

“It’s no different than anywhere else”

Regionalism, Place, and

Popular Culture in Lynn Coady’s

Saints of Big Harbour

The 2002 publication of Lynn Coady’s second novel, *Saints of Big Harbour*, cemented her status as one of Canada’s major young writers. Its success contributed to and can be partially attributed to an increasing interest in Atlantic Canadian writing beginning in the 1990s, as reflected in the publication of national (and in some cases) international bestsellers, major literary awards, and academic interest. This interest seems at least partially due to the perceived authenticity of Atlantic Canadian culture and its literature. Cultural and geographical specificity (i.e. its status as the product of a presumably local culture) and a realist aesthetics combine to produce a particularly valuable commodity in the context of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century Canadian literature, as Danielle Fuller argues (“Bestsellers” 53). The last of three interrelated books primarily set in Cape Breton (following *Strange Heaven* [1998], nominated for the Governor General’s Award, and the short story collection *Play the Monster Blind* [2000]), *Saints’* appeal is, in part, its status as Maritime literature, as an authentic portrayal of Cape Breton. For instance, the 2003 Anchor Canada paperback edition prominently featured a blurb from a review in *The Globe and Mail* that describes Coady as “a master chronicler of place and culture.”

Yet, in interviews Coady frequently emphasizes her discomfort with the assumptions associated with the label “Maritime writer.” In an interview with Michelle Berry (contemporary with the publication of *Saints*), for instance, she comments on the “expectation that I’m a traditional sort of writer simply because much of my writing happens to focus on so-called traditional communities and people. . . . since I write about the Maritimes, there’s this

bagload of clichés that seems to dog me" (82). It's not that Coady rejects her categorization as a Maritime writer; in fact, she embraces it. In her introduction to the anthology, *Victory Meat: New Fiction from Atlantic Canada*, Coady clearly and unambiguously identifies herself as an Atlantic Canadian writer, but she also insists that as an Atlantic Canadian she is part of—not apart from—the modern world: we "use email, collect Air Miles, and have the entire third season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on DVD. . . . Atlantic Canadians, and Atlantic Canadian writers, have grown up right alongside of the rest of the Western world" ("Books" 3). What Coady does reject is the series of stereotypes and assumptions that are associated with Cape Breton, the Maritimes, and Atlantic Canada. In her interview with Berry, she states: "I try to stay true to my experience of Cape Breton without being stereotypical and reductive" (82-83). The challenge for Coady (and other Atlantic Canadian writers), then, is to write about place, particularly a marginalized place like Atlantic Canada in general or Cape Breton in particular, without reinscribing the series of "stereotypical and reductive" images and assumptions associated with that place. In her Cape Breton fiction, Coady presents us with a portrait of late-twentieth-century Cape Breton while resisting the sentimentalizing and idealizing tendencies frequently associated with regional writing, tendencies which often attempt to fix places and societies like Cape Breton's as pre-modern, quaint, and authentic.¹ In *Saints of Big Harbour* in particular, Coady disrupts such expectations by presenting an understanding of place in keeping with Doreen Massey's claim that "the identity of place . . . is always and continuously being produced" (171), that place does not simply exist but is rather "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. . . . Each 'place' can be seen as a particular, unique, point of . . . intersection" of "networks of social relations and movements and communications" (154). Coady does so in part by situating her largely adolescent and post-adolescent characters in a world defined by participation in transnational popular culture rather than traditional or folk culture, and by emphasizing the banal samenesses rather than the unique particularities of Cape Breton. The result is that Cape Breton is "no different than anywhere else," as Coady describes it to Berry (86).

Atlantic Canada and Atlantic Canadian writing have typically been discussed in terms of regionalism. As David Harvey notes, the term "region" conventionally implies subordinate, distinctive, and more authentic (170), and, as Glenn Willmott observes, "in modern regionalism especially, the

figure of the region tends to be opposed to that of a centralizing modern society” (145). Constructed through a series of binary oppositions, the region is typically understood as less developed, premodern, powerless, yet (and as a result) more authentic, organic, and homogeneous. In this view, a “region” like Cape Breton is simultaneously devalued as being politically and economically marginal (and even a drain on the resources of the nation-state) and valued as providing an escape from the vicissitudes of the modern world and access to a rooted, more authentic way of life and relationship to place. As Coady puts it,

whenever a distinctive culture . . . is taken note of by a larger culture . . . two things happen simultaneously. On the one hand, the distinctive culture gets marginalized.

