture is not her own and when she had her language taken from her at a young age, she actually lost her ability to think in her own Native way. Now, she asks the same people that stole her language to give her

back her language. By finding her own language, she says that she can “teach you about me” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 32). The importance of preserving cultural identity and language is an important part of decolonization. The recovery of lost knowledge is a crucial part of healing from the impacts of forced assimilation (Joe & Choyce *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*, 6). From the perspective of an Indigenous person, Angel Cavender Wilson discusses the importance of recovering the history of Indigenous people in the article “Remember this! Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives:”

On a broader scale, decolonization concerns a simultaneous critical interrogation of the colonizing forces that have damaged our lives in profound ways, coupled with a return to those ways that nourished and sustained us as Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. As we engage in this difficult process, we disrupt the world of the colonizer as well. From this angle, the recovery of Indigenous knowledge is a central component in the struggle for decolonization (Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 1).

The most important aspect of decolonization is recovering the lost heritage of Native people and this subject is the central theme of “I Lost my Talk.” Joe’s poetry is not just poetry that is pleasant to read for Native and non-Native people but it is able to give a political message without alienating either culture. While the poetry is artfully constructed, Joe is engaging in the active pursuit of truth and reconciliation for her endangered culture and people (Grant v11). This poetry emphasizes the importance of the Mi’kmaq language not just for non-Natives to understand the impact of the forced assimilation but also for the Mi’kmaq people themselves who may be confused as to how to how to go about recovering their “stolen” identity (Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 1).

Native people have had to contend with serious obstacles to protecting and preserving their cultural heritage. Not only were the Native children forced to learn English in Shubenacadie Residential School but they were also forbidden to learn their own culture. As Angel Cavender Wilson states, the training that has been forced upon Native people involves the racist idea that the Native culture is inferior:

Part of the colonization process for Indigenous peoples has been the constant denigration of our intellectual, linguistic, and cultural contributions to the world.

We have been trained by the dominant society to think of our stories and language as insignificant or even worthless (Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 13).

Through many of the accounts that have now been written about the Shubenacadie Residential School, we can understand that the attempt to “kill the Indian within the child” was horrific for the Native community (Selkirk 1). The community is still in turmoil from having lost the right to retain their autonomy as a result of these policies (Selkirk 1). This has been called “cultural genocide” and in 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper finally apologized for the actions of the Canadian government (Americas News, June 11, 2008). During this event, Phil Fontaine, the head of the Assembly of First Nations stated:

For the generations that will follow us, we bear witness today, in this house that our survival as First Nations people in this land is affirmed forever... Never again will this house consider us an Indian problem for just being who we are (America News, June 11, 2008).

As Fontaine argued about his experience as a First Nation person, he was attacked for being different. Therefore, it is no wonder that Joe titled her poem “We Are Who We

Are” and addressed the issue of Native identity finishing with her simple request to be understood and not attacked.

“Young Girls at Eskasoni” shows three colonial influences that pressure the young women in her community and ends without resolution as to what the mixture will produce. Joe shows her concern over the influences of pop culture, Christianity, and higher education on the young girls in her community. The three stanzas of this poem show three different views of a group of young girls in the community at Eskasoni. The first stanza starts out with “rock concerts in the community hall” and the beginning of dating where the girls are “dancing but not touching/ Eyes focused on nothing special/ And a shy contact with the opposite sex (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 26). This image paints a picture of shy girls who are still shy with boys, and the “friendly teasing with others their age” indicates camaraderie between the girls. The second stanza contrasts the rock concert with the girls going to Church with their families. The “trailing admiration” and the “conformity inspired” by the Church service show the influence of Christianity on the girls who will soon become women (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 26). The temptation of boys and sexuality at the rock concert is followed by the psychological influence of religion on the girls. The third stanza is another contrast and Joe states that most of the girls will go on to “higher learning/ Not knowing what the future holds” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 26). There is a feeling of pressure on the girls who face natural feelings about boys, but then are checked by the teachings of the Church, and then will be further influenced by “higher learning” (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 26). Joe calls their situation a “mixed-up flow of ideas, not in bloom” and concludes that these girls will “soon be women” which leaves the reader with a feeling of uncertainty for the future of Eskasoni (Joe, *Eskasoni*, 26). Joe’s struggle with

colonialism is again evident in her poetry because she does not take a clear oppositional position against or for these colonial influences.

“Young Girls at Eskasoni” fluctuates with uncertainty about how to decolonize the experience of young people. The pervasiveness of colonial education, religion, and pop culture is widespread and infiltrate Native communities. This poem shows Joe’s anxiety for future mothers and female leaders of the community. Joe makes an interesting reflection that the ideas from rock music, the conformist messages of Christianity, and the influence of higher education mix together and make her feel uncertain about where these young girls will end up. While Joe is a Christian and does not discourage other people from being members of the Church, which at times has been used as mechanism of oppression. Rather, she only notes that these messages are powerful influences within the lives of the youth (Joe & Choyce, *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*, 6). It is evident that Joe is concerned about some aspects of colonialism, but it is a troubled resistance. However, Joe is definitely concerned about her community and their ability to retain their autonomy. Despite images of neglect in the media, this poem shows that Joe and the Native community value their youth but the many influences that will act upon them may or may not create problems in the future. The act of wavering for and against certain aspects of colonialism shows the troubled resistance of Joe’s literature. Other types of postcolonial writing may not have the same difficulties with negotiation; however, this ambivalence is recognized to be the result of the duality of dominating and domination that is the unfortunate inheritance of the Canadian experience.

Fear for the future of Native communities is a legitimate concern for this group of people who have had to survive cultural genocide from assimilation policies in Canada

over the past one hundred years. Joe speaks about her own personal attempts to “write back” against colonial power which is part of a post-colonial attempt to reconstruct her people’s narratives which have been generally excluded from literature (Spivak 271). Joe writes about her literary attempts:

My work is to inspire others to voice anything they want. Published work is going to be around awhile. Inspiration came to me by learning that others do not write what I want to hear—the good in my culture. Write what comes from the heart.

Do not wait until tomorrow—do it now! (Joe, *Native Poetry in Canada*, 14).

Joe comments on the permanence of writing as compared to the oral part of her culture which has been the way that Native people have transmitted their culture traditionally. While not suggesting that the oral tradition is inferior, Joe has expressed a desire to utilize literature and print to counter the negative things that have been written about her culture. Misconceptions about the Native people and stereotypes plague the history of the First Nations people and Joe addresses this issue in the beginning of *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*:

It is ironic that Cornwallis is honored. His words and deeds are well recorded, even the deeds of human atrocity. It makes me wonder how much honor is considered for the many Aboriginal people whose blood was spilled on their homelands that were taken from them. The public archives, I notice, are full of biased chronicles written in early times, mostly misrepresenting the truth of the First Nations people. I have often told my children that if we recorded our own history through writing, it would have been different. Who knows, maybe someday a record will be discovered written by Aboriginals in the many lands they lived (Joe & Choyce, *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*, 8).

Wishing for a written record by an Aboriginal person to correct the existing distorted records of history is a chief wish for many First Nations members (Joe & Choyce, *The Mi'kmaq Anthology*, 8). It is recognized that colonial ideas were intertwined within the dominant historical views of historians from the point of European contact and it is frustrating for the Native people who have tried to overcome these distortions.

In the poem “You are the Teacher” Joe addresses the subject of colonial oppression and the way that history has perpetuated false ideas about the Native people. Joe begins: I wrote in verse what bothered me/ The lies recorded in history” (Joe, *Lnu*, 28). These first few lines of the poem encourage Native people to use their lives to help the next generations. While history has used language to deceive and to act in negative ways, Joe asserts that she will use language in a positive way. She says she will choose “beautiful words” as her “tool” and record the lives of her people as following the “golden rule” (Joe, *Lnu*, 28). She encourages her people to teach and share this information and she believes that children will respond and “honour your word,” resulting in a positive impact on the next generations. Joe finishes: You my people are their teacher,/ Sharing,/ They in turn will honour your word/ And future generations they touch” (Joe, *Lnu*, 28). A similar theme repeats in “We are Who we Are” where Rita Joe uses her poetry to reopen and protest against hegemonic historical narratives (Wyile, *Speculative*, 36). The poem is a protest but at the same time ends in a positive way by suggesting that the Native community could construct its own narratives of truth, teach these truths to their children, and then this would positively impact future generations of Native people. Once again, communication and sharing between her communities is posed as a solution to colonial “lies” (Joe, *Lnu*, 28).

“You are the Teacher” also gently poses the idea that the distortions of totalizing narratives of history are responsible for negatively impacting the lives of Native people today. This was part of Linda Tuliwai Smith’s assertion about the messages that Native people are given about their “their worthlessness, laziness, dependence and lack of ‘higher’ order human qualities” (Smith 14). Joe discusses the issue of colonial history and the problems with the presentation of historical narratives in Canada today. During an interview, Joe states:

My greatest wish is that more writing is done by minorities, and used as the content reading by our children[...].As I have always said again and again, our history would have been written different if it was expressed by us. My people were known as great orators, the ones I have heard presented their views truthfully, not eloquently but in humble terms....the literary passage has done a harm in more ways than one can imagine (Lutz 283).

As many marginal writers from Atlantic Canada have expressed, the covering up of certain types of historical narratives has harmed this country and has harmed the Native people. In a discussion of Native issues, Christine and Allen Mowat agree with Joe and state that the racism that Native people experience from the rest of Canadian society originates with the falsified and negative portrayals of Natives in Canadian history books and literature:

Two well-researched Canadian surveys have, in the last few years, exposed deep-seated prejudices against Indians in history books and school texts. Negative, derogatory and pejorative terms...about the Canadian Indian, have been used to characterize Indians. Our fiction has been no less guilty. These ugly distortions

are the small beginnings from which prejudice evolves and on which it is nourished (Mowat 1)

It is no wonder that Joe tackle the subject of colonialism in her poetry and attempts to address this problem with her people. The complexities of the poems are shown by Joe's ability to simultaneously educate non-Native people and also address her own people at the same time, within a few short verses. This writing is an overt attempt at the process of decolonization, although a troubled resistance, within a Canadian context.

Joe's poetry is an example of radical ambivalence because she displays colonial poetry written in English, the language of the colonizer, but the content is a subversion of colonialism at the same time. Joe decolonizes by speaking up about the distorted versions of the history of Native people in Canada and also speaks gently and kindly to the non-Native cultures that may read her poetry, offering a hand of unity and forgiveness. This makes this body of poetry unique and all the positive attributes of her literature should be offered to all people in all educational systems in Canada. Being unfamiliar with Native culture is not a good excuse to exclude Native authors or subjects, especially with the proliferation of Native authors in the past few years. Only by collaborating with the Native community and incorporating their thoughts on the pedagogy of cultural studies, will it be possible to minimize the gap between all Canadian cultural groups. This literature is an important part of the decolonization process for Canadian society. With a view to the decolonization of Canadian educational systems, the inclusion of the poetry of Rita Joe and her poems to all Canadians alike is absolutely necessary.

The radical ambivalence of Rita Joe's poetry is evident when she opens a dialogue about forced assimilation and takes an oppositional position to the existing state of

marginalization of First Nations people. It is crucial to examine this act of political agency and to no longer tolerate the suppression of Native literature within non-Native communities. The idea of examining the perspective of the Native woman or the “subaltern” has been contested by some groups who argue that it is impossible for the dominant non-native group to understand this voice because of differences in epistemology (Spivak 808). Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that there are difficulties around discussing the decolonization of native people in certain settings and says: “Many indigenous intellectuals actively resist participating in any discussion within the discourses of post-colonialism. This is because post-colonialism is viewed as the convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world” (Smith 14). For example, certain works of literature that academia singles out and uses to represent a group of marginalized people are once again victims of the dominant power discourses. Academia has the financial power to pick and choose who will be allowed to represent marginal groups based on their own research and these decisions are often based on political reasons. Therefore, Native people have disputed the mechanism of academia as unable to discuss colonialism or the decolonization of the native people within Canada (Armstrong & Grauer xvii). In the case of Joe, it has been suggested by Native members of the Mi’kmaq community that academia is dominated by cultural politics. Many Native writers have also expressed concern that literary discussions of non-Native people are unable to do justice to works of literature or philosophy that are produced from the community of Eskasoni, Nova Scotia.

It is important to understand that there is a controversy about whether an examination of Native literature would change Native-non-Native relations or contribute

to a decolonization of Canadian history. It has been argued by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that the act of judging or inclusion would simply perpetuate the status quo. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that there is little good done in trying to interpret works by the subaltern because of the difference in the base of knowledge between the colonized and the colonizers:

I acknowledge this theoretical point, and also acknowledge the practical importance, for oneself and others, of being upbeat about future work. Yet the moot decipherment by another in an academic institution (willy-nilly a knowledge- production factory) many years later must not be too quickly identified with the "speaking" of the subaltern. It is not a mere tautology to say that the colonial or postcolonial subaltern is defined as the being on the other side of difference, or an epistemic fracture, even from other groupings among the colonized. What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks? (Spivak 808).

Spivak argues that the analysis of the "subaltern" by academics is not likely to effect change and she implies that analyzing the voice of the "subaltern" would be almost impossible because of epistemological differences (808). The colonizer cannot and should not pretend to understand the colonized and finding a common mutuality of politics is an incredibly difficult endeavor. To underestimate this difficulty only creates a false sense that there can be a mutual interchange between these two cultures when there is no common ground. This argument may come from Spivak's disenchantment with academic institutions which she calls a "knowledge-production factory" as if these establishments only work as hegemonic mechanisms of control (Spivak 808).

The value of Joe's literature to all Native and non-Native women comes from her search for a common ground between the two groups. Therefore, with a view to Spivak's concern about the "moot decipherment" of the works of "subalterns" years later in a "knowledge-production factory," this discussion will focus on the form of this poetry and its literary value in the decolonization process of the Native community (Spivak 808). Audre Lorde states a similar point, arguing that women share a common bond and that the differences perceived between women are constructed:

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed on us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, 'I can't possibly teach Black women's writing—their experience is so different from mine.' Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, 'She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?' Or 'She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?' Or again, 'This woman writes of her sons and I have no children.' And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other. We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us (Lorde 226).

In the case of poetry written by women like Joe, Lorde would argue that women may have different experiences, but it is important to seek out the writings of other women. Lorde cautions that women should not be deterred by the differences of the speaker but rather look at the messages that are within these experiences. Silence, Lorde argues, is more damaging. Admonition about the importance of sharing experiences as women is also echoed in Joe's poetry.

From a Canadian standpoint, it is crucial to examine the literature of the First Nations and the ways that the colonial legacy still impacts their experience. As postcolonial theory has shown, it is important to examine the poetry of the "subaltern" because it works to expose the lingering mechanisms of colonialism which marginalize groups of people (Spivak 808). Even if dominant views do not change immediately towards the Indigenous people, it would be empowering for Native students to read alternative viewpoints of history which may expose the dominant viewpoints. Agnes Grant makes a significant point about the attempt to exclude literature from Aboriginal people based on fear:

It is understandable that school programs rely heavily on the literary traditions of Europe because those are the culture bases of most of the teachers and curriculum developers, the literary traditions in which they have been trained. It is not, however, appropriate to continue this practice as Canadians increasingly attempt to define what "Canadian" is in terms of our multicultural reality. At such a time, as more and more aboriginal writers publish their work, ignorance of the culture can no longer be used as an excuse for not teaching Native literature. It is of considerable importance to readers of all ages to have access to literature which

enables them to understand and accept the principles upon which the values and traditions of their particular culture is based (Grant vii).

Thus, Grant argues that it is unacceptable to argue that ignorance of a culture is a reason to not include Native literature within education systems. Rather, Grant argues that there is too much literature and art available from the Native people and one must include this in the Canadian education system. This would make the Canadian culture a truly inclusive society rather than a society that only celebrates tolerance but is weak at carrying it out.

Native literature and other types of decolonizing discourse could be potentially empowering for all Native students who attend educational systems. It is time to begin presenting an honest view of Canada's history which presents the experiences of all Canadians (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 31). As Lutz argues, Joe is able to break the cultural barriers between the realities of the Mi'kmaq culture and the realities of the English culture:

Side by side, the Micmac and the English text visualize the simultaneous presence of both cultures within the same space, and they document the consciously transcending liminality of the author between and in both worlds. She [Rita Joe] is the 'interface' linking and negotiating both realities, and the non-Native speaking reader knows that as an outsider (s)he has no ready access to the world the Micmac text represents (Lutz 283).

Rita Joe's poetry, as Lutz argues, is able to bridge the communication gaps that have existed between Mi'kmaq Canadians and English Canadians for many years.

Joe has embedded her views of colonialism and the impacts of assimilation on her people inside her poetry. The recovery of lost “knowledge” is important to the process of decolonization. This subject of language, knowledge, and the loss of cultural values from the government’s attempts to assimilate the Mi’kmaq people in Nova Scotia is seen within this poetry. “We Are Who We Are,” “I Lost my Talk,” and “You are the Teacher” discuss colonial oppression, however, her poems are not reactionary and angry. Rather, she simply and directly expresses the difficulties of her experience and reaches out for non-Natives to understand her and stop treating her like an “Other” (Smith 3). “The Battered Woman” addresses spousal abuse and the importance of communities to join together to cope with this growing problem in all cultures. “The Girls of Eskasoni” examine the many influences on the female youths of her Native communities and expresses concern about the future of her people. In all these poetry, there is a unique and inventive performance of speaking and rhyming that directly confronts the many issues of the Mi’kmaq community in Atlantic Canada.

“I Lost my Talk” would undoubtedly never be given the title of the Great Canadian Poem, if there was such a prize, amid the current political system in Canada. Although the experience of assimilation is more likely to be the social and historical experience of the Native populations, European settlers, and non-European immigrants respectively, assimilation is rarely discussed as a collective Atlantic Canadian issue. Yet, in many ways, language issues and expectations from the State that were inflicted on the cultural groups in Atlantic Canada has impacted the people of this region in very different ways than the rest of Canada. George Elliott Clarke argues that topics such as assimilation, hegemony, and colonialism need to be discussed:

I confess that in my four decades as a Canadian—as an African-Canadian—I have seen social progress liberalize even the academy. This is just. Our canons have been enriched by the inclusion of writers of colour and First Nations writers, not merely because of their heritages, but because what they have to say are essential to our common understanding of what it means to breathe this northern air (Clarke, *Harris, Phillip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism*, 2).

While Clarke argues that there is a greater diversity of literature included in the canon, there are still many topics about the way that cultural hegemony of Canada is maintained. Unfortunately, many consider this a topic for “minority” groups and that this is not an important dialogue of mediation for “majority” groups, as if there is such a thing in Canada. Cultural hegemony, as maintained by force and exclusion, should be a significant concern for all Canadian citizens. This type of power and manipulation by Canadian Government Policy towards members of the Atlantic Canadian community should, perhaps, make Canadians question the prevalence of the existing positive convictions about the so-called progressive state of Canadian society.

The ability of Joe to maintain a “dual vision” that remakes the current social systems in Canada for both Native and non-Native communities alike, makes her fiction an important mechanism of political agency. While it can be admitted that Joe’s attitudes often represented a troubled struggle with colonialism, it is still a creative way to open a dialogue about the sensitive issues of cultural genocide. These poems are a practical way to educate and increase public awareness about the impact of contemporary colonialism and this makes her voice an important tool for mediation that should not be overlooked in Canadian educational systems.

Chapter 4

Writing Against Erasure: Black Activism in George Elliott Clarke's

George and Rue

George Elliott Clarke's *George and Rue* negotiates an ambivalent resistance by imitating the form of the colonial historical novel and at the same time writing back about the many unheard experiences of Black-Canadians who suffered under colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire*, 6). The novel uses the suppressed voices and the experiences of Black Nova Scotians to counter the widely held notions of progress that are part of North American nationalism. This colonial legacy still continues to affect the lives of Black-Canadians and other marginal groups and the novel acts as a subversive counter to the distorting discourses of multiculturalism and progress. *George and Rue* counters literary ideas about region by displaying an alternate regional identity to the popular Scottish Nova Scotian identity so often displayed. The novel narrates a positive identity for Black-Canadians and shows the Black culture with its long standing roots in Nova Scotia.

Black-Canadians are often unrepresented in the Atlantic Canadian regional literary canon and this lack of inclusion may perhaps stem directly from the fact that Black history, after a long legacy of colonialism, has been overlooked as an important part of contemporary Nova Scotian history. Some critics have suggested that Clarke, as an African-Canadian, has the "impossible desire to belong to the nation. A nation that forms him, but a nation that cannot imagine him within its own formative narratives"

(Walcott 16). As other marginal groups of Atlantic Canada will agree, being left out of history or being written out because their experiences conflict with the imagined progressive notions of Canadian identity is a devastating and harmful political move for Canadian unity. Why? There can be no healing process for any marginalized group, if harm is not acknowledged. The inability of Canada to acknowledge an authentic Black history which includes difficult subjects such as slavery, systemic racism and forced segregation undermines the illusions of a progressive land of freedom. These subjects make Clarke's novel a powerful and important piece of fiction and of historical information because they allow Black Nova Scotian history to exist within a national framework. The novel subverts the "coerced unity of traditional history" by carefully placing Black history inside a fictional narrative and creating a place for this invisible part of Canadian experience (Wyile, *Regionalism*, 143). This decolonization process is crucial for Black-Canadians and aids in their ability to leave the political margins and establish a well-deserved positive place in Canadian society.

Clarke's narrator is a radically ambivalent figure of resistance who stands against the master narratives of Canadian history that have excluded Black-Canadian history or distorted that history with negative assertions based on colonial bias. In traditional realist texts, an omniscient narrator was often used in fiction against Black-Canadians in colonial times, creating the illusion that history and historical fiction are always accurate, intelligent, and trustworthy (Hogue 95). While Clarke's narrator, at first, seems to be narrating the story "normally" and appears to follow the conventions of a traditional novel, this voice soon begins to evolve into a "dual voice" that provides a subversive source of information for the reader. This discussion, therefore, will focus on the device

of the narrator of *George and Rue* and on Clarke's purposeful lack of tradition and objectivity in his narrative. This unique narrator is an important tool for Clarke to decolonize by subverting the literary devices that are embedded in the "semantics of colonial texts" (Furman 106).

George and Rue's narrator begins by contextualizing the particular social conditions and the obstacles that impacted the community of Three Mile Plains from 1930 to 1950. The social forces that affected this generation are first presented by an omniscient third person narrator. This narrator gives a panoramic view of the world and looks into the thoughts and feelings of the characters, bringing a broad background to the story. The novel begins with the infamous murder committed by George and Rufus Hamilton:

Sick of his victim's moans, the double-dealing passenger picked up the hammer and clipped the man again. Hard, bloody action. The struck-down man breathed less and less-like he was calmly asleep. Not right in the eye of God, it was, but the batterer didn't feel shameful or dirty. There was blood splashed on his face and clothes, blood all over the car seat, and black blood on the dying man's face. The car floor was sticky with blood; stains speckled the window (Clarke, *George and Rue*, xii).

This is a brutal act and the omniscient narrator makes it clear that there was no remorse on the part of the murderers. The two murderers are the main characters of the story and the author admits that the story is based on a historical event (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 189).

Clarke subversively opens the novel with a suggestion that George and Rue may not be the only people who are guilty of a social crime in this narrative. The second page of the novel is blank except for one quote from Thomas Jefferson: "If something is not done, we shall be murderers of our children" (4). This quote refers to President Jefferson's frank discussion of the slave rebellion in the plantations of St. Domingue in 1797 (Buck-Morss 134). The rebellion of 1797 disturbed Jefferson and he eventually sent money to help the white slave holders (Finkelman, ix). This infamous quote suggests that even Jefferson felt some responsibility for the deaths of the white slave holders and perhaps felt that if this situation was ignored, he and his colleagues would be to blame. As will be shown further, the particular crime committed by George and Rufus Hamilton was committed by two Black men. Thus, the opening quote of the book effectively initiates Clarke's suggestion that the Hamilton's may not have been the only people responsible for this murder because their situation was brought about by the lack of action on the part of the dominant class of white people at the time.

Clarke uses language as a subversive tool of resistance that alternates between different types of political agency. In the disclaimer of the novel, he argues that George and Rue are representative characters for a subject that is much larger than just the two men who committed this murder in Fredericton:

George and Rufus Hamilton always lived outside boundaries (including knowledge, including history, including archives). They are "encompassed" here only by unrestrained imagination. That is the only truth in this novel, whose English ain't broken, but "blackened" (Clarke, *George and Rue*, v).

To tell a story based on a real event, in a language that is “blackened” suggests that language is being used as a literary device. Robert Sandiford states: “It is worth noting the language used isn’t Black Caribbean Creole or Black American speak, rather a language all its own and maybe even on its own” (65). The language of the narration for all the characters is blackened, including Silver himself who is designated by the narrator as the “white” taxi driver. By the end of the story, the narrator’s voice changes from an every day conversational tone to poetic verse. In a traditional novel, the narrator would likely use the same language and voice from beginning to end. This is not the only way that the novel subverts and rebels against the status quo. The narrator, also, has a subversive opinion about Three Mile Plains and the murder committed by George and Rufus Hamilton.

The first hundred pages of *George and Rue* documents the extreme poverty of the community in Three Mile Plains. As in other postcolonial writings, the narrator’s internal feelings are intimately displayed in this section and there is little regard for logical argument or narrative sequence (O’ Reilley 71). The narrator illustrates the frustrations of these people who try to support their families:

Plains Negroes had to go into Windsor to work. They went to the gypsum quarries, to the textile mill, the apple orchards, and into the mansions, all for pennies. In the gypsum pits, they saw buddies “axidentally” dynamited—arms, legs, flying through the air, or dropping dead of lung cave-ins, their breaths whitened by gypsum that blackened the guts. In the Windsor Clothiers factory, folks churned out thin cotton socks that disintegrated after one wear and one wash. Other Windsor Plains people made fiddles—and cash playin reels and jigs. There

was work on the roads, driving horse and cart. If a man got out of the quarry, he could milk cows (if he still had his hands). Privation was there in the boulders, in the starving hog, in the men mistakenly blasting each other into amputees for a wage of twenty five cents a day, and calling themselves lucky. Some died broken, but everybody died broke. The people had to make their history with their sweat (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 16).

Despite the fact that the people of this community have to work extremely hard and often at dangerous jobs, the narrator clearly demonstrates that the community remains in poverty. The narrator jokes about the dangerous conditions that these men have to endure to make a living. At this point in the story, it is evident that Clarke has done a lot of research and filled the opening of the book with “verisimilitude” to create a “realistic” story (Jordan 102). In some cases, Clarke carefully includes real people from Three Mile Plains as characters, such as George Dixon (the boxer) (Hlongwane 295). He uses the real names of the Hamilton family tree when telling George and Rufus’s family history. This cataloguing of the community is certainly an act of “fictionalizing” their lives and it also gives the novel the feel of realist fiction.

Clarke creates a radical voice for this narrator who, at first, makes a conscious effort to use everyday speech. Then, contrary to traditional forms of narration, the narrator changes his style of speech from an omnipotent narrator at the beginning to the prose of a poet. The novel begins sounding like an oral history, as though the author of the story is purposely avoiding a link with colonial language.¹⁰ This style of speech is not

¹⁰ Clarke’s technique is similar to the poetry of Rita Joe. Joe’s narrator speaks in an everyday dialect and the speech is very easy to understand. When discussing the language choice of Rita Joe, one critic recognized that the “refusal to even mimic the colonizer’s language while, instead of mimicry (to use Homi Bhaba’s term) it employs another type of subversive masking...” (Lutz 282). ¹⁰

simply an entertaining trick of narration. Instead, as Andrews argues, “such speech is a means of maintaining a distinctive racial consciousness and sense of black solidarity” (128). As we will see, this narrator is fundamentally unreliable and, especially when he describes Silver, it becomes very evident that many “liberties” that have been taken with the historical account surrounding the events of the real murder. Through the character of Silver, we see that the narrator is strategic about the way the “facts” of the story should be presented. Clarke alters the name of the victim in the novel from Norman Phillip Burgoyne to Nacre Pearl Burgundy and he also gives Silver a racist attitude. When the narrator begins to describe Silver, the reader is literally forced into the mind of the character through a stream of consciousness writing style that appears to capture and record his true thoughts and motivations (Bjork 142). Ironically, it is through the murder victim himself that Clarke chooses to remind the reader of some of the most untrue and ugliest beliefs of Canadian history about Black-Canadians. Silver relates:

Problem was, nobody’d pour a pint or a teaspoon for these two Coloured chaps who were always out of pocket, always wastrels, and who were dumbfounding at sports, but, otherwise, were undependable lazy asses, once intoxicated (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 118).

Silver believes that George and Rue are lazy and therefore responsible for their own poverty. His observations seem absurd when juxtaposed with the earlier parts of the narrative that took great pains to describe the hard working community of Three Mile Plains.

The voice of Rita Joe’s poetry is simple and penetrating language.¹⁰ Similarly, the narrator speaks with a common vernacular and Clarke states that the language is “blackened” (Clarke, *George and Rue*, v).

In another example of the novel's duality, the narrator tells different versions of the same story and interprets events from different points of view. This is most obvious when the narrator relates Silver's opinion of the "Negroes":

As Silver saw it, the centuries-misplaced and ocean displaced Negroes, stranded in New Brunswick since 1783, had a problem with *Civilization*, its culture of taxes and jails, for they dared to love *Freedom* too much, liquor and lovin too much, music and guffaws too much and were ornery, contrary, and disrespectful. They was natchally uppity, sassy, seditious, loud...They seemed to like the squalor and the shacks and the shitty work. They quit early on schools, bought junk, ate maggoty meat, and begged to haul garbage, mop up other people's filth and vomit, or do witless jobs: shovelling snow, laying down tar, whatever it took that didn't take brains (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 119).

Silver has a unique view of the "Negroes" and his suggestion that they are "misplaced" and "stranded" makes the slave-trade sound like an accident. Silver suggests that this group does not agree with "civilization," but he does not question the barbarity of slavery. All blame for the situation in Fredericton is placed on the "Negroes" and there is a suggestion that this class of people "like" to do menial jobs and they "like" to eat rotten food. The narrator makes a disturbing comment on slavery: "True, Silver regretted slavery, too bad it happened. He don't think his ancestors were involved in that grotty trade. But even if they had been, so was everybody else" (Clarke, *George*, 119). It seems that although Silver can admit that slavery occurred in Atlantic Canada, he feels no obligation to care about the well-being of these marginal people. Since slavery was a

problem created before his generation, Silver believes he has no responsibility for the plight of African-Canadians.

It is a highly controversial move for Clarke to use Silver as a tool to display historical racist attitudes and it is not surprising that the family of the victim, who are still living, are not happy with the memory of their father being used this way. Even though the names have been changed, it is obvious that Silver is a fictional representation of the victim. The character is a taxi driver in Fredericton and he is killed in the same way as the actual victim. Using Silver as the mouthpiece to deliver this kind of information is incendiary because, of course, the family of Norman Burgoyne, the real victim, take issue with his characterization and his comments. Perhaps readers would think that Burgoyne really felt and thought this way, which may not be true at all. The Disclaimer, of course, says that the novel is meant to be fiction. However, one might ask, what is fiction and what is truth? By aggressively challenging the truth of the historical record in this way, Clarke succeeds in illustrating how the boundaries of fiction and history can be blurred. The distortion of history, even at its most purposely controversial, questions the authenticity of history within fiction. *George and Rue* mocks the dominating myths of Canadian history by exposing how the advancement and the prosperity of the Western world has actually been obtained. Modernity and its progress came with a high cost to the colonial subjects of slavery and was not a result of "civilized" behavior on the part of the founding people of Canada. The story counters the cultural amnesia that exists about slavery, or the underlying denial of slavery in Canada, and it counters the belief that Abolition stopped the denigration of the Black community.

Norman Burgoyne, the actual person who was the victim of George and Rufus Hamilton, is portrayed as racist. While there is no real reason to believe that this part of the narrative was based on factual evidence, the liberty that Clarke takes with this character is an interesting way to gain attention from the actual community of Fredericton. In an interview, Clarke discusses the liberties that he took with the historical account and with Silver's dialogue:

But the actual victim, Mr. Burgoyne, was a pretty nice guy, charitable, and he had four young children who, as a result of the actions of my late cousins, were left to grow up poor and fatherless...He was surely a victim of the Hamiltons as much as the Hamiltons were victims of their circumstances—including racism. Yet, history—even fictional history—demands facing unlovely, ugly truths, such as the probability that, somewhere along the line, Burgoyne was an innocent beneficiary of the invasion of North America by his ancestors and the creation of vast wealth—wealth that drove the Renaissance and created Modernity—sapped from South American gold mines and the blood of the Aboriginal and African slaves (Wyile, *Speaking*, 148).

Clarke admits that he has manipulated the “facts” of the story and has inserted the voice of Silver without basing it on any particular proof or information. He also makes an interesting point that slavery, the forced labor of many innocent people, was a large part of North American economic progress. Slavery is still a rather obscure subject and is only now beginning to be understood better during the last thirty years. In the novel, Silver's coins represent a “white” inheritance that appears to represent colonial ideology,

slavery, and European influence. Unfortunately, the colonial inheritance for George and Rue, according to Clarke meant abuse, exploitation, and poverty.

Silver's expressions about Black-Canadians would not have been unusual for this time period in history, one of segregation and prejudice. It is very likely that the people in this era thought negatively about the community of Three Mile Plains. Clarke makes an interesting point about this generation:

The point of writing the story was to throw a light on the society, on what it was like before there were attempts at amelioration through Civil Rights legislation and fair-employment legislation and multiculturalism and all those things that have made life somewhat better for minorities and others in Canada....This was an era in which groups of people could be policed and coerced into pseudo-slavery, which is what happened to the Japanese-Canadians....So I really wanted to look at that and try to remember what that era was like. I found the way my father and mother had to grow up very interesting, so I wanted to try, in a strange way, to bear witness and also honour that history, that reality, when you were supposed to know what your place was and stay in it and not transgress, because if you do, the full weight of social sanction and the law will come down on you, so you better make sure that you accept your place and not be too uppity (Wyile, *Speaking*, 149).

The way that racism affected the Black community is often an unpublicized part of Canadian history and this makes Clarke's narrative challenge the ways that literary scholars think about realist Maritime fiction.

The narrator's comments about Silver, who is portrayed as being insensitive to the poverty of George and Rue Hamilton, plays an important part in restoring cultural memory. Although Clarke has taken liberties with the actual historical record, Silver represents an ugly side of racism that existed in the 1940's. As was brought out in earlier discussions about Canada, Canadian society has experienced cultural forgetfulness (Henry & Tator 1). Silver, however, plays an important part in restoring cultural memory. Through this character, Clarke is able to expose the psychology of the people who lived in this era. The narrator echoes the way that social Darwinism was internalized in this era and strategically suggests that Silver thought that George and Rue deserved and perhaps enjoyed the life that they lived.¹¹ Silver does not imagine that George and Rufus Hamilton ever wanted something better, just as many individuals in this cultural era found ways to justify the "state of black folks in 1949 Canada" (Sandiford 65). The narrator exposes the reader to all types of history, even the internalization of colonial attitudes toward skin color and how these attitudes affected the lived experience of being identified as Black in Canada. Silver's voice would never be considered "nostalgic" nor would anyone in contemporary society want to look back on his type of racism and see it as sentimentality. *George and Rue* is a lesson on the undesirable hidden history of Nova Scotia and it examines many different ugly thoughts and actions on the part of many different people, not just George and Rufus Hamilton.

The narrator's commentary on the town of Fredericton illustrates how essentialism is offensive and can damage the reputation of a body of people. This is especially true

¹¹ "Racism," according to Lawrence Blum should be restricted to two terms: "*inferiorization*," or the "denigration of a group due to its putative biological inferiority;" and "*antipathy*," or the "bigotry, hostility, and hatred" towards another group defined by its generally accepted inherited physical traits (Blum 8)

when historical facts are narrated without context or nuance. The narrator suggests that George and Rue were executed to satisfy the racist public opinions in Fredericton. Clarke's use of language draws attention to George and Rue Hamilton's appeals for clemency:

George's letter overlooked, however, what Viscount Alexander—who'd just toured the University of New Brunswick and snagged a doctorate—could not: the body of Nacre Pearly Burgundy had spawned a host of bitter citizens clamouring for two black boys to swing from a beige fake tree. (Indeedy, Fredericton was anxious to see 'shiftless, murderous niggers' hanged—in tune with the racket of hammers hitting nails, the crescendo of piano keys—hammers—striking chords and the machine-gun of typewriter hammers striking paper.) The greatest ex-general (since the Duke of Wellington) of His Majesty's forces would bow to New Brunswick public opinion, which could be polled, while reserving respect for God's opinion, which no one could divine (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 194).

The most poetic passages of Clarke's book are devoted to stating that the town of Fredericton was undoubtedly racist and that its people enjoyed and even demanded the hanging of these men. This passage about Fredericton forces the reader to see, first hand, how essentialist viewpoints cause an uncomfortable disconnection from the truth. Historically, marginalized people have had to deal with problematic representations in history that have stemmed from essentialisms, bias, or even strategic propaganda. Therefore, the way that Clarke allows the reader to experience essentialism through these exaggerated representations of Fredericton is didactic and almost pedagogical. Perhaps the only way for the majority class of Canadians to learn about or understand the way that

disenfranchisement functions is to study it through the lens of literature which can, as Nussbaum argues, provide readers with at least some “sense of life” (36).

As an example of radical ambivalence, the narrator challenges the efforts of the Justice system to give a fair trial to George and Rufus Hamilton (Wiebe 101). The real-life prosecutor of the case, Alphaeus Boyd, is portrayed as a racist and Clarke mocks his privilege and his higher education:

Thirty-year-old Crown Prosecutor Alphaeus Boyd—bearded bespectacled, sleek, silk-suited—viewed the two brothers as one deadly criminal: Rufus-George with suspect clothes, dirty looks, shifty grammar. Boyd heard a scintilla of Africa, of bush, in the boys talk; also a hint of red men’s hatchets, from before Europe’s guns and cannons thrust Christ and Shakespeare upon the savages...He could not forget either that his looming appointment as the deputy attorney general of the Province of New Brunswick could be withdrawn if the jury was not persuaded by the evidence of his arguments to bring mortal convictions against the boys (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 176).

There is no doubt that Clarke uses this passage to parody the way that higher education plays such an important role in Western epistemology and the myth of progress. George and Rue are suspect for not having the right clothes or the right grammar and Boyd feels an innate colonial superiority over them. The Prosecutor’s relation to George and Rufus is based on his education and his Western epistemology. When the Prosecutor looks at George and Rufus, he sees only one person, as if all Black-Canadians are the same. Their lack of education is viewed as suspicious and their identity is lumped together with colonial bias about the “red men,” the “savages,” and “Africa” (Clarke, *George and Rue*,

176). Rather than feeling anything for the men, the actions of the Prosecutor are based on greed and his need to weigh the politics of his position as Deputy Attorney. He needs to make sure that public opinion is satisfied with the verdict.

The vernacular of the narrator in the earlier parts of *George and Rue* subversively switches to poetic language by the end of the book. This is an unconventional style of narration compared to the traditional novel which is usually “a coherent, totalized structure containing a stable organizing center” (Hogue 94). The switch of narration begins when George contemplates confession:

Tabloids acted grief-stricken. They was contrite about what happened, wished they'd cared more for public servants like cabbies. They commented about life withering like snow, about the way light tears itself to bits, struggling through pines, about how anyone's blood is always like a newborn's, pungently fresh and precious, about how rock could spill and fall toward no end. They wept for a crushed yellow flower in the funeral parlour, the mashed body of a fly (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 157).

This language here is very different from the blackened English that opened the novel. Clarke shows the opportunism of the tabloids in a poetic language that begins to build and create sympathy for George and Rue.

The narrator's dual voice and the subversive history that is embedded within the narrative challenges European conventions of the realist novel. A traditional historical novel, according to Lukacs, is not necessarily about history, but more about explaining the motivation behind the people who created the history. Lukacs states that:

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of a great historical event, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality (42).

Clarke pays considerable attention to the people and the social events that surround the murder in Fredericton and the reader is exposed to the social forces that helped to shape George and Rufus Hamilton. Clarke's narrator, in a direct and clear way, does "re-tell" history and there is a poetic awakening of the characters in this story. However, Clarke's historical reality is not commonly known about Atlantic Canada which makes this novel so unconventional and subversive.

From examining this novel, it is obvious that Clarke is very interested in "historical reality" and contextualizing the story of George and Rue Hamilton (Lukacs 42). The narrator is skillful and he uses the execution to evoke sympathy for the men:

The quality of that light was yellowish and hellish, but it was still light, and the brothers prayed it would last forever. But the afternoon's shadows reminded George and Rue of the specters of the previously hanged. These wraiths seemed to dangle from the ceiling pipes and to smile back from the reflections of themselves displayed in the water in their toilets. They were shades of spooks looking at spooks of shades, amid siftings of light like the dust of blossoms (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 199).

The language turns to poetry preceding the execution of George and Rue. The fear of the men, the reminder of other Black men who had been hung, beside the “dust of blossoms,” paints a mood of sympathy.

Using food as a literary device, Clarke focuses on the poverty and disenfranchisement of the characters of George and Rue to show the realities of their life from 1930 to 1950. The challenge of earning enough money to provide basic food, without any education and without any wider respect, makes the lives of these two boys completely intolerable. The dual voice of the narrator is seen again in the dreams of the boys awaiting their sentencing:

He dreamt of Heaven with feasts of Syrian apples and Israelite quinces, almond flavored peaches, jasmine of Aleppo, cucumbers, lemons, sultana citrons, apricots and cottage cheese, pumpkins and pomegranates, white roses and rose-flavored pastries, rum-laced pound cakes, iced nougats, lime sherbet, tarts, oil of lavender, caviar, grappa, champagne, red wine, eggs, roast turkey, venison stew, rhubarb pie, sausage, clams, lobster, any soup he could imagine, Montreal smoked meat...Death would thin out his body, but Heaven'd fill his belly eternally (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 200).

The dream of good food, described in such rich language, makes the earlier poverty of George and Rue seem like an even more poignant section of the novel and the last words of the narrator sound almost Shakespearean: “The Negro hands of night moulded stars into immemorial, memorial pearls. Finis the ‘Black Acadian’ Tragedy of ‘George and Rue’” (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 207). By the end of the story, the narration has shifted from the blackened English to heightened formal poetry.

This strategic shifting of language subversively illustrates how any story can be manipulated even if the facts are used in telling the story. At the end of the novel, Clarke admits that these two men were his relatives and that he relied heavily upon the transcripts of the trial to write his story (Wyile 151). The trial transcripts, medical reports on George Hamilton, the brother's letters to the Governor General, and newspaper reports on the hangings are all incorporated directly into the novel creating its "intertextual effect" (Wyile, *Speaking*, 151). The historical documents are a part of a "documentary collage" and it is obvious that the papers are being "reworked into the fabric of a fictional narrative and being recontextualized" (Wyile, *Speaking*, 151). Many of the names from the actual event are used in the novel, which makes the novel feel much more like non-fiction. Even the author admits that many of the events that occur in the novel are true while others are completely imaginary. Most importantly, Clarke emerges in a playful way throughout the novel with his continuing criticism of history. This passage appears at the end of the novel:

This novel recapitulates bleakly truthful circumstances, but it is fiction, and I have taken prodigious and relentless liberties with "facts" so that psychologies, identities, genealogies, and even some place descriptions are purely imaginary. (But *History* is the truth, if you remember) (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 219).

Clarke's strategy attempts to subvert the reverence that is placed upon the objectivity of history. He uses the word history with a capital H, as if he is speaking directly to any reader who might automatically assume that history will always give a truthful account of an event. Some things need to be questioned and just by writing about the extreme poverty of the community in Three Mile Plains, Clarke reopens history.

George and Rue, at first glance, seems to be a typical historical novel with an investment in portraying linear thinking under the totalizing arc of a historical narrative. Most “classic” historical novels follow these conventions of linearity in plot, character development, language, and structure. As Hogue observes, traditional historical novels followed a certain logical order and attempted to be realistic with the narration using a familiar style in language and phrasing:

Novels of this period conventionally assume that the world is linear; that the world has a beginning (origin), middle, and ending; and that it wills a truth through the mastery of knowledge. The traditional novel (or detective story) represents itself as a closed system, as a categorical reality, as an essential truth. It represents itself as a coherent, totalized structure containing a stable organizing center (Hogue 94).

The non-conventional style of *George and Rue* is subversive of the cultural hegemony of nationalistic discourse that exists in Canada today. The form of Clarke’s novel is a challenge to conventional narrative styles because it does not use the “normal” tropes of Atlantic Canadian regionalism and it includes the suppressed narratives of Black-Canadians.

Slavery has been left as an untold story and perhaps it has been unstudied because it reflects some very distressing contemporary facts about Canadian society. George Elliott Clarke, in academic articles, has extensively discussed the problematic lack of representation of the slave trade in Canada. In discussing Robin Winks *The Blacks in Canada—A History*, Clarke argues that it is difficult to find information on slavery in Canada:

Practically every page in *The Blacks in Canada* conveys information that will astonish most readers (such as the forgotten truth that African slavery was practiced in the colonial formations of Canada (British North America and Nouvelle France) and that racial segregation was a feature of life in several provinces until the 1960's). In addition, seemingly every other page is rife with accounts that offer a plethora of potential heroes and heroines to celebrate Black History Month (February) or, for that matter, in cultural productions like plays, novels, film, and art. Wink's work is a solid gift to educators, researchers, and artists (Clarke, *Cultural*, 92).

The writing of any novel that discusses slavery or the continued denigration of African-Canadians in contemporary society opens a sensitive subject. In many ways, the writing of *George and Rue* is an act of political agency, because the novel rebels against the status quo. The story opens up a suppressed subject and forces the readers to remember that while there is little doubt that colonialism was beneficial for many people, it was never beneficial for the Black community of Three Mile Plains. The novel acts to counter the widely held myth of Western progress and this narrative illustrates the way that history can be used for and against cultural groups in the scene of Canadian hegemonic domination (Burgess 8). *George and Rue* is a cultural text that forces Canada to remember the disparity that exists for the Black community today as well as the racism that has continued to play a role in contemporary society long after slavery was abolished (Wyile, *Speaking*, 148).

Colonial attitudes have affected the recording of history and the ability of the historical record to report a contextualized representation of Black communities in

Canada. While it might be relatively easy to go to a history book and find out many of the strengths and weaknesses of the community in Three Mile Plains, it would be difficult to find this history contextualized properly. As Daniel Francis argues, one of the reasons that the dominant myths of Canadian history are under siege is that they are “partial and exclusive” (Francis 12). Patriotic Canadian nationalism and the “unifying national narratives typical of traditional political and military history” have downplayed the flaws in Canadian society (Wyile, *Speculative*, 9). Clarke himself notes the state of African-Canadian history:

The history of Africadia, what I call Africadia, particularly Black Nova Scotia, African Nova Scotia, is a history that’s crucial partly because of the fact that it’s so poorly known, so unrecognized, so disparaged, and partly because it’s a matter of pride and self-preservation (Clarke, *George and Rue*, 135).

The difficulty of being marginalized in Canada is that it is difficult to “write over” a misrepresentation when there is little social or economic power for representation in the media, government, or in academia (Kallen 284). It is an especially difficult task for a minority group in Canada to try to pressure the government because these communities are already small in number and hold less social influence on the dominant culture.

The legacy of colonialism creates an identity for Black-Canadians that needs to be decolonized. The decolonization of history requires critical thinking about the distortion of history and the ways that Canadian society as a whole, and not just Black-Canadians, needs to work to transform and rebuild the disparaged identity of this group of people (qtd. in Wilson, Wilson & Taylor 14). Clarke’s earlier point about the way that history is

used to either build up or disparage a cultural group is extremely important in the decolonization process. Clarke states in his review of *The Blacks in Canada: a History*:

African-Canadians await a magisterial history that will tell their story within the context of the peculiar conditions and unique obstacles that their first representative—slave, Loyalist, refugees, fugitive, settler, and postwar immigrant encountered. Any such scrupulous readings will surely annihilate the Winks-supported myth that African-Canadian history is a tale of apathy and abjection in contrast with the African-American poem of action and achievement (Clarke, *Cultural*, 95).

As Clarke opens this subject, *George and Rue* initiates a dialogue about power and provides an opportunity for outsiders to understand what it is like to be marginalized and how racism has affected certain communities. This historical novel writes back and refuses to exclude controversial subjects such as racism and slavery. The novel exposes the contemporary social forces that are influenced by the long legacy of colonialism in Canada that has affected and continues to affect the lives of the Black community, today. Clarke's work, however, needs to be supported by the rest of Canadian society so that these issues are no longer the difficult work of a few people. The literature of the marginal, a direct result of anti-colonial ideology, needs to be discussed, and publicized even more than it is already.

George and Rue mocks the dominating myths of Canadian history by exposing how the advancement and the prosperity of the Western world were actually obtained. Modernity and its progress came at a high cost to the colonial subjects of slavery and was not a result of civilized behavior on the part of the founding people of Canada:

This glaring discrepancy between thought and practice marked the period of the transformation of global capitalism from its mercantile to its protoindustrial form. One would think that, surely, no rational, "en-lightened" thinker could have failed to notice. But such was not the case. The exploitation of millions of colonial slave laborers was accepted as part of the given world by the very thinkers who proclaimed freedom to be man's natural state and inalienable right. Even when theoretical claims of freedom were transformed into revolutionary action on the political stage, it was possible for the slave-driven colonial economy that functioned behind the scenes to be kept in darkness. (Buck-Morss 821-22)

Thus, while the historical records and master narratives of Canada cry progress, this conviction only works by counting out the lives of colonial slaves. *George and Rue* counters the cultural amnesia that exists about slavery, or the underlying denial of slavery, and the story counters the belief that colonial attitudes changed after Abolition. The novel is an effective way to illustrate the immense difficulty all subjects of colonial history face when they try to wade through colonial policy, bias, facts, and omission to end up with a secure interpretation of history. Rita Joe's longing for a history that does not misrepresent her people is echoed in *George and Rue* and Clarke goes even one step further to aggressively reverse the power roles of representation in order to re-structure this story and rethink the way that his community has been historically represented or unregistered (Waring 1).

George and Rue brings the extreme, social forces of the 1930's into existence and it contextualizes the struggle of human relationships in one text. The social content of *George and Rue* covers the devastation of colonialism and racism that has continued in

Canada well beyond the date of abolition in the 1830's. Clarke's narrator mocks and imitates the voice of racism from this period in Canadian history and it relates a side of history that perhaps Canadians would like to forget. Additionally, Clarke makes it very clear, through the voice and the actions of his narrator, that history can be manipulated. The novel provides an opportunity for outsiders to understand what it is like to be marginalized and how racism has affected certain communities. By walking in the shoes of George and Rufus Hamilton, the reader begins to see that the contextualization of history is absolutely necessary. In fact, the suppression of history makes Canadian society blind. As Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring argue, "history is never a thing of the past," and "forms of historical reflection play a crucial role in any attempt to counteract oppression in the present" (qtd. in Cuder-Dominguez 56). The mediation of real internal and external divisions in Canada is impossible if the subjects of racism, marginalization, and power are suppressed.

Clarke's narrator is a radical apparatus of resistance against the master narratives of Canadian history that have excluded and distorted Black-Canadian history. The generation of new ideology about Black-Canadians within a radical historical novel breaks many conventional standards of the genre. These new narratives are subversive deconstructions of the many colonially biased narratives of the Black experience in Canadian society. Perhaps the real genius of this novel is illustrated by the way that Clarke plays with his narrator, plays, in fact, with his own voice, continually adding and omitting details that can fundamentally change the interpretation of "fact." The story illustrates that using the facts surrounding an event does not guarantee that the reader will be able to find an accurate record of the events. As Nussbaum suggests, perhaps the

novel is the best way to explain certain psychological truths (Nussbaum 281). In *George and Rue*, Clarke uses his text to uncover a suppressed history and leads his readers to a better understanding of the psychology behind Canadian racism. This creates a direct challenge to a Canadian hegemony that has allowed this type of historical discourse about Black-Canadians to go on for so long. It is crucial, therefore, for all members of Canadian society to collectively work together now, to decolonize all parts of their history, and create a national identity that no longer ignores the contributions of Black-Canadians.

Chapter 5

The Record of Unregistered Lives: Globalization in Alistair MacLeod's "*The Boat*"

In Alistair MacLeod's short story "The Boat," there is a conscious effort to grapple with the economic illusions of globalization. Once again, the notions of Western progress are countered by the suppressed voices of the unregistered lives that have been devastated by so-called progressive economic decisions of the 20th century (Waring 1). As many of MacLeod's best known stories demonstrate, the human cost of these efficient economic decisions has ravaged the Atlantic Canadian region, driven young people from their families and homes, and created a heritage of outmigration that has lasted for more than a century. In MacLeod's narratives, Cape Bretoners are often condemned to dangerous and low paying labor. While the Atlantic Canadian region is often attacked for its defeatism, the issues that MacLeod brings up about progress contests the historical myths that many outsiders hold about this region (Harper 1).¹²

Although it is perhaps the most well-known story in the whole history of Atlantic Canadian literature, "The Boat" can also be read a strategic misperformance of the typical literary representation of the Maritime experience. The story, at first glance, seems to follow in the form of traditional regional writing. Its settings, family structures, rural economy, and typical gendered characters appear to re-entrench the master narratives of

¹² Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated: "I think in Atlantic Canada, because of what happened in the decades following Confederation, there is a culture of defeat that we have to overcome... Atlantic Canada's culture of defeat will be hard to overcome as long as Atlantic Canada is actually physically trailing the rest of the country."

colonial discourse. The content of the story, however, is certainly not a mythologized account of nostalgia and romance. "The Boat" is a narrative that challenges the progressive mythology of the Canadian economy by showing the loss of the young and the sadness of the women that occurs when Atlantic Canadian families are separated by outmigration. MacLeod's story is a clear critique of the illusive nature of globalization and the ways that it has impacted the Atlantic Canadian region.¹³

In Atlantic Canada, globalization has impacted the region in a very aggressive way and the gap between the rich and the poor has grown drastically during the twentieth century. Decisions that impact many of the isolated regions of Atlantic Canada have been made by an "economic elite" who worry about their own financial interests and effectively control the distribution of wealth (Hessing, Melody & Howlett, 37). As documented in the article: "The Socioeconomic Context: Canadian Resource Industries and the Postwar Canadian Political Economy," the gaps in the Canadian economy have been steadily expanding:

Social class, often identified in terms of socio-economic status, is defined by political economy in terms of one's relation to the means of production.

Differences in power and authority are tied to the unequal distribution of wealth

¹³ Globalization can be used to refer to "economic globalization" that occurred from the 1970's onward. Tom G. Palmer of the Cato Institute defines "economic globalization" as the "diminution or elimination of state-enforced restrictions on exchanges across borders and the increasingly integrated and complex global system of production and exchange that has emerged as a result" (Palmer 1). Palmer's theory refers to "economic globalization" which drastically changed the financial, political, and cultural climate of the last thirty years (Palmer 1). Similarly, Noam Chomsky argues that "economic globalization" has affected the contemporary world in a more drastic way with international trade agreements and global financial institutions which have effectively unified the world into one single market (Chomsky 12). Therefore, the term "globalization" refers to the economic changes of the past thirty years and not the past four hundred years.

and also shape access to the decision-making in both the private and public sectors...In 1990, the richest 20 percent of Canadians owned 70 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 40 percent owned less than 1 percent (Hessing, Melody & Howlett 36).

Unfortunately, many people outside of Atlantic Canada blame the shortfalls of its economy on the region's apparent inability to modernize and they ignore the powerful social forces that have shaped the region during the twentieth century (Creelman 5). In the literary record of Atlantic Canada, however, we see that, for many years, the writers of the region have embedded discussions of power, economics, and culture in their fiction and poetry. These texts have shown a resistance to commonly held notions that fault 'backward Maritimers' who are supposedly stuck in their conservatism and have failed to prosper like the rest of modern Canada (McKay 45). MacLeod's story precisely identifies and then examines the forces of globalization which have acted on the Maritime people and forced them to become part of a transient skilled labour force. "The Boat" captures a key moment in the economic transition of Maritime history and the difficulties associated with making a professional choice in the midst of such powerful global forces.

The Atlantic region has been devastated by poverty and economic pressures for a very long time. Outmigration has stripped the Maritimes of its youngest and most talented workers since as far back as the late 1800's. As Veltmeyer argues:

Facing hard times, many Maritimers have relied on the time-honored- tradition of migration to solve their economic problems. With startling consistency 80 000 to 100 000 people have left the region in each decade between 1881 and 1981, travelling first to the "Boston States" and later to central and western Canada to

seek work. The period between 1921 and 1941 is the only exception to this trend when 150,000 people, nearly 18 percent of the population, left each decade in an attempt to escape the Depression. (23).

This is a shocking number of people who have had to leave the region and their homes in order to escape poverty and the statistics make MacLeod's portrayal of the pain of outmigration even more relevant to his discussion of globalization. While this examination, at least on one level, seems to be hidden inside a typical Scottish narrative from Nova Scotia that includes the clichéd elements of a boat and a fisherman, as readers look closer, they see that this regional mimicry is actually a strategic misperformance of normal conventions (Wiebe 100, Tremblay 36).

"The Boat" is both a subversive and normative reiteration of cultural expectations because the text challenges the traditional literary style of "nostalgia" for Cape Breton as well as the longing for a "home place" which Davies has identified as a dominant feature in so much Maritime fiction (Davies 193). The narrative includes a son that misses his family and his childhood home in Cape Breton and, in the beginning, it seems like this is an almost standardized story: a nostalgic look at the maturation of a son into a man, or a "coming of age" narrative that dwells on the loss of a family's cultural home, its way of life, and its identity. All of these elements have been present since the beginning of the Canadian literary tradition, appearing even in the Confederation poetry of Carman, Roberts, Scott, Campbell, Lampman, and McGee (Andrews 122). "The Boat," however, has a greater importance because its seeming nostalgia actually examines the tremendous losses caused by out-migration and economic disparity. By exposing the tragedy of globalization, this story acts as a "resistance narrative" that exposes the misconceptions

that global “progress” is always a good thing (Selbin 90). Eric Selbin argues that these kinds of stories are an important part of culture and history and it is “imperative to recognize the role played by stories, narratives of popular resistance” (Selbin 84). The popularity of these types of stories stems from a desire within the culture to oppose these powerful forces and these stories encourage and animate rebellion and revolution (Selbin 84). It is crucial to understand these types of resistant stories in the context of history:

Stories keep the past alive and assert one’s own place—and version—of critical historical processes. Told and retold, polished to a high sheen and in the service of an array of masters, these tales offer us a wealth of information (Selbin 90).

“The Boat” critiques and documents a pivotal time in the Atlantic region. The story shows radical ambivalence by exposing the human cost of neoliberalism and it thus acts as a resistance to the historical processes that have acted on the Maritimes.¹⁴ The story shows the toll that forced migration places upon families and records the personal dimension of early globalization.¹⁵

¹⁴ Political neoliberalism refers to a way of doing business and politics which values the market and increasing economic wealth above most other concerns. Paul Theoron in “Neoliberalism: Origins, Theory, and Definition defines neoliberalism as an ideology that holds certain economic goals:

Neoliberalism is a philosophy in which the existence and operation of a market are valued in themselves, separately from any previous relationship with the production of goods and services, and without any attempt to justify them in terms of their effect on the production of goods and services; and where the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs (Theoron 1).

¹⁵ The liberal school of economics became famous in Europe when Adam Smith, a Scottish economist, published a book in 1776 called *The Wealth of Nations*. He and others advocated the abolition of government intervention in economic matters. No restrictions on manufacturing, no barriers to commerce, no tariffs, he said; free trade was the best way for a nation's economy to develop. Such ideas were “liberal” in the sense of no controls. This application of individualism encouraged “free” enterprise, “free” competition -- which came to mean, free for the capitalists to make huge profits as they wished (Marinez & Garcia 1).

MacLeod's story is an important example of radical ambivalence because his text acts as a fluctuating piece of literary resistance that subverts the homogenizing rhetoric of national discourse. The narrative focuses on the human cost of outmigration and the actual lived experience of the so-called progress of Canadian development. In its famous opening, "The Boat" begins with a boy remembering his father and his childhood home in Cape Breton. The son recalls his father and the times they spent fishing together:

My father did not tan—he never tanned—because of his reddish complexion, and the salt water irritated his skin as it had for sixty years. He burned and reburned over and over again and his lips still cracked so they bled when he smiled, and his arms, especially the left, still broke out into the oozing salt-water boils as they had ever since I had first watched him soaking and bathing them in a variety of ineffectual solutions (MacLeod 20).

The father's discomfort shows the son that, perhaps, fishing was not the best suited occupation for his father. David Creelman argues that this passage documents "nature's ability to bend and warp the vulnerable human" who is victim to the sun and the lack of choice in occupation within the Cape Breton economy at the time (Creelman 129). As part of his maturation, the son begins to realize that his father, perhaps, was not suited for fishing either "physically or mentally" and that his father would have liked to have gone to University (MacLeod 14). The story, opening with a poor fisherman, who struggles

Liberalism meant international trade agreements and the disintegration of traditional ways of doing business where nations faced financial barriers when trading their goods and services. This economic "liberalism" was revived after the Great Depression in order to boost profits and the economy and soon these "old" philosophies were applied in a "new" way to the global markets which were opening at the time with the implementation of free trade agreements (Marinez & Garcia 1). The opening up of Free Trade agreements such as NAFTA and CAFTA changed the world and drastic restructuring of economies, politics, and cultures has been the result (Marinez & Garcia 1).

with his sunburns, aptly illustrates the devastation of the economic recession during the 1970's. The Cape Breton economy was poor and the choice of livelihood was limited. Pushed along by a "fever" of positive beliefs about the material prosperity that would come with the opening up of international trade, many people embraced the extreme changes of the 1970's with great optimism. There were some people, however, who were not optimistic about globalization and argued that the human cost of neoliberal practices was high. MacLeod incorporates the political debates about globalization and neoliberalism within the characters of this story.

Economic pressure plays a key role in the decisions the sisters make to marry men from big cities who can offer them easier and more affluent lifestyles. The catalysts that start the process of outmigration are the lure of higher education and a promise of escape from what seems like the domestic drudgery of life in Cape Breton: "Shortly after my sisters began to read the books, they grew restless and lost interest in darning socks and baking bread and all of them eventually went to work as summer waitresses in the Sea Food Restaurant" (MacLeod 10).

The sisters are dissatisfied with their lives in Cape Breton and soon begin dating men from the city. The mother is very reactive to these tourists and she makes many comments about their visits during tourist season:

My mother despised the whole operation. She said the restaurant was not run by 'our People' and 'our people' did not eat there and that it was run by outsiders for outsiders. 'Who are these people anyway?' she would ask, tossing back her dark hair, 'and what did they, though they go about with their cameras for a hundred

years, know about the way it is here, and what do they care about me and mine, and why should I care about them?' (MacLeod 10).

The mother resents the intrusion of the tourists and feels that they do not understand her or appreciate the strengths of the culture that has been able to survive in Cape Breton for hundreds of years by living off the land and sea. While the daughters have no problem working in the service industries and the whole family benefitted economically from the wages, the mother stands against the changes that are taking place in her community and way of life.

The father is a fisherman and, under normal conditions, his job provides only an adequate living for the family. In the summer, when the tourists arrive, they bring a source of wealth that augments his income and the mother feels suspicious about the money they bring into the family:

When the father takes the tourists on the boat for circles and then drinks and sings for them, he makes a lot of money. When he came home he threw the money he had earned on the kitchen table, as he did with all his earnings, but my mother refused to touch it. (MacLeod 14).

The mother is absolutely against making money out of interactions with the people from away who come to visit Cape Breton. She refuses to take the money that the father made showing the tourists around because she feels that these earnings are almost complicit in something criminal.

The mother is also against her daughters marrying men that were not raised in Cape Breton. The girls are young and do not understand what their departures will mean for Cape Breton, for the family, or for the future of their children. The girls, under

economic pressure, do not have the options that the men have and it is not easy for a woman to move away and get jobs in a foreign city. The girls see only two choices: marry a man from Cape Breton or marry a man from away. Marriage to a man in Cape Breton meant a life of mending old clothes a traditional life of hard work while marriage to a man from away at least held the promise of a better way of life. The economic prosperity of the men from the urban areas, who are rich enough to vacation in Cape Breton, offers the girls a way out of their traditional existence. The daughters marry outsiders and move long distances away from Cape Breton:

Yet go they did, to Boston, to Montreal, to New York with young men they met during the summers and later married in far-away cities. The young men were very articulate and handsome and wore fine clothes and drove expensive cars and my sisters, as I said, were very tall and beautiful with their copper-colored hair, and were tired of darning socks and baking bread (MacLeod 16).

The urban prosperity not only draws away the sons but steals the daughters who give birth to grandchildren far away from the family home. This is a source of significant emotional hardship for the mother later when the mother is separated from her grandchildren and spends her last years alone in Cape Breton.

MacLeod shows the devastation of this family when the father begins to age and the forces of globalization begin to encroach upon the family. The father gets sick and he is unable to do hard physical labor. Each year the lobster traps need to be overhauled and readied for the fishing season. The mother's brother and his father's partner come to work on the traps and the narrator notes the high economic stakes of the upcoming season: "I knew that my mother worried and my uncle was uneasy and that all of our very lives

depended on the boat being ready with her gear and two men, by the date of May the first” (MacLeod 17). The lure of bigger boats, trawlers and the pressure of supporting large families become too great for the family to endure. The Uncle leaves the family business behind:

At the conclusion of the lobster season, my uncle said he had been offered a berth on a deep-sea dragger and had decided to accept. We all knew that he was leaving the Jenny Lynn forever and that before the next lobster season he would buy a boat of his own. He was expecting another child and would be supporting fifteen people by the next spring and could not chance my father against the family that he loved (MacLeod 19).

The pressure to make more money and to support his growing family of fifteen forces the Uncle to leave behind the family business. The father is alone on the ship and the son decides to quit school and to fulfill his economic destiny by helping the family survive (MacLeod 20). The lure, however, of greater catches of fish and more revenue is something that slowly encroaches on the lives of the people in Cape Breton within MacLeod’s story. As Creelman argues, trying to make a living by buying a bigger boat is understood as the only way to survive:

Economic pressures threaten to overwhelm Macleod’s characters and force them to read their lives as meaningless. Macleod tends to represent the economic and the environmental forces in similar ways; they are viewed as inevitable, natural conditions beyond the sphere of influence of the local community (Creelman 130)

The family does not try to argue with the Uncle, it is just accepted that the economic conditions of raising a large family produce solutions that are out of their hands. As the

primary industry falls apart, the story shows the inevitability of external economic factors that overwhelm the men and soon they are forced to find new ways to support their families.

The economic pressures of globalization are seen vividly in the passages of the story about the fish prices and international competition and the encroachment of the big boats into the Harbour. The fisherman try to save their lobster from outside competition but the policies that allow bigger boats to arrive are not discussed with the people who need lobster to make a living. The fisherman cut the lines of the outsiders but the debates that are mentioned in the story are ones that will eventually affect the livelihood of all Cape Breton fishermen:

Twice the big boats have come from forty and fifty miles, lured by the promise of the grounds, and strewn the bottom with their traps and twice they have returned to find their buoys cut adrift and their gear lost and destroyed...Twice they have gone away saying: 'There are no legal boundaries in the Marine area'; 'No one can own the sea'; 'Those grounds don't wait for anyone.' (MacLeod 25).

Who owns the sea? And who should make decisions about the limits of foreign fishing? These questions relate directly to the policies of a globalized economy and they are the same challenges that eventually ruined the fishing industry in Newfoundland and have been debated for decades within the Federal and Provincial governments (Lear 41). This story is radical because the dilemmas that are incorporated in MacLeod's narrative about globalization appear long before it was ever evident that these would become some of the most controversial debates in the 20th century for Atlantic Canada.

MacLeod, of Scottish descent, writes a narrative about a primary fishing industry which was formed as a result of the legacy of colonialism. Through MacLeod's anti-globalization debate about the fishery, one can see how Canadians, at times, are intimately implicated in the difficulties of the Canadian colonial legacy (Bhabha 315). MacLeod profoundly states: "No one can own the sea" (MacLeod 25). It is interesting to note that MacLeod's narrative is against the global forces which meant his family would lose their fishing industry to foreign competition. At one time, the Native population, undoubtedly, would have felt and voiced the same narrative about the fish, when foreign competition or the European settlers invaded.¹⁶ This fish was one of the chief sources of sustenance for the Native people who would eventually change their entire existence as a result of globalizing colonial forces. Many European immigrants moved to the Canadian colony to harvest this fish and to improve their economic way of life, without a thought to how this disrupted the traditional lives of the Native populations. Similar to contemporary attitudes about neoliberalism, the settlers were pushed along by a "fever" of positive beliefs about the material prosperity that would come with the opening up of international trade and many embraced the extreme changes of colonialism with great optimism. By contesting the unbridled optimism that still exists about the "progress" of Canadian society and highlighting the human cost of neoliberalism and globalization, MacLeod's text becomes a small voice of anti-colonialism in a Canadian literary world of European "progress" narratives. This is what makes MacLeod's story an important mechanism of political agency. The text stands up for the human cost of economic

¹⁶. "Indian Treaties and Surrenders." Canadian Encyclopaedia . 21 June 2010.
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0003983>

development and remembers the many people who are not counted as significant. It also acknowledges the fact that it is only the elite few who benefit from the statistics and figures that fuel many economic decisions made throughout Canada. "The Boat" provides a jarring juxtaposition for the national illusions of romance and nostalgia that are so often used as representative tropes in Atlantic Canada and it replaces these fantastic narratives with the suppressed voice of actual lived experience (Bhabha 309). The story, centered on the marginalization of Atlantic Canadian people, highlights the reality of economics and the neglected condition of the region.

There is only devastation left in the wake of the economic restructuring of the 1970's for Atlantic Canada. Many families fell apart during this period and the region became a holding place for older people who refused to leave and for a few younger families that had enough work or could simply endure poverty. MacLeod sharply defines this pivotal moment in the story, not with nostalgia and romance, but with the loss of an industry to external globalized forces that left only destruction in their wake. While this moment is often recorded as positive in the Canadian economy, MacLeod shows the human cost of these progressive "economic" decisions. When foreign competition, larger boats, and new technology intrude into Cape Breton, the fishery is changed forever. Many more people are forced to leave their traditional ways of life and to move to urban centers that are a long way from their childhood homes. The narrator of the story observes:

And though the prices are higher and the competition tighter, the grounds to which the Jenny Lynn once went remains untouched and unfished as they have for the last ten years. For if there are no signposts on the sea in storm, there are certain ones in calm, and the lobster bottoms were distributed in calm before any of us

can remember, and the grounds my father fished were those his father fished before him and there were others before and before and before (MacLeod 24).

This dilemma over fishing becomes a tragedy. The future of Cape Breton and the fishing industry is taken over by corporations, new technologies, and by government agencies. Eventually, the tradition of the people of Cape Breton that existed for hundreds of years is interrupted and disrupted for good.

MacLeod's narration soon begins to evolve into a "dual voice" of resistance. The story shows an unfolding dilemma between the past ways of doing things, and the present benefits of change illustrated by the conflict between the father and son. In the story, the two characters are locked in the internal battles of trying to absorb the new ways of life that are offered to them and wanting to cling to their old traditions. The death of the father triggers a hard look at the life of a fisherman and the son is greatly affected by this event. The narrator says: "But on November twenty-first, when it seemed we might be making the final run of the season, I turned and he was not there and I knew that even in that instant that he would never be again (MacLeod 23). The father takes the one choice that he has left in the face of the destruction of the fishing industry, a depressing choice that ultimately allows the son to outmigrate. As Francis Berces argues, in MacLeod's fiction the pressures that act upon the characters are powerful:

Two factors exerting constant nihilistic pressure are the proximity of most characters to survival conditions and, secondly, death itself, the final elemental darkness threatening to reduce all hopes to one uniform and meaningful conclusion (116).

It is a feeling of doom that pervades the lives of the characters that are trapped within a system that is not determined by the local person who inhabits Cape Breton. This mood illustrates the sense of despair for the local man who is affected by global economic policies that have a grim human cost at the local level.

The image of the father's body, washing up on the shore, is a sharp reminder of the devastation that the people from this culture have endured, and this passage acts as a radically ambivalent apparatus of resistance. The final words of the story are not of hope but rather of the son's memory of his father's body and how it was battered by the sea. This famous last image seems to suggest that the economic forces which act on the father function like the ocean itself and they are too powerful to fight against or resist:

But neither is it easy to know that your father was found on November twenty-eighth, ten miles to the north and wedged between two boulders at the base of the rock-strewn cliffs where he had been hurled and slammed so many, many times. His hands were shredded ribbons as were his feet which had lost their boots to the suction of the sea, and his shoulders came apart in our hands when we tried to move him from the rocks. And the fish had eaten his testicles and the gulls had pecked out his eyes and the white-green stubble of his whiskers had continued to grow in death, like the grass on graves upon the purple, bloated mass that was his face. There was not much left of my father physically, as he lay there with the brass chains on his wrists and the seaweed in his hair (MacLeod 25).

The natural and the economic forces combine to burn, batter, and destroy this man. The narrator's father is in his grave and his mother is disconnected from her children and sits alone in Cape Breton (MacLeod 25). The story which may have appeared to be a

nostalgic narrative at first glance concludes with a violence that is certainly not sentimental and a profound reflection on the ambivalence or uncertainty of the future of Atlantic Canada.

Economic stability for the son does not come without a price and the regrets of his choices haunt him and stay with him for his whole life. As many people feel when they are forced to outmigrate, there is a tremendous loss in culture, family stability, and in security. The flashbacks that the son has at the beginning of the story show that the freedom that he has gained from leaving Cape Breton is intertwined with regret. The story opens:

There are times even now, when I awake at four o'clock in the morning with the terrible fear that I have overslept; when I imagine that my father is waiting for me in the room below the darkened stairs or that the shorebound men are tossing pebbles against my window while blowing their hands and stomping their feet impatiently on the frozen steadfast earth. There are times when I am half out of bed and fumbling for socks and mumbling for words before I realize that I am foolishly alone, that no one waits at the base of the stairs and no boat rides restlessly in the waters by the pier (MacLeod 4).

The son wakes up alone with his regret and he is unable to forget his family and the friends that he left alone. These flashbacks subtly show that the promises of neoliberalism did not turn out to be positive for this family. The son finishes the story and admits: "It is not an easy thing to know that your mother lives alone on an inadequate insurance policy and that she is too proud to accept any other aid" (MacLeod 25). The mother, who resented the intrusion of the urban tourists, sees her family

destroyed, her husband dead, and her family's proud way of life, obliterated. The son, although economically stable, cannot feel completely happy and MacLeod illustrates this with the son suffering from insomnia, bad dreams, and regret.

The political ideology intertwined within "The Boat" resists nostalgia. The story is a subversive narrative that questions the globalizing forces that continue to destroy the lives of Atlantic Canadians. Atlantic Canada is a region full of people who realize that their right to live where they want and how they want is likely to be based on forces out of their control, and affected by economic forces set into motion hundreds of years ago. The improvement of civilization through globalization is only beneficial to an elite group of people. As Thom Workman notes in *Social Torment: Globalization in Atlantic Canada*:

For the moment, we continue to suffer thorough all manner of ideologically loaded claims and boasts about globalization....and it is impossible to find evidence of 'increasing prosperity' in Atlantic Canada. Across the region working people have faced greater difficulties and lost political and economic ground. Rates of unionization have stagnated; working-class confidence has been eroded; wages are deteriorating; labour laws have atrophied and are just as likely to be used against working people as on behalf of them; the minimum wage has fallen precipitously, with many jobs across the region clumping this miserable baseline wage; women are forced to assume a disproportionate number of low-wage jobs; the unemployment insurance regime has been gutted; and rates of poverty are not abating (140-141).

The wonderful appraisals of neoliberalism and globalization are a step in the wrong direction for Atlantic Canada and MacLeod's fictional voice is a counter-narrative to this ideological commentary. MacLeod's work, it seems, has stood true over the test of time, becoming even more influential and relevant as the reach of globalization has expanded. For the young people of this region, outmigration or poverty have become the two inevitable choices and neither of these benefits Atlantic Canada.

The ability of MacLeod to maintain a "dual vision" that remakes the current social systems in Canada makes his fiction an important mechanism of political agency and resistance. MacLeod's fiction is able to summarize and animate a political discussion about the economic changes that have affected the Cape Breton region for a century and continue to present challenges in the present day. This story highlights the importance of opening up a discussion about reworking the way that Canada makes its economic policies so that the Atlantic Canadian region is no longer relegated to an unimportant status. Western Cape Breton has been neglected by government policies and this has resulted in a "highly localized and isolated" way of life well into the twentieth century (Finnigan 5). As Mary Frances Finnigan argues in her dissertation "To Live Somewhere Else: Migration and Cultural Identity in Alistair MacLeod's Fiction," the policies of the Canadian government that were meant to improve and stabilize the economy in the Atlantic region have resulted in a social reality that has not been favorable:

The increased presence of government programs, and structural changes in transportation and industry such as mechanization and labor surplus, increasingly progressive communication technologies, a rise in support for formalized education, and the decline of local markets, contributed to the post war structural

shift experienced by its communities, beginning in the 1950's. The swift introduction of all of these factors to the region contributed to a formula for decline, as economic stagnation, the inability to compete, and outmigration continued increasingly to burden the population (Finnigan 5).

The combination of factors that affected Atlantic Canada in the 1950's made it difficult for the region to prevent outmigration. Yet, the human cost of Canada's trade decisions and the economic policies that have ravaged Atlantic Canada continue to go largely unnoticed or unidentified and the stubborn conviction that Canada should be seen as a metaphor of progress and development still remains.

Unfortunately, outmigration and poverty still plague the populations of Cape Breton. Most youth face the hard choice of poverty or outmigration and older populations must retire and be laid to rest without their children and grandchildren living close to them. As Finnigan further argues, Alistair MacLeod is able to encapsulate the growing changes and costs of the neoliberal policies within his fiction:

In a broad context, the individual alienation that he [MacLeod] details so intimately reflects the private human cost of wider shifts in society: the growth of urban identity, professionalization, and the intensifying pressure on rural continuance during the post-war period (Finnigan 4).

While neoliberal policies have affected all of Canada, the Atlantic region has been devastated by outmigration. Berces discusses MacLeod's portrayal of the pressures of the environment on his characters:

Indeed, environmental conditions are at times so powerful that the texts approach a kind of determinism so powerful that their insistence that individual freedom is

subsumed in the numerous pressures of immediate circumstance: 'His characters are critically vulnerable to if not determined by environmental conditions...and are well within reach of devastating economic poverty (Berces 116).

"The Boat" shows the father and son locked in the difficulties of poverty. Fishing is the only way for the son to make a living and he must leave the region in order to find other types of employment. The mother's character, too, is an apt representative of the many older people in Atlantic Canada, born during the baby boom, who face their last years alone, without their children and grandchildren to care for them (Atlantic Provinces Economic Council 190). MacLeod's intimate look at the realities of living in Atlantic Canada today, a region that still struggles with the same external forces, and a growing devastation of culture and family life, is a subversive counter narrative the nostalgic and romantic notions of this community. His story radically challenges the "normalcy" of national myths that proclaim the economic development and progress of Canada but sustain these myths only by suppressing the voices of many marginal groups of people (Tremblay 36).

"The Boat" discusses the experience of being marginalized in Atlantic Canadian culture. While the narrative is fictional, many of the events are based on true historical events that have been more widely understood as a result of different types of historical and cultural scholarship in the past twenty or thirty years. The economic divisions within the country relegate certain regions to the status of non-progressive when in truth these places and these people have often been ignored and discounted. The same political ploy has been used to discount First Nations and Black-Canadians, and it is not a new diversion for a majority who must always accumulate their wealth and labor from

someone or someplace else. This story makes a statement about the aesthetic beauty of the imagined community of Canadian nationalism by proving it to be a cultural fabrication (Bhabha 315). MacLeod is a regional writer who represents a region of people who have no specific geography. The characters in his fiction represent the unregistered lives of the poor, the hungry, the marginalized, the women and children who cannot inhabit a region because they have been tossed around by the globalized forces of economic “progress” (Waring 1). These voices counter the Canadian ideology of democracy and cosmopolitan expansion and their lives are sacrificed in order to maintain economic prosperity in Canada. Outmigration, poverty, and hardship are the key characteristics of the lives of these people and MacLeod refuses to forget their importance. As Workman states:

One-sided sketches of globalization that celebrate its prosperity unforgivably trivialize the poverty and hardship of the vast majority of the world’s people. Worse still, they cannot even begin to recognize the necessary link between the leisured life of the privileged few and the swelling ranks of the exhausted, the poor and the hungry (Workman 7).

MacLeod’s anti-globalization narratives almost seem prophetic now when we view this writer from a 21st century perspective and locate his work in the contemporary age of precarious economic booms and busts. While “The Boat” has been misinterpreted at times by conservative readings, the subversive content is anything but nostalgic. MacLeod remembers the economic decisions that have affected the people of Atlantic Canada and he subversively resists the dominant discourses of progress and utopia that are so often associated with North America.

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Conclusion:

Political Agency in Atlantic Canadian Literature

Atlantic Canadian society has not benefitted from forgetting or denying the indiscretions of the past. Marginal groups in Atlantic Canada argue that the myth of progress is only sustained by the suppression or elimination of many personal and communal narratives of Canadian history. Now, through literature, through legal processes, and sometimes even through demonstrations of outright violence, marginalized people in Atlantic Canada continue to remember the past and strive to have their stories told within whatever forum they can grasp to bring these narratives to the attention of the wider public. These texts fall into a place of radical ambivalence - they deal with subjects that subvert nationalism, public history, private suffering, and the ability of Canada to call itself "multi-cultural." These subjects are sometimes discreetly hidden in sophisticated narratives that appear as 'good' historical novels, 'simple' native poems, or 'nostalgic' short stories. The forum of literary fiction and poetry allows alternate versions of historical and social discourse to be publicized and these subversive works of literature radically reimagine the political arena of Canadian hegemony.

MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod are certainly not the only Atlantic Canadian writers involved in this important process. The region has many other authors who participate in the re-enactment of previously suppressed historical narratives. For example, there is no doubt that Antonine Maillet's *Pelagie-la-Charette* is an example of writing back against the traditional colonial historiography of the Acadian identity or experience (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Empire*, 6). Similarly, Lawrence Hill's *Book of*

Negroes is also subversive because the fictional story purposely engages with the terrors of slavery and racism over a hundred year period. This is an example of a novel that might imitate a traditional history narrative but it is subversive because it “takes back” Black history from colonial representation and makes visible a set of social contributions that were previously invisible. It also formally recognizes the key roles Black-Canadians played to help build the foundation for the economic prosperity of North America. David Adams Richards’s stories are also subversive versions of conventional regionalism because they use fictional characters to challenge the political constructions of Atlantic identities. Some critics have asked why Richards doesn’t write in a style similar to “our acceptable regionalists” and many literary debates have been staged over the ways that Richards and his unusual characters question the “normalcy” of political constructs of regional identity and national identity that are often completely taken for granted (Tremblay 36 -37). Regionalism and the role it plays in patriotic nationalism will always remain stagnant until it is aggressively questioned by critical literature and critical authors who do not take the “ideological roles” of the National myth for granted and do not maintain these “nation-appropriate metaphors” (Tremblay 37). Lisa Moore’s *February* is another text that blurs the boundaries between history, fiction and bias by providing a feminine narrative about the tragic deaths of the workmen aboard the *Ocean Ranger*. In this novel, Moore radically shows that fiction that recounts or revises history is a powerful way to shape ideologies of the present. Further discussions about radical ambivalence would undoubtedly recognize the texts of Maillet, Hill, Richards, and Moore as key sites of resistance and their content would illustrate the way that ideology is immersed within the politics of fiction.

Radical ambivalence in Atlantic Canadian literature is recognized as the result of simultaneously dominating and being dominated by broader social forces in Canadian culture. In their different ways, the works of MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod display a similar kind of ambivalence by impersonating the traditional models of the regional text and, at the same time, subverting the “normalcy” of national myths (Tremblay 36). Although these writers come from vastly different cultural communities and backgrounds, their writings share in this narrative strategy. Atlantic Canadian literature has used regionalism in subversive ways against the distortions of multicultural discourse and the illusionary myth of progress. Careful study of these works by MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod opens a tragic side to Canadian life by investigating the reality of lived experience as compared to the aesthetic notions of Canadian hegemony. This hegemony is maintained by minimizing and erasing the truth about the flaws of Canada, and this creates a dominant national discourse that is not an authentic representation of the Canadian experience. This discourse may be a traditional narrative but, as we have seen in this study of the region’s literature, this long standing narrative is only maintained by marginalizing and suppressing the experiences of many hard-working Canadian people who deserve a positive place in this society.

MacDonald’s *Fall on your Knees* appears in the form of a traditional history novel, but subverts the national aesthetics with a dialogue that remembers racism, domination, and oppression. The novel narrates an alternate side of history, one that is often discounted or suppressed because it shows the flaws of Canada. *Fall on your Knees* is a story about exclusion and a negotiation with a version of history that is not commonly remembered about Canada’s past. The text registers the radical ambivalence that Sugars

describes as a fascination and repulsion for certain aspects of Canadian national discourse (Sugars 150, Wiebe 100). *Fall on your Knees* is a deliberate recollection and reiteration that counters the dominant discourses of a “cleansed” history of inclusion and progress. In many ways, the novel may seem to mimic a 19th century historical novel in form but the content challenges the imperial structures that linger in Canadian society today. MacDonald’s book is actually an example of an ambivalent site of resistance to the dominant settler-colony perspective of history which has marginalized Native populations, Black-Canadians and other community groups. *Fall on your Knees* works as a cultural mechanism to give a voice to Canadians that have been denied their history, rendered invisible, or silenced by the dominant historical discourse. This remembrance of the marginal acts as a counter narrative to the totalizing and powerful discourses about Canada that exist presently. *Fall on your Knees* exposes political and social mechanisms that historically created racial intolerance, class struggle, and religious oppression. MacDonald’s attempt to reopen historical narratives with suppressed stories of racism is an act of political agency for the people who have lived these experiences and also presently suffer from the control of hegemonic knowledge production that undermines the reality of the Canadian experience.

In a similar way, Rita Joe’s poetry provides an important example of radical ambivalence because her texts act as fluctuating sites of literary resistance that subvert the homogenizing rhetoric of national discourse in Atlantic Canada. Joe opens a discussion about cultural genocide and the systemic racism of the Residential School system and her poetry navigates through the controversial subjects using the diction of a traditionally conservative poetry written in English. The radical ambivalence of Joe’s

poetry is evident by her willingness to take an oppositional position to the existing state of marginalization that the First Nations people undergo every day in Canada. The poems allow the average Canadian to take a political and revealing look at colonial history. Joe voices her personal response to the “suppression of indigenous local history” or the “writing over” and misrepresentation of the appropriation of the aboriginal lands during first contact (Wyile, *Speculative*, 36). By carefully reopening the history of colonialism, Joe is able to oppose contemporary ideologies about Native populations that are often seen as a “closed book” by national discourses.

Joe uses language as a tool of resistance. Fear for the future of Native communities is a legitimate concern for this group of people who have had to survive cultural genocide from assimilation policies in Canada over the past one hundred years. Joe speaks about her own personal attempts to write back against colonial power which is part of a post-colonial attempt to reconstruct the narratives of her people that have generally been excluded from literature. It is no wonder that Joe tackles the subject of colonialism in her poetry and attempts to address this problem with her people. The complexities of these poems are shown by Joe’s ability to simultaneously educate non-native people and also address her own people at the same time, within a few short verses. This poetry is an overt attempt at the process of decolonization, and though its own resistance is often troubled for many different reasons, the writing provides an accurate portrayal of aboriginal struggles in the contemporary Canadian context. Joe’s poetry is an example of radical ambivalence because it offers an anti-colonial poetry that is written in English, the language of the colonizer, yet dominated by a content that challenges colonial history at the same time. The ability of Joe to maintain a “dual

vision” that remakes the current social systems in Canada for both Native and non-Native communities alike, makes her poetry an important mechanism of political agency and resistance. Joe’s creativity in opening a dialogue about the sensitive issues of cultural genocide is a practical way to educate and increase public awareness about the impact of contemporary colonialism and this makes her poetry an important tool for mediation that should not be overlooked in Canadian educational systems.

George Elliott Clarke’s *George and Rue* negotiates an ambivalent resistance by imitating the form of the colonial historical novel but at the same time writing back about the many unheard experiences of Black-Canadians who suffered under colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire*, 6). The novel uses the suppressed voices and the experiences of black Nova Scotians to counter the widely held notions of progress that are part of North American nationalism. Clarke’s narrator is a radically ambivalent apparatus of resistance against the master narratives of Canadian history that have excluded black-Canadian history or distorted their history with negative assertions based on colonial bias. *George and Rue* mocks the dominating myths of Canadian history by exposing how the advancement and the prosperity of the Western world were actually obtained. Modernity and its progress came at a high cost to the colonial subjects of slavery and were not a result of “civilized” behavior on the part of the founding people of Canada. The novel counters the cultural amnesia that exists about slavery, or the underlying denial of slavery in Canada, not to mention the belief that Abolition stopped the denigration of the Black community. A text that allows the reader to learn about the way that racism affected the Black community is a subversive contrast to what is normally discussed in the progressive narratives of realist Atlantic Canadian fiction. It is

subversive because the historical degree of racism in Nova Scotia is often an unpublicized part of Canadian history. The writing of *George and Rue* is an act of political power because the novel rebels against the status quo. The story opens up a suppressed subject and forces the readers to remember that while there is little doubt that colonialism was beneficial for many people, it was never beneficial for the black community of Three Mile Plains. The novel counters the widely held myth of Western progress and *George and Rue* is a cultural mechanism that forces Canada to remember the disparity that exists for the Black community and that has continued long after slavery was abolished.

George and Rue is a small voice of anti-colonialism in a Canadian literary world of European “progress” narratives. George Elliott Clarke refuses to allow the cultural erasure of Black-Canadian history to be maintained in Canada. His narrative is a subversive attempt to illustrate the way that history can be used for and against cultural groups on the scene of Canadian hegemonic domination. Clarke’s narrative about two criminals who were hung for murder might seem unthreatening to the contemporary ideas about Canadian racism, however, his narrative shows the trauma of a culture that refuses to acknowledge its racist past. The alternative vision of suppressed history is shown through the lens of the lived experience of Black-Canadians. The narrative uncovers the patterns of domination that are intertwined with the control of literature, history, and politics. As Brydon argued, the first step for Canada was acknowledging the harm that has been done in the past but the next step, was much harder (Brydon 190). However, there is a lot more work that needs to be done in understanding the ways that contemporary domination and power act upon different cultural groups. *George and Rue* is an example of subversion inspired by the emotion of being written out, being

oppressed, and being misrepresented. This novel becomes a political act of agency and is a strong move for Black-Canadians who have been marginalized for centuries. This new “tale” represents the many things about Canada that has been suppressed by patriotic, nationalistic, progress narratives.

MacLeod’s short story “The Boat” is a conscious effort to grapple with the economic illusions of globalization. Once again, the notions of progress are countered by the suppressed voices of the unregistered lives that have been devastated by so-called progressive economic decisions of the 20th century. MacLeod sharply defines this pivotal moment in history, not with nostalgia and romance, but with an in-depth look at the loss of an industry to external globalized forces that left only destruction. While this moment was recorded as positive in the Canadian economy, MacLeod shows the human cost of this restructuring. When foreign competition, larger boats, and new technology intrude into Cape Breton, the fishery is changed forever. This story is radical because the dilemmas that are incorporated in MacLeod’s narrative about globalization appear long before it was ever evident that these would become some of the most controversial debates in the 20th century for Atlantic Canada. The political ideology intertwined within “The Boat” resists nostalgia and the story subversively questions the globalizing forces that continue to destroy the lives of Atlantic Canadians. Atlantic Canada is a region full of people who realize that their right to live where they want and how they want is likely to be based on forces out of their control, and affected by economic forces set into motion hundreds of years ago.

Through an examination of the conflicted dual vision of literary resistance within Atlantic Canada, one can see how Canadians, at times, are intimately implicated in

colonialism (Bhabha 315). Examining Atlantic Canadian literature and the way that this kind of writing resists Eurocentricism with coded messages of resistance teaches us a valuable lesson about the real political power of novels, short stories and poems. Atlantic Canadian authors have produced a crop of literary performances that radically reimagine the social constructions of their world. This alternate type of resistance to colonialism, within the Canadian “settler-invader” dynamic, is often controversial because of its instability. Resistant writing is incredibly important because it works to change the political climate and contests the almost axiomatic belief that Canada is socially progressive. So much information can be learned about the prejudices, fears, and politics of the people in a nation by examining not what Canada upholds but what Canada has excluded. The unity of thought, in this case, seems to be that Canada is united in tolerating a fabricated picture of the “authentic” Canadian. In different ways, the narratives of MacDonald, Joe, Clarke, and MacLeod work to counter some of the negative ways that marginalized groups have been portrayed in literature and history. Although these texts are often considered as conventional forms of literature, in actuality, the content of these texts acts as a forum for agency and resistance. The recollection and reiteration of the experience of the marginalized is a deliberate “misperformance” or a rupturing of the normative patriotic discourses of Canada. These authors radically oppose the homogenizing rhetoric of national discourse in Atlantic Canada. In unique ways, each of them displays a radical political view about Canada that juxtaposes the Canadian national illusion with the suppressed voices of lived experience (Bhabha 309). The effect of this juxtaposition creates a counter narrative to the imagined community of the nation (Bhabha 315). Atlantic Canadians must grapple with a unique set of cultural codes that

have occasionally absorbed and occasionally resisted the colonial inheritance of the region. This radical ambivalence in Atlantic Canadian literature has created a complex tapestry of art that is marked by political implication and resistance. The writers studied in this discussion have produced texts that provide an opportunity for all outsiders to understand what it is like to be marginalized, and in doing so, they have opened up a wider dialogue about how to create a greater social inclusivity for all Canadians.

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