

Swept Under: Reading the Stories of Two Undervalued Maritime Writers

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Volume 33, Number 2, 2008

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl33_2art04

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Creelman, D. (2008). Swept Under:: Reading the Stories of Two Undervalued Maritime Writers. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(2), 60–79.

Swept Under: Reading the Stories of Two Undervalued Maritime Writers

DAVID CREELMAN

IN THE PAST TEN YEARS, fiction from the Maritime provinces has topped bestseller lists across North America and Europe. Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*, David Adams Richards's *Mercy among the Children*, and Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* have enjoyed international success and have stimulated interest in the fictions being produced in the Maritime region. But if some novels have broken through and attained critical acclaim and popular success, other Maritime texts have slipped into comparative obscurity. Of course, not every text deserves a wide readership. Maritime writers have been just as prolific in their production of clichéd or pedestrian fictions as the writers of any other region, and there are many mediocre novels that fittingly fade into the shadows. But there are other texts, works of unusual beauty or complexity, that have not received the recognition they deserve. Susan Kerslake's first two novels, *Middlewatch* and *Penumbra*, and Lesley Choyce's *The Republic of Nothing* have not won wide critical attention or public interest, though each text is intricate and engaging, both aesthetically and ideologically. The reasons why these novels have been swept aside, or swept under, are complex; however, three factors can be identified as having shaped their reception and reputation. First, they were published by small presses that have had to labour under difficult circumstances to push their product into the Canadian market. Second, the style and mode of the fictions set them outside the mainstream of popular readership. And third, each of these fictions resists the signifying codes that define the Maritime region, and their determination to question, resist, and problematize regional identities has excluded them from the signifying streams that might have carried them further into the reading community.

1.

The reception of Susan Kerslake's and Lesley Choyce's novels has been affected, first of all, by the particular missions and the economic constraints that define the small presses in the Maritimes and in Canada. Not all authors and publishers aspire to or are able to attain international success and mass-market breakthroughs. When Kerslake sent the manuscript of *Penumbra* to Aya Press, she noted that "best sellerdom is not my aspiration . . . but it sure would/will be nice to see *Penumbra* turned out" (letter; quoted with the permission of the author). Both author and publisher recognized that, as a small press, Aya was committed to producing high-quality limited editions but was not positioned to launch an international sensation. While the individual visions that guide publishers influence the reception of a particular text, the economics of the publishing industry also shape readership. As Danielle Fuller has pointed out, big money is needed to back big successes; the recent mergers of major publishing houses and the subsequent vertical integration of the publishing industry have created megapublishers and produced a marketplace oriented toward the blockbuster (44-46). The economic limitations faced by small presses, in contrast, determined the reception of each text being discussed here. Like all small presses, Aya Press applied for available provincial and federal government programs. *Penumbra* was published by Aya with both the support of the Ontario Arts Council and a significant grant from the Canada Council that helped to finance the printing of the 750 copies of the novel. Government subsidies are an essential aid to help the publisher offset printing costs, though it must be remembered that the manuscript grants that subsidize production do not contribute to marketing campaigns. Thus, Aya Press had to be especially careful with resources and relied on lower-key forms of publicity to market Kerslake's novel, including launching a postcard campaign and participating in bookseller conventions. Kerslake's own reluctance to participate in publicity activities such as reading tours meant that from the outset, then, *Penumbra* was marketed to a select audience.

Similar challenges were faced by Goose Lane Editions, the Fredericton-based publisher of Choyce's *The Republic of Nothing*. Goose Lane has been skilled at coordinating levels of financial support; the novel's acknowledgement page recognizes the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the federal government's Book Publishing Industry

Support Program, and the New Brunswick Department of Economic Development, Tourism, and Culture. The press produced a skilfully edited and visually attractive text, but marketing budgets for regional publishers have been typically small. Middle-size companies such as Goose Lane are able to launch texts with respectably large parties, and as Laurel Boone recalled *The Republic of Nothing* was given a “decent tour.” However, even mid-range presses have sometimes struggled to devote the resources and funds needed to create and sustain the media buzz that produces strong sales. In a crowded marketplace, thin resources for marketing lead to difficulty competing against the national and international houses, especially when the “economies of scale available to large firms . . . place immense pressure on the retail prices of books” (Fuller 44). The economic hardships endured by the publishing industry in recent years, including the difficulties that arose after General Publishing filed for bankruptcy and the “publishing industry lost its largest Canadian owned distribution company,” make it harder for small presses to break through into the public consciousness (Fuller 45). Goose Lane, Nimbus, and Gaspereau have all survived and even flourished in the wake of recent hardships, but some small presses, such as Ragweed, Aya, and Oberon, are either under siege or have disappeared. Thus, while conclusions must remain tentative, it is clear that some Maritime texts, like Kerslake’s and Choyce’s, are not widely known due in part to publishing pressures that define the industry as a whole.

2.

A second factor that may have prevented these texts from breaking through into best-seller status relates to their innovative form and style. Operating outside the realist conventions that have long been the dominant genre of Maritime fiction, these texts have puzzled even their admiring reviewers and limited the enthusiasm of the public. Kerslake’s fiction stops short of self-reflexive postmodernism, but her commitment to charting the inner psychological states of her characters has led her to develop an intensely symbolic and highly figurative voice. Reviewers of Kerslake’s two novels are ambivalent about her lyrical style, and sometimes it is hard to tell if her poetic experiments are questioned on aesthetic grounds or because the style is out of step with what is expected from a regional text. Only six reviews of *Middlewatch* appeared after it was published by Oberon in 1976. All spoke highly of its central theme

and the skill with which Kerslake explored “the relationship between a severely disturbed adolescent girl and the young teacher who takes her in and tries to bring her back to contact with reality and with the human community” (Hosek 134). However, critics were less enthusiastic about the author’s tendency to “linger . . . over detail for its own sake,” and Chaviva Hosek suggests that the “author has over-valued its lyricism and ‘poetic’ qualities and undervalued its ‘prosaic’ flatness” (136). Anthony Appenzell seems to be less bothered by the “lyrical-archetypal” style but remarks that it seems to have emerged from the wrong place, noting that it is “altogether the kind of novel one might expect to come out of Quebec rather than out of the Maritimes,” though he graciously admits that it is “welcome nevertheless” (73). Granted, Kerslake’s style requires that her audience set aside what Roland Barthes would call their readerly expectations, but readers and reviewers seem to be less than willing to accept an East Coast “writerly” text. Only two reviews of *Penumbra* were published, and Eric Garsonnin’s praise for the novel is introduced with the warning that “some readers might get lost along the way” (73). In a letter to Glynn Davies, publisher of Aya Press, Libby Oughton — whose Ragweed Press published Kerslake’s collection of short stories *The Book of Fears* in 1984 — complains about how hard it is to get the national press to pay attention to regional texts: “I have a desperate hard time getting any reviews outside the region no matter what I do — never in *Q&Q* [*Quill & Quire*], the *Globe*, *Gazette*, etc etc. . . . No matter how well I edit, design and so on, it seems like when they see Charlottetown on a book, they assume it’s either regional history or a pile of you-know-what — sigh” (quoted with the permission of the author). Oddly enough, while readers and reviewers have seemed hesitant about Kerslake’s poetic voice, she has attracted some attention from the academic community. Janice Kulyk Keefer considered Kerslake’s texts in both her 1987 book, *Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction*, and a later article about “Recent Maritime Fiction: Women and Words.” More recently, Richard Cumyn’s interview with Kerslake has appeared in *The New Quarterly* (see Kerslake, “Susan Kerslake”).

Choyce seems, at first sight, to have departed from the realist conventions and been celebrated for his innovations. Goose Lane foregrounds the fact that Choyce is moving outside the typical narrative techniques of realism by including a quotation from a national, central Canadian review on the back cover of the paperback edition of *The Republic of*

Nothing. The *Globe and Mail* extols the novel as “a triple decker yarn shot through with mythic possibilities, its part fairy tale, part adventure story and part coming of age testimonial.” But it is curious that those reviewers who remark favourably on his stylistic innovations also comment on Choyce’s status as an immigrant to Nova Scotia. Kerslake is a native of Chicago, having emigrated to Nova Scotia in 1966, but this bit of biography, noted in Aya Press’s promotional material, is rarely mentioned by commentators. Choyce’s reviewers, however, frequently mention that he was born in Cinnaminson, New Jersey, was educated in New York City, and settled on the East Coast in the late 1970s. As often as critics comment on his stylistic complexity, they comment on his public persona as an East Coast surfer (see Demont), as if his odd writing style is more tolerable if it is first recognized that Choyce is an atypical Maritimer in other ways. Yet, if his text falls out of the mainstream of realist literature, his energetic blend of magic realism, parody, and the *Bildungsroman* results in a text that has found a niche market. Choyce’s fiction has attracted virtually no academic attention in the form of articles; however, his novel was deemed sufficiently accessible to be added to the alternative list for the high school curricula of both Nova Scotia and Alberta. While the presence of this book in the classroom will be considered in more detail below, the fact that it has been read by students would account for the four interesting reviews linked to the novel on Amazon.com. Reviewers writing under aliases such as “that kid” and “Valley girl” praise the novel as a fast-moving and engaging text that “starts off as a book about an Utopian island and becomes about one family, mainly the main character, trying to find their way.” As a third reviewer notes, “unlike most school books which are often boring and tedious, this one kept us interested” (“Amazon Reader Reviews”). Choyce’s style has thus led to a wider readership for his novels than has been enjoyed by Kerslake, but the mix of genres is odd enough, it seems, to keep Choyce from the kind of wider audience tapped by more conventional writers such as David Adams Richards and Alistair MacLeod.

But even as the idea is considered — that these texts have not become bestsellers because of their innovative styles — it must be recognized that stylistic innovation has not hurt writers in other parts of Canada. It is true that Kerslake’s fiction can be challenging, but so are the texts of other, better-known artists. When postmodern writers such

as Robert Kroetsch, Rudy Wiebe, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, and Nicole Brossard have won broad readerships while challenging aesthetic conventions, it is odd that Maritime novelists have been bound by the view that they should be traditional realists. In part, the region's reputation for being deeply tied to more traditional aesthetics is legitimate. From Ernest Buckler, through Alden Nowlan, to David Adams Richards, Lynn Coady, and Leo McKay Jr., conventional narrative modes such as realism and naturalism have shaped numerous Maritime texts and have persisted as the region's dominant aesthetic for a longer period than in other parts of the country. Nor is the region's interest in realism inexplicable. A Marxist critic would link this late flowering of realism in the Maritimes to the region's similarly late entrance into the industrial and postindustrial economy. A cultural critic might argue that the region's longing for a distant past and its hesitations about an uncertain future have not predisposed its writers to engage in artistic innovation or revolution. Maritime authors, unlike the writers of other regions, do not operate within the kind of confident cultural context that encourages them to explore new narrative modes and aesthetics. Whatever the reason, many Maritime writers have persisted in using conventional narrative techniques.

However, not all writers from the east have committed themselves to the realist mode. Kerslake and Choyce are not alone in their willingness to represent the region in innovative ways. R.M. Vaughan has employed a highly symbolic voice to capture the interiors of his characters, Nancy Bauer has experimented with a style drawn from magic realism, Antonine Maillet has long used and parodied mythic patterns within her texts, and George Elliott Clarke has adopted a self-consciously poetic voice in his first novel, *George & Rue*. With a wealth of innovative writers working in the region, an observer cannot help but conclude that, if critics view Susan Kerslake and Lesley Choyce as anomalies, it may have less to do with the actual aesthetic codes at work in the Maritimes and more to do with those critics' own expectations about what the region's literature is or should be. Indeed, to fully examine the forces that narrow the readerships of these two writers, not only does attention need to be paid to the limitations that have hampered their publishers and the innovative styles of their novels, but consideration also needs to be given to the ways in which preconceptions about the region as a whole have had an impact on the reception of their texts.

3.

Kerslake's and Choyce's books have not been bestsellers, in part, because of the ways in which they actually talk about the region. These fictions resist the signifying codes that typically define the Maritime region within the discourses that operate across the nation as a whole. Their determination to question, resist, and problematize regional identities has excluded them from the discourses that might have carried them along.

Concepts of regional identity in relation to the nation as a whole have been in existence from the very moment of Confederation, when three self-consciously distinct regions agreed to form a federation because each believed that the creation of a dominion would not only "promote the Interests of the British Empire" but also "conduce to the welfare of the Provinces" (Canada). Canadians have always been aware of local perspectives and regional identities. Often these identities were viewed as the distinct character that the people of a region developed as they responded to their environment, interacted with their geography, and struggled to maintain the language, religion, and cultural heritage of their settler ancestors. In the past, the identities of the regions were defended but not always hotly contested. In the past two decades, however, the term "region" has been reconsidered in the light of contemporary theoretical perspectives. Critics such as Frank Davey, early in the 1980s, noted that traditional theories of regionalism, which often relied on essentialist models, were not neutral constructions but versions of the region that are encoded with "an ideology [that] prevents or conceals internal political differentiation and activism" (9). Turning away from the early models of regional studies, recent critics have started to view perceptions of "region and regionalism as constructs rather than natural formations and recogniz[e] the processes of negotiation, contestation, and conflict in forming their definition" (Wyile et al. x). Regions, then, are not defined by geographic or even historical certainties. Rather, as Davey argues, "both region and regionalism are social creations" (2). Regional identity is an imagined cultural construct, and as such it cannot be reduced to a monologic discourse.

Social historian Ian McKay forcefully insists that, while there are multiple definitions of the Maritimes, there is no single Maritimes ("Note" 90). A regional identity is a construct carefully masked behind

a series of simultaneous, sometimes competing, discourses. These different constructions, intent as they are to represent the internal differences and semiotic gaps of the region in positivist terms, create images that are then available for commodification. And it is this very commodification that allows “the reterritorialization of regionalism as marketplaces” (Davey 14). When texts reproduce images that can be aligned with one or more of these constructions, they find, already in place, a code, a series of signs, that paves the way to the consumer or, in the case of literature, the reader. Those cultural producers who construct images outside the established vocabulary are not blocked from producing their texts, but either the text’s resistance to the dominant concepts of the region will be recuperated by a dominant ideology or the text will struggle to find an audience.

At the risk of oversimplifying the competing discourses that attempt to articulate different versions of the Maritimes, four distinct positions — four dominant discourses — can be identified.¹ The oldest construction of the Maritime region is the essentialist position, created out of the discourses of geographic determinism. As Ian McKay notes, these conceptualizations would include “attempts to define ‘region’ in natural essentialist terms. . . . The notion of the Maritime Provinces seeks to define the region according to its intrinsic essence: the sea” (“Note” 95). Within the essentialist discourse, the Maritimes comprise a traditional society, a slow-moving, friendly, shore-lined place wherein the primal citizens bind together to protect a cherished way of life. New Brunswick tourist packages emphasizing Acadian villages of old, the Nova Scotian postcards of Peggy’s Cove, the images of simultaneous fog and sun-struck coast — these and many other stereotyped concepts now constitute a body of familiar images. By themselves, these images of place are often too clichéd and overdetermined to be of much use to an artist, but even if they seem clichéd the essentialist construct remains a subtext for the region. This naturalized bank of signifiers is still employed as a normalized default. Indeed, though contemporary artists infrequently draw on such essentialist discourses, this is still the mode through which older texts are celebrated. L.M. Montgomery’s novels, and *Anne of Green Gables* in particular, have become a template for marketing an age of agrarian innocence to the urban, postindustrial tourist. The currency of this conception of the Maritimes as old-fashioned and geographically based was also demonstrated recently when Frank Parker Day’s novel

Rockbound was selected as the winner of the 2005 CBC Canada Reads contest. The novel is actually a complex fusion of a conservative/conservationist desire to retain traditional community structures, wed to a liberal humanist celebration of the individual and a recognition of the emerging modernist sensibility, but the novel's multiplicities were not fore-grounded by the CBC.² Canada Reads mined the essentialist regional discourse to laud the way in which the novel "evokes the power, terror and dramatic beauty of the Atlantic, and paints a portrait of back-breaking labour, cunning bitterness and family strife in the decade preceding the first Great War" ("Canada Reads").

The second frequently employed construction is more sophisticated. In the second half of the twentieth century, "the Atlantic region came to be defined largely in terms of its structuring absences: its lack of metropolis, its lack of domestic pools of capital, its lack of a well-developed industrial base, its lack of a developed class structure" (McKay, "Note" 96). Within this version, the region is continually compared to the centre and recognized as "underdeveloped." When region as a concept is set against nation (itself a constructed signifier of an absent signified), the region is cast either as the lesser dependent or as the oppressed victim. There are a number of ways in which these roles can be played out politically, but there is little difference with regard to how they function as polarized representations. National/regional, rural/urban, have/have-not, heartland/hinterland, triumphant/defeatist, bully/victim, cosmopolitan/conventional, emerging/receding — these are the regional constructions employed most often within political and economic discourses, and they form the core of the media's current vocabulary. Many of the regional studies in history and literature in the 1970s and 1980s employ this version of the region.

Nor is it a matter of attempting to argue that these are inaccurate representations. Rather, they are incomplete discourses, and ideology fills the gaps that open between the signifier and the unrepresented signified. As McKay notes, "when the region and its people are 'Othered' in this nationalist historiography, when they are reduced to quaint, patronage-ridden, backward obstacles or simply seen as a problem of regional disparity, we should query these discursive 'terms of trade,' this reduction of what we know to be a rich complexity to one inferior binary opposition" ("Note" 99). At the extreme end of this would be included the types of cultural productions that McKay examines. In *The*

Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia, he considers how a number of neoconservative cultural producers, such as Helen Creighton and Mary Black, have resisted the emerging power of urban modernism and recast the Maritimes as traditional, folk, antimodernist, and reactionary. But texts employing this body of polarized signs need not be simplistic or reductive. Writers have evoked this vocabulary in complex ways, and in some texts this discourse has been employed but has been allowed to govern only an aspect of the larger work. Writers who have embraced these binaries and given voice to a polarized version of the region can find a wide audience for their work. The nostalgic vein of Ernest Buckler's fiction, which allows him to contrast the idyllic Annapolis Valley with the sterility of urban Halifax, and the celebration of clan and family in the later stories and the novel of Alistair MacLeod are examples of how texts draw part of their significance from a regional, albeit constructed, identity.

A third strategy, rarely employed before the closing decades of the twentieth century, accepts that the Maritime region is a problematic construction, within which alternative versions of the region can be proposed. Marginalized communities may use this strategy to point out that the region is neither as geographically determined nor as polarized and disadvantaged as is claimed, in order to carve out an alternative space that is then occupied as a site of resistance. What were formally thought of as small enclaves or emergent communities — particularly groups who had been defined by and ignored due to their class, gender, race, or ethnicity — are recognized as different and promoted as an alternative to the hegemonic discourse. Thus, the Acadian community in the 1960s and 1970s could experience a renaissance during the same moment when the dominant culture is anxiously discovering that it was the weaker opposite of the powerful national centre. Of course, as these marginal groups are examined and recuperated, there is a temptation to present them as a new kind of positivist alternative. The alternative versions may begin to emerge as new, truer, essentialist notions. Antonine Maillet's Pélagie views the region as a place of loss and betrayal as well as a home place of self-definition. Maillet holds competing vocabularies at once, but eventually Pélagie's status as mythic figure, as a Moses leading her people to a promised land, dominates. Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* approaches a similar positivism when the complexities of her representations of the black community in New Waterford threaten

to become a homogenized portrayal of family harmony and plenitude. But if these alternative discourses can occasionally become reductive, at least they allow nonhegemonic identities to emerge and find a viable place among the competing versions of region being constructed.

The fourth strategy, and the least frequently employed because it is the most costly, is to insist on seeing the region as an unreadable entity, to refuse to create a stable image of the region, to persist in indeterminacy. The novels of Choyce and Kerslake have not broken out as best-sellers, not just because they were published in small houses, or read by conservative reviewers, but also because they challenge the current representations of the region. The novels refuse to produce stable versions of the East Coast. They are neither essentialist nor polarized, and they do not seek to advance an alternative. By persistently foregrounding the constructedness of the east, they make visible the problems that we seek to avoid.

4.

The Republic of Nothing is born, in Choyce's novel by the same name, when on 21 March 1951 Everett McQuade decides to declare his home, Whalebone Island, an independent nation. On a typewriter that itself cannot comply with the assumptions of the wider culture, since it has no letter "g", McQuade types out a declaration and separates from Nova Scotia. He secedes from the province, not because he wants to move toward a particular set of economic or political values, but because he wants to get away from the superficial and materialistic culture of the mainland. He names the republic "nothing," to suggest his "total disaffiliation with any existing doctrine or country" (8). From this initial resistance to conventional identity, Choyce proceeds to chronicle the quixotic life of Everett, his psychic wife Dorothy, his insecure son Ian, and his daughter Casey as they spend thirty constantly shifting years in their little community.

From the opening moment, in which the McQuade family constructs for itself a local/national identity that signifies nothing, the novel is deeply suspicious of any community, national or regional, that believes in its own being. At the international level, Choyce mocks American patriotism, describing the "ugly passion of a true patriot," a police officer, who longs to "see blood and jagged glass driven into the bodies of anyone who would speak out against the American war" in

Vietnam (213). Less militaristic patriotism is no less subject to parody. Ian McQuade contributes his voice to an antiwar protest by singing the Canadian anthem, starting with the last line, "Oh Canada, glorious and free," faltering in the face of the police officer's anger, and later revelling egotistically in his brief fame as the "Crazy Canuck who sang some wacko Canadian song" (215). Pretensions of national identity are skewered, and celebrations of regional identity are similarly emptied out. Images of Nova Scotian cultural identity are subverted as every mainland politician proves to be a crooked, money-driven hypocrite, and even the images of the innocent folk are twisted around. In a passage that Choyce might as well have written as a companion to Ian McKay's analysis in *The Quest of the Folk*, the old man of the island, Hants, recalls his meeting with Helen Creighton, "a little woman with pretty eyes." Creighton once paid a visit to Whalebone Island, plied Hants with rum, recorded his sailing songs, including "Farewell to Nova Scotia," and then drove off, breaking poor Hants's heart (242). The folk experience of the province is a construct built on misrepresentation and exploitation.

If there is no authentic national or provincial identity, Choyce carefully guards against the possibility that Whalebone Island should ever aspire to an alternative essentialist identity. All the inhabitants of the island are immigrants and castaways from the wider world who bring their demons and gaps with them. Dorothy, Everett's wife, is a nameless woman who is washed up on shore and is unable to remember her own past as the daughter of a violent man. Named for the heroine of the *Wizard of Oz* — another castaway to an imagined land — Dorothy is an unusual version of the maternal; her mysticism and prophetic powers prevent her from being read as a typically regional image of the feminine. Faithful to Everett during his long absences from the island, she nonetheless forms a psychic bond with the neighbour Bentley Ackerman. Dorothy is a loving mother to her drifting son Ian, but at the same time she imagines that he is the reincarnation of her brutally murderous father. Dorothy's mercurial character is the norm on an island populated with figures determined to abandon previous lives and escape to less defined roles. Mr. Philips is an exiled physicist on the run from the nuclear arms industry of the American government. Duke/Delaney O'Neil is a homeless New Yorker brought to the island as a stand-in for Gwen's grandfather, a role that the old man himself soon believes.

Ian McQuade himself is content to perpetuate this deception because he realizes that “lies can be as good as truth in the proper context and that memory is a mutable thing shored up with hope and fear and the unlikely epithet that all things are possible” (129). In a relativistic world, identity is an early, unmourned casualty.

The text resists at every turn the impulse to play out the conservative, patriarchal traditions that have characterized some regional discourses. Every inhabitant carries burdens, and few of them are lifted. The characters learn to accept their own inadequacies. For example, the abused child Burnet Jr. grows up to be a deserter from the Vietnam War who returns to take care of his unrepentant, stroke-debilitated father. Gwen, the woman whom Ian loves, becomes pregnant, and the text ultimately endorses her decision to travel to Boston for a legal abortion. The erratic community of Whalebone serves as a continuous reminder to the reader that all communities and regions are only tentative constructs. When the community is threatened by an American and West German mining firm, which wants to dig up the island’s deposit of uranium, the community is saved not because Everett can successfully argue that the Republic of Nothing should be recognized as an independent “real” nation but because the bog that the miners are destroying houses the remains of an ancient Viking, thus motivating the United Nations to declare the area a world historic site. The dried remains of one dead traveller frustrate the plans of a contemporary imperial conqueror. The island is saved, and Ian is able to pursue his life’s work, his “subtle research into the nature of the power of nothing — the sweet centre of all the chaos that is our lives” (364). He never wavers from his conviction that the community is only something he has “dreamed . . . into existence. . . . I think I made this whole place up” (272).

Given the text’s determination to resist the current constructions of regional identity, it is curious that the novel should even have had the success it enjoys. Although not a “break out text” like those examined by Danielle Fuller, the novel, as Laurel Boone of Goose Lane Editions writes, “continues to sell in the trade market,” “is used in Nova Scotia schools,” and appears on the alternative list of texts on Alberta’s high school curriculum. As one of the optional texts that could be selected for the grade twelve curriculum, the novel has been included in a number of high school English courses. That a text that subverts so many of the dominant perspectives should be part of the ideological state appar-

atus, to use an Althusserian term, seems odd until the course materials, including descriptions for the grade twelve Canadian literature course at Horton High School, are reviewed. Students reading through a list of texts largely representative of the canon were asked to produce an essay on *The Republic of Nothing*, focusing on four of the following themes: "Politics, Miracles, Youth and 'Coming of Age,' Spiritualism, Regionalism, Women's Rights, Independence (Passive), Revolution (Assertive), Love, Power" ("Horton High School"). While regionalism is an issue to be considered, most of these themes touch more directly on issues faced by maturing teens, and the text is thus recuperated under the larger interpretation of the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. The text remains popular in part because it is not "really old or really boring" and in part because its insistent indeterminacy can be recovered as a story of maturation and self-realization ("Amazon").

Susan Kerslake's novels *Middleground* and *Penumbra* are more difficult to recover within the folds of the dominant discourses. *Middleground* resists many of the assumptions that govern the different versions of the Maritime region. Although set in a small community, somewhere near the Atlantic Ocean, the novel is devoid of place names, and the locations described — the seashore, the meadows, the hilltop school — are portrayed in lyric and mythic tones. The kinds of essentialist images typical of the first type of regional identity simply are not employed. The characterization is similarly unusual. Anthony Appenzell suggests that the novel is "essentially the story of Sleeping Beauty and the man who awakens her," but in fact the text rejects such clearly defined categories. The main character, Sibbi, an echo of Sibyl, is a multifaceted young woman whose withdrawal inside her own psyche gives Kerslake an opportunity to explore the nature of language, communication, and the inarticulate horrors of the soul. At the beginning of the text, the "girl is alone, a heap of sand, an island barely breathing life" (5). Having been raised, assaulted, and then abandoned by her brother — her only link to the outer world — Sibbi has been emotionally traumatized and mentally broken. She must withdraw from memory and thus must withdraw from language in order to temporarily bracket off the pain of her brother's betrayal. Her catatonic state, her inability to "make one conscious move," poses a challenge to the community that seeks to integrate individuals into larger systems and clearly defined roles (16). At the end of the text, Sibbi emerges from "the remote regions" to respond

to the ocean and “scoop up handfuls of water,” but — far from being an essentialist return to geographic space — the gesture is incomplete (131, 133). Her return to community is uncertain: while she stretches out her hand to Morgan, her temporary guardian, she makes the gesture “lightly, not quite committed” (133).

Morgan, the other central character and the figure through whom most of the narrative is focalized, is similarly enigmatic. As Kulyk Keefer notes (175), this schoolteacher, while apparently motivated by good intentions as he rescues the badly beaten Sibbi and attempts to restore her sanity by linking her to language and the community, is nonetheless a figure who seeks to control the girl in his own way. His motivations are not entirely clear, and as the text slowly decodes and unveils Sibbi’s torturous childhood it reveals almost nothing about his history. Morgan remains a figure whose consciousness resides almost exclusively in the present tense. Having come from outside the community, from where we do not know, he is certainly a positive force, but he cannot be assigned a stable place within the plot, let alone the larger regional discourses. He comes from the urban world, yet he wants to reattach Sibbi to a community to which he himself does not belong. He is infused with an educated appreciation of the arts, in particular poetry, but he does not really understand Sibbi’s complex need to slowly enter herself in the communal language that will restore her to herself. The novel is a blend of psychological realism and poetry, which ultimately says much about the inner life of the subject and little about the role of place or the region’s culture. The relative lack of attention that Kerslake’s first novel has received is understandable given her refusal to participate in the available signifying codes of the region.

In her 1984 novel, *Penumbra*, Kerslake initially seems to anchor her writing more solidly on the East Coast. The narrative is set in the nineteenth century on a small island just off the coast of a whaling town, and thus the basic markers of a regional text are at least present. However, this first expectation that the text will explore the nature of the larger community is not fulfilled. In her intensely metaphoric narrative, Kerslake immerses us in the inner lives of her characters. Indeed, for a long time, we encounter only the inner experiences of the characters, for the author holds back key bits of information that would allow the reader to orient herself within a larger context. A central fact of the text is withheld until page 97, nearly two-thirds of the way through the

text, and only then does the narrator reveal that the story chronicles the lives of a small family that resides on the tiny island because the father, John, runs the community insane asylum and cares for the inmates who have been exiled from the mainland. The reader must move from inscape to inscape until this key is granted, and by the time we realize the characters are in an asylum we have already begun to question the validity of the community standards that placed them there. Indeed, this text is deeply suspicious of community structures and the overly simplistic binaries that anchor them.

The village on the mainland sees itself as the seat of civilization and manners, and on one occasion, when the unnamed adolescent who narrates much of the text visits the town with her mother, she is unsettled by the formality and rigidity of the women with whom they share an afternoon tea. The highly structured tone of their conversation, the persistent sense of judgement and condemnation communicated by the group, is conveyed concisely by the girl, who watches “their mouths make flowers with thorns under the tongue” (69). Living in a community is “hard and exacting work” (70). The town forces compliance with its rituals by insisting that the only other space that can be inhabited is the savage natural world, the seas on which the men sail to slaughter the whales and meet violent deaths. But the novel insists that between these two oppositions — on the little island that sits offshore — a more humane middle ground can be negotiated by those who take seriously the power and validity of inner emotional life.

Kerslake is interested in uncertain ground. Just as the penumbra is *a thing between* — the partial shadow outside a definitive shadow cast by the sun or the moon — so too the novel resists definitive states and values the ambiguous middle. The characters live on an island between the town and the ocean. The physical space is neither tamed nor free. The mother, Sarah, fears the “insane” men and women who inhabit the asylum, and because she assumes “they have no rules” she longs for the company of “normal people” and locks the doors against that which she does not understand (14). But her husband and her two children are more at ease in their in-between state, and John argues that his charges are people who “have gone astray” (13). The moral principles and ethical actions that could elevate and fulfill the human condition cannot emerge, Kerslake argues, until the individual is willing to resist social and cultural assumptions and risk entering the deeply personal inner

space of emotion. Mercy, the mute woman who has been cast away by her family, has deep reserves and insights that the text celebrates, even if she is not able to communicate her illuminations back to the larger society. Indeed, John proves to be the most compassionate figure in the novel. He is so fully able to empathize with the agonies of Hebel, a man who is tortured by his memories of death, that he is willing to ease the man's suffering by assisting his suicide. Although the mainland community labels John's behaviour as aberrant, the reader is not as sure that a criminal act has been committed. The novel reveals the gaps that emerge between a community's need to conform and an individual's need to fulfill his or her sense of self, and the text does not render a decision about the problem as much as it continually insists that neither is an unproblematic position. In the final pages of the narrative, the daughter recognizes the indeterminacy of her situation and reflects that "I will have to remember in my own way after all. . . . My eyes do not become accustomed to this dark" (143-44). The novel can be decoded on an aesthetic level, but once again, thematically, it does not connect back to the traditional constructions of the region. Such determined ambivalence positions the text outside the dominant discourses of regional identity, and thus the text resists being carried along by a preestablished semiotic code to readers prepared to receive it.

5.

The discourses of regional identity are not neat, distinct, or rigid constructs. The images and concepts that come to define a region are multiple and shifting, and, while maps can be drawn describing some of the different phases and competing versions of those discourses, such carefully staged models must be recognized as incomplete. Nor is the study of regional discourses the search for a perpetrator or a victim. Each region of Canada produces a similarly varied set of discourses that is used to construct identities, and these different regional discourses are produced, maintained, and questioned by all levels and segments of the society. Cultural producers and consumers at the local, provincial, regional, and national levels have all had a hand in creating and maintaining these different discourses of regional identity. Indeed, if participation in these discourses were not widespread, the codes would cease to have signifying power.

Nor are the multiple discourses themselves to be viewed as unfortunate codes that should be abandoned or dismissed. That a regional culture should confine its writers within a limited set of constructions is not, in itself, unusual or unfortunate. Given that the nation is an imagined construct within which a host of regional discourses work to produce the illusion of identity, the issue of resisting cultural discourses would emerge in any part of the country. The competing discourses of the nation's regions provide the space within which writers speak, to articulate one vision and oppose another, and without these multiple versions cultural production would become static. However, if regional discourses are not in themselves a problem, it is worth noting that artists in other regions are offered more varied possibilities, more widely defined constructions within which to work. Certainly within the options provided by Maritime discourses, a text does not have to stray too far to find itself outside the known boundaries and swimming hard against the stream. Each of the innovative Maritime writers mentioned above could be viewed as having been curiously underappreciated. R.M. Vaughan has produced lyrically and symbolically charged texts exploring marginalized individuals within the community, but his texts remain largely unexamined. Nancy Bauer's latter fictions are innovative explorations of feminine artist figures and alternative family structures, but few critics have considered her narratives. Antonine Maillet has won significant literary prizes for her ground-breaking Acadian fictions, and she is a central figure of the Acadian cultural renaissance, but she and other Acadian writers, such as France Daigle, Louis Hache, and Simone Poirier-Bures, who articulate an experience outside the anglophone discourses, are undervalued or unknown to many Maritime readers. Of the writers mentioned earlier, only George Elliott Clarke has won wide national exposure with his novel *George & Rue*, though this may be because Clarke himself is crossing discursive borders as he not only explores the experience of the black community within a racist Maritime society but also engages the discourses of discrimination and multiculturalism that have currency across the other regions of the nation. Like many of these other writers whose work has been underappreciated, Choyce and Kerslake opt out of the cultural mainstream. They will continue to find a small, committed audience, but six-figure sums are not advanced for such texts. And perhaps wider attention would be more readily offered to these writers if readers were

willing to perceive and then risk playing with the discourses that define regional territories. Competing discourses are an enduring part of the Canadian literary experience, and unless we become more aware of the complex ways in which regionalism works, fine texts will continue to be shuffled aside, or swept away, to the detriment of a full appreciation of the nation's culture.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A note of thanks to Joshua Graham, who assisted me in the research for this paper, and to Catherine Hobbs, archivist at the Library and Archives of Canada, for her assistance with this project.

NOTES

¹ For a more thorough analysis of how the semiotic square theory of A.J. Greimas can be used to understand multiple regional identities, see Creelman's "Multiple Identities."

² For a more complete analysis of Day's novel, see Creelman.

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