. . . The second is an offshoot of the first, but is much wider-ranging, seemingly benign, and therefore insidious: the culture gets fetishized. (“Books” 1)

As Coady’s comment suggests, whether marginalized or fetishized, the consequences for a “regional place” like Cape Breton remain the same: economic and political disenfranchisement, the reduction of a complex and heterogeneous society to a series of stereotypes, the elision of any similarities to the centre, and the valuing of that culture solely for its presumed difference from that centre. The result, then, is to construct a static and nostalgic image of a regional place and its society. Moreover, as David Creelman reminds us, regionalism does not provide neutral, objective descriptions of particular places and societies but ideological constructions (“Swept” 66). Tony Tremblay reads regionalism “as a construction of the centre rather than the margins” (24), arguing that “regions produce narrative in a wider context of pre-existing myths that have already in large part defined them” (29). Alternatively, as Frank Davey observes, regionalism provides a strategy “for resisting meanings generated by others in a nation-state, particularly those generated in geographic areas which can be constructed by the regionalism as central or powerful” (4). “However,” Davey continues, “it is important to note that it is usually also a strategy for resisting other meanings generated in its own region—meanings such as nationalism, feminism, class, ethnicity, localisms, or race” (4-5). The ideological work performed by regionalism, then, often perpetuates the existing socio-economic order, both internally and externally, an order in which many inhabitants of the region are disempowered and that resists change. This is an order from which Coady’s adolescent and post-adolescent characters are largely alienated and in which they are marginalized and their experiences are devalued.

Traditionally, an emphasis upon place has been central to definitions of Canadian literary regionalism, and as a result place has often been seen as the key aspect in regional identity formation. As Janice Fiamengo notes, this understanding of regionalism "privileges geographical location over all other aspects of identity, suggesting that the fact of living in a certain place has a force greater than family history, gender, or political affiliation in shaping identity" (242). Such an understanding of regionalism focuses in part on, as Willmott writes, the "evocation of the unique spirit of a place" and the "native author's rendering of the experience of a place" (145).² Regional writing, then, is expected to examine the particularities of a specific place and explore their impact upon its inhabitants. One of the ways that Coady resists such expectations is by rarely providing detailed and vivid description of physical environment. *Saints*, for example, is notable for the absence of visual description of Big Harbour or its surroundings. Furthermore, there is little that is unique in the description of the town, which is largely characterized by generic banality. The key locations—mall, arcade, hockey rink, bar, high school—could exist anywhere. When Guy Boucher, more or less the protagonist, goes into Big Harbour to pick up his mother, for instance, he hangs out at the mall and the arcade (5). On the occasion that *Saints* does provide a visual description, as in the case of the high school, it does not emphasize a vernacular or quaint architecture but rather generic contemporary architecture: "I can't believe the school—it's enormous. It is made practically all of glass, so the cloudy grey light fills the whole place—it's like I'm still outside" (30). The defining features of the community are most often chain stores and restaurants—Canadian Tire, Sobeys, Shoppers Drug Mart, KFC, Dairy Queen (in *Strange Heaven* the site of a murder), etc.—not quaint local stores firmly rooted in the history of Big Harbour. The local businesses that are referenced, such as Leland MacPhedron's bar, are largely devoid of "local" detail. Moreover, the largely Acadian community outside of Big Harbour that is Guy's home (until his family moves into Big Harbour) is even more vaguely described and only passingly identified by name as D'escousse (although it is referred to by such pejorative nicknames as "Frog-town"). Even the fact that Big Harbour is located on Cape Breton Island is under-emphasized, with only occasional references to that regional setting. Ultimately, there is little about Big Harbour that renders it distinct or unique, as is emphasized by its generic name. In fact, the town might be better described as what Marc Augé calls a "non-place": "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (77-78).

Related to traditional regionalism's emphasis upon place has been an emphasis on environmental determinism, an assumption that the landscape and surrounding natural environment produce a unique regional identity, and thus a unique literary response. From such a perspective, as Lisa Chalykoff observes, "Canonical works of regional literature are those which 'reflect' with the greatest 'accuracy' the 'inevitable' effect that a land-based regional essence exercises 'uniformly' on its inhabitants" (166). Just as *Saints* does not focus on the particular characteristics of Big Harbour itself, however, it also pays little attention to the natural environment in which the town is located, and the characters rarely take note of their natural surroundings or provide any indication of the environment's impact on their lives. In contrast to what might be expected of a novel set on Cape Breton, there are no images of a harsh, wind-beaten landscape or the immense sea, or other such clichés. The few descriptive passages that do exist are decidedly unpicturesque, as is the case in this description of the harbour:

Off to the waterfront to see the sun rise above the frothy squalor of the strait—to watch its rays illuminate the purple clouds of gunk that are cheerfully and steadily belched heavenward from the pulp mill day and night, bullying and crowding the real clouds out of existence. A Big Harbour morning. (174)

This passage describes an industrial landscape, rather than the expected natural one, thus resisting the tourist gaze often catered to by regional writing, but even this description is an exception in the novel, and, moreover, is not assigned any real deterministic power. One might be forgiven for assuming that such a passage of environmental despoliation and industrialization be read as reflective of or even as a source of the alienation, degradation, and inauthenticity of the lived experience of Pam Cormorant (who is the focal character in this passage) and the other adolescents of Big Harbour. The truth of the matter, however, is that it is the mediascape (Appadurai 35)³ rather than the landscape—"natural" or industrial—that has deterministic power in the novel, at least with respect to the lives of the adolescent characters who are the novel's focus. In *Saints of Big Harbour*, geography is displaced as a source of meaning and identity construction, and largely absent.

Massey notes that traditional "ideas of place-identity are . . . always constructed by reference to the past" (8). In discussing *Strange Heaven*, Creelman notes that "Coady completely dispels any nostalgic impulse that might have entered the text and promised to anchor the young woman [Bridget Murphy] to her past or heritage" (*Setting* 190). Similarly, the adolescents of Big Harbour demonstrate a near total ignorance of and

indifference to the past. There are residual traces of conflict between Acadians, like Guy Boucher, and the descendants of Scottish settlers, who make up the majority of the inhabitants of Big Harbour. Guy, for instance, is repeatedly referred to as that "French guy" or that "French fuck" when negative rumours about him begin to circulate. It is worth noting, however, that Corinne first describes him as the "French guy" (128) as a means of creating her fantasy stalker, whom she renders exotic by emphasizing his "frenchness" (i.e. foreignness) and the fact that he is "from out of town" (127). Guy's "frenchness" has no real meaning for him or others of his generation, however, as "most of us don't even speak any French" (5). Similarly, when Guy sees a photograph of a boy in a tartan vest, whom his mother describes as "a little highlander," Guy is unable to make sense of that cultural reference: "I don't know what that's supposed to mean," he thinks (19). Terms such as "highlander" and "French guy" have been evacuated of historical and cultural meaning for Guy's generation. In fact, they have no sense of historical pride or roots, little sense of connection to ancestors or to the past. If there is a past, it is located elsewhere, "deep in the backwoods of Cape Breton," the home of Pam Cormorant's relatives, "who look like something out of the movie *Deliverance*" (95). Note that from Pam's perspective, her relatives can only be understood by reference to popular culture. The past they represent is alien and of little relevance to Pam and her generation in Big Harbour, and is certainly absent from Big Harbour itself.

The place of regionalism is constituted in part by an "authentic" local culture and perpetuated through the transmission of local knowledges from generation to generation. As might be expected, then, *Saints of Big Harbour* is nearly entirely devoid of references to local or folk culture and traditions. The adolescents of Big Harbour are participants in popular, not folk culture. As John Fiske puts it, "Popular culture, unlike folk culture, is made out of cultural resources that are not produced by the social formation that is using them" (170). From Guy's *Star Wars* sheets (82) to Corinne's Calvin Klein jeans (148), from Corinne's favourite drink, Diet Coke (29), to Vachon cakes (119), from Charlie perfume (263) to Brut, Hugh Gillis' cologne, and his Trans-Am (153), the lives of Big Harbour's adolescents are marked by the proliferation of brand names, and the absence of anything signifying local culture or local cultural practices. Even Guy's relationship with his mother is mediated through the smell of Vaseline Treatment for Extremely Dry Skin (9; 33). Karnage, the house band in Leland's bar, does not play traditional folk music, but satisfies customer demand by performing a "kickass version

of "Sweet Home Alabama" (154) and a ZZ Top cover (157) before satisfying its own punk leanings with the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK" (158). After its set, it is replaced with Marvin Gaye "blar[ing] from the sound system" (159). Howard Fortune listens to Neil Young (120) and Hugh plays George Thorogood (153) and AC/DC (313) in his Trans-Am. Rather than Highland dancers, there is Len Bird's breakdancing (158). And there are TV shows and movies, as references to American television shows, such as *Quincy*, *Happy Days*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and the *Dukes of Hazzard*, and American movies, such as *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *Deliverance* are strewn throughout the novel. The one exception might seem to be hockey, given its prominent presence in the culture of Big Harbour (and in Canadian culture more generally), but the rivalry between the teams from Big Harbour and the neighbouring community of Port Hull quickly degenerates into a "carnival of violence" (77), both off-ice (77-78) and on (88).

In *Saints of Big Harbour* it is not place, landscape, and/or history that is constitutive of identity, but popular culture. Television, not traditional culture, shapes their language, providing them with vocabulary and cultural references. Hugh, for example, uses the phrase "I'm here to tell you" after hearing it used on TV (230), and Guy "learns the language of television, what he believes must be the language of America" (182). His uncle Isadore complains that it is now necessary to understand TV in order to understand everyday conversation: "Now it was as if people spoke in some kind of code," he says (47). Guy compares his uncle at one point to a "fat Clint Eastwood" (11), while the bar patrons refer to Isadore as Quincy and to Leland, the bar owner, as Boss Hogg (*Dukes of Hazzard*). Like the heroes in a TV cop show (such as *Starsky and Hutch*), Hugh and Howard "perfected the choreography of climbing out of the car at precisely the same time, unfurling their bodies, slamming their doors in unison for maximum intimidation effect" (311). Frequently, TV provides the standard against which Guy measures his life, as when he enthusiastically praises his mother's confrontation with Isadore for being "just like TV" (247) and when he describes Alison's defence of him to Constable MacLellan as being "like watching TV" (393), or when, alternatively, he is embarrassed at a school dance that doesn't measure up to what he has seen on *Happy Days*: "On television, nobody danced like that" (79). We are told that "[t]he advent of television had intensified his embarrassment about his life in general" (79), as Big Harbour at times looks ridiculous and lacking by comparison. As Coady observes to Berry, "TV informs you of your lack. Insists upon it" (75). Even though, as Guy

realizes, life portrayed on TV is "not how it is in real life" (*Saints* 182), it has a comprehensibility, desirability, and cultural impact otherwise lacking in Big Harbour. For instance, while violence is profound and cathartic on TV, in Big Harbour it is meaningless, arbitrary, and omnipresent (182-83).

That which is desirable is what is on TV, or from somewhere else. For Big Harbour's adolescents to be "not from around here" is of great value. For example, "a lot of the girls at school think [Guy's English teacher] Alison Mason is incredibly hot," even though he is in many ways a pathetic figure: "It's just because he's American" (7). Similarly, Corinne is initially drawn to Guy because she thinks he's "not from around here": "I think saying it made her feel sophisticated but it also made me feel pretty cool, because I realized I could've been from anywhere, instead of just out in the sticks, out in Frog-town" (7). Corinne listens to music imported from Germany, and creates an imaginary boyfriend "from the city" (31), whose most important characteristic is that "[h]e is not from around here, that is the main thing" (123). By contrast, for the older inhabitants of Big Harbour local status is still to be valued, as in the confrontation between Constable MacLellan and Alison near the end of the novel. Investigating the alleged crime committed by Guy, the Constable challenges Alison's right to intervene based solely on the fact the he's "not a local fella": "'Here is my point,' said MacLellan. 'I have known Fred Fortune my whole life. And I have known Isadore Aucoin my whole life and this is my community. I don't know what it is to you, but this is where I was born.' MacLellan stood there. Apparently this was all there was to his point" (392). Yet, the confrontation ends with MacLellan being forced to realize that as grounds for authority and judgment such localist claims are of little value. In Alison's words, "this is absolute *nonsense*" (392). In this scene, then, the authority of the local is refuted and subverted. Significantly, the figure able to protect Guy is the outsider Alison, not the insider Isadore, "a local boy" who had known MacLellan "for years" and who presumed that his local status would be sufficient to end the investigation (348).

As Massey writes, in the late twentieth century it was "commonly argued . . . that the vast current reorganizations of capital, the formation of a new global space, and in particular its use of new technologies of communication, have undermined an older sense of a "place-called-home," and left us placeless and disorientated" (163). Such a sense of disorientation, which may be seen as "threatening to fracture personal identities," may lead to a desire for a stable and fixed sense of place "as a source of authenticity and stability" (Massey 122). In *Saints*, it is Guy's uncle, Isadore Aucoin, who most insists on

such a conservative sense of place, and who most stands in opposition to popular culture's dominance and the perceived homogenization of Big Harbour. Nostalgic for the stable patriarchal order embodied in his father ("he wondered where he was supposed to get his sense of what was what without his father there to let him know" [48]), Isadore demonstrates anxieties about his place in the family, the community, and society more broadly, and responds to the threats to this identity through his hyper-masculine and often excessively violent performance in a desperate attempt to "stop the world from getting worse" (49), to fix it in place. For Alison Mason, Isadore is in many ways a folk hero who represents a contrast to the "cold, urban, inauthentic America" that Alison fled (213). Alison sees "Isadore as some kind of primal force—a mythical, working-class superhero" (222) as someone who is "more tuned in than [Alison] was, as having a more fundamental, primal connection to the world around him" (217). In Alison's eyes, Isadore is a born storyteller (74) and "the ultimate specimen of manhood," as he tells him (240). To Alison, Isadore is authentic, rooted, and masculine; he represents a traditional masculinity and traditional cultural values in a modern world from which such things are increasingly absent. He embodies what Alison was looking for when he moved to the "Canadian outback" (236). As a born storyteller, Isadore is suggestive of and identified with the storytelling traditions and oral culture often associated with traditional societies and thus frequently understood as more authentic. Unlike most of the other "French" characters in the novel (and certainly unlike Guy's generation), he scatters French expressions such as "mon petit" (23) throughout his speech, suggesting that he is more deeply rooted in Acadian culture than are the other characters. Isadore is not only associated with regional folk culture, but also with the national, particularly through the Canadian flag stolen from the Legion that he insists on flying from the roof of the family home and which he occasionally salutes (14). Suggestively, as Guy notes, "the flag sort of flops to life for a moment, then hangs limp again, as meaningless as can be" (14). Isadore is also associated with Toronto, the financial and economic centre of Canada, having moved there when he was eighteen. His relationship to it is ambivalent, as he simultaneously desires and condemns it: "Clearly he pined for the city and believed it was in his blood and was hurt, for some reason, by its memory" (67). His relationship with Toronto exemplifies the centre-periphery relationship between the Maritimes and Toronto, with its history of marginalization and exploitation (real and perceived), a relationship that is simultaneously

constitutive of "regional" identity and a source of dissatisfaction for the inhabitants of the region. Isadore is cast in a dependent relationship with the centre that has left him dysfunctional and non-productive, as, in many ways, a stereotype of an Atlantic Canadian. Isadore's memories of Toronto fill him with a sense of lack. Whereas Guy judges Big Harbour against the TV standard, Isadore measures it against his experience in Toronto, refusing to watch local hockey because it can't measure up to sitting in "the front rows of Maple Leaf Gardens while The Rocket sails one in as pretty as you please" (45). As a classic symbol of a central-Canadian-based national identity (one based on the relationship between Toronto and Montreal as representatives of English and French), this phrase not only articulates a traditional sense of national identity (in which Atlantic Canada can only passively participate through choosing either Toronto or Montreal), but it is also a discourse located long in the past, as by the early 1980s the rivalry between the Maple Leafs and Canadiens no longer has the resonance it did in a six-team NHL, and Rocket Richard is a hero of the distant past (pre-Quiet Revolution, pre-Referendum), thus locating the nationalism associated with it in the past. Moreover, Isadore refuses to watch the Maple Leafs on TV, for it only reminds him of his failure and marginalization: "he had been there once, but wasn't anymore" (47). For Isadore, national popular culture, exemplified by NHL hockey, marginalizes him, constructing Big Harbour as a place of failure and insignificance. Furthermore, his attempt to reclaim hockey by coaching Guy ends in failure. When Isadore begins coaching Guy, he realizes that "this new experience of hockey could be the greatest of his life. For the first time since he had played as a teenager, he would have some measure of control over the outcome" (53), but Guy quickly becomes disenchanted with hockey and his uncle and stops playing (93), not only rejecting Isadore's attempt to exert a form of patriarchal authority over Guy, but once again confirming Isadore's lack of control over the world around him.

In seeking to preserve his world as he knows it, Isadore rejects trends from elsewhere that have trickled into Big Harbour, such as the new lights in the bar: "All the clubs got them up in Halifax now," Leland, the owner, says, which the young think are "cool" but which Isadore condemns as a "real slut of a thing . . . [that] can stay up in Halifax" (215). Just as he can't make sense of the code of TV, moreover, he also is unable to read his niece Louise, who as a teenager adopts a Goth identity (a transnational youth identity also adopted by Ann Gillis [43]): "since he had no understanding of what else she could possibly be trying to achieve in making herself up this

way, it seemed to Isadore that Louise was simply becoming a crazy person” (66). Outside influences such as these are incomprehensible to Isadore, rendering his everyday existence less meaningful and his place in the world less certain. More than anything, however, Isadore rejects TV and hates “how it had crept into everybody’s lives and taken over so completely in the past twenty or so years” (47), forcing Guy’s mother to hide the TV from him. It is the act of stealing that TV in order to sell it which transforms Isadore’s life (245), initially rupturing his relationship with his family, as Guy’s mother responds to his claims to be the saviour of the family by stating that “you’ve been our ruin” (246), and in his absence creating a moment when she and Guy can finally discuss Guy’s father (248). Attempting to sell the TV, Isadore slips on the ice, breaking the set and hurting his back (273). Rendered weak and helpless by the back injury, Isadore is forced to recuperate in his sister’s apartment. Isadore, however, has finally become seduced by the power of TV, spending all his time watching game shows, particularly that epitome of American consumerism, *The Price is Right* (287).

Only after this acceptance of TV is Isadore somewhat ambiguously reincorporated into the community that had temporarily cast him out. He is, however reluctantly, given a place in his sister Madeleine’s apartment, significantly not the family home, however, and welcomed back to Leland’s bar by its owner, although the other patrons are less enthusiastic (379-384). By the end of the novel, then, Isadore is no longer the “authentic” folk figure resisting the incursions of an alien, inauthentic, consumer culture. Moreover, whatever alternative to the dominance of global popular culture he may have represented is undermined by the fact that he is an abusive, manipulative, violent man, a “Bully Incarnate,” as Alison thinks of him (72). What he is trying to preserve, or more accurately recover, is patriarchal authority. Isadore desperately struggles to play the role of father, to rule the family (Guy is fatherless and Isadore lacking a family), to reassert a traditional masculinity that he associates with his father. Without that, Isadore’s life is purposeless, as he bemoans the fact that “he was failing to keep everyone young and happy the way his father had been able to do” (49), yet he actually destroys what he claims to wish to preserve, as is reflected in the destruction of his mother’s china, described by his sister as “the family heirlooms” (106). Through Isadore, then, traditional culture and regional, locally determined identity are associated with a traditional and ultimately destructive patriarchal culture. Guy’s final rejection of Isadore, albeit in defence of his father, when he, supported by Alison, hits Isadore over the head with a shovel (387-88),

is not just a rejection of him and the traditional masculinity he embodies, but also a rejection of the parochial cultural view and identity he articulates throughout most of the novel. This rejection is affirmed by Guy's choice to move in with and adopt as a father figure the American Alison Mason, he of the ambiguously gendered first name and pacifist tendencies.

Pam Cormorant's father is at first the opposite of Isadore. He had grown up "deep in the backwoods of Cape Breton" but had gone to school and "stayed just long enough to have his accent ridiculed out of him, then used his homogenized speech and his half-assed education to get himself a good position at the mill" (95). He "spoke like he was from Ontario" (96) until he lost his job, after which he started drinking, gradually stopped dressing in formal office attire, and went "back to speaking accented and old-fashioned like his relatives" (96); significantly, he also takes out his failure and despair on his daughter, telling her that she is fat and that "I just don't see it happening for you" (99), reinforcing the brute male chauvinism associated with the regressive traditional masculinity performed by both Mr. Cormorant and Isadore. Whereas Isadore resisted homogenization and held on to his version of the traditional culture with which he had grown up, Mr. Cormorant repressed all traces of that identity in pursuit of financial success, only to revert to a stereotypical version of that identity when his financial and career success is taken away. His rejection of the traditional culture that produced him renders him, unlike the adolescents of Big Harbour, "inauthentic," as he puts on a mask purely as a means of achieving career success. By contrast, his second cousin Ronald is a more "authentic" traditional Cape Bretoner who lives "in a trailer and sh[oots] the animals who [stroll] across his yard and br[ings] the butchered carcasses to his relatives and neighbours, just as his own father used to do" (96). Well-meaning, kind, and comfortable with himself, Ronald is, however, a character out of time: "He didn't realize that now they had the Co-op and Sobeys for their meat, and not as many people liked eating fresh-killed deer and rabbit anymore" (96). Ronald is seemingly oblivious to the societal and cultural changes that so trouble Isadore, and is thus able to continue living as his father had. Neither Mr. Cormorant nor Ronald, however, is any more successful than Isadore in adapting to life in the late twentieth century, and Ronald's subsistence existence, in which he largely ignores the consumer culture in which the Cormorants exist, is not presented as a meaningful alternative to the lifestyle of the Cormorants or the other inhabitants of Big Harbour. Mr. Cormorant is truly placeless, and only recovers a sense of place

as he regresses into his past. Ronald has a strong sense of place, but place that is static and nearly entirely isolated from the wider world.

Big Harbour's adolescents experience place as "a contingent, dynamic, and influential 'permanence'"⁴ (Harvey 194), and their experience of place is by no means uniform, as the stories of Howard Fortune and Hugh Gillis illustrate. Howard and Hugh are the two young men who could have left Big Harbour (like the rest of the "1980 honours graduating class" [145]) but have remained. They have little in common other than this fact until they bond in an orgy of ultra-violence driven by Howard's urge to punish "the French guy" who has allegedly wronged his sister, Corinne. Howard had left Big Harbour to attend university but returned after his first year, instead taking a job in the fish plant (124-125). He eventually leaves the family home, moving to an apartment in Donnell Cove: "a terrible place, celebrated for its lobster pound, fish plant, and its parish priest of twenty years, recently discovered to be a pederast" (265), a place in keeping with stereotypical images of Cape Breton. In his flight from whatever he experienced at university, Howard, like Mr. Cormorant, retreats into the past, as represented by Donnell Cove. Unlike Mr. Cormorant, it is not his past, as he has no personal claim on the lifestyle associated with Donnell Cove, and in fact he never quite fit into Big Harbour either (147). In the end he presumably commits suicide, though his fate remains ambiguous (396-97). Certainly, Howard's retreat to Donnell Cove has not resolved his anxieties and insecurities, anymore than did his violent pursuit of Guy. Hugh, by contrast, never left Big Harbour, but simply stayed after graduating from high school, giving as his reason: "I like it here" (147). Unlike Howard, however, Hugh did not go to work in the fish plant, a traditional job choice, but instead took college courses in computers (147), obviously associated with the future and a non-traditional lifestyle. The choices that Hugh makes, then, reflect what Massey calls a progressive sense of place, one in which place is not static or insular but changing and formed in part by relations with the wider world (155; 161). Hugh may participate in the mindless violence initiated by Howard, but he gradually becomes disenchanted with that behaviour and with Howard himself, particularly after being criminally charged along with Howard. In particular, he is concerned that having a criminal record might limit his options, and his ability to move and pursue opportunities, that it might fix him in place (367). Comfortable in Big Harbour for now, Hugh does not wish to cut himself off from the world.

If, as it is often argued, the spatial restructuring associated with globalization has "left us placeless and disorientated" (Massey 163), then

Corinne Fortune might be seen as the character best exemplifying that condition. After all, she is the character who in many respects seems most distanced from local culture and most engaged in global culture, with her imported German music, Calvin Klein jeans, and fantasies about being "not from here." Not only that, but she clearly escapes into the fantasy she creates about her stalker and boyfriend and seems increasingly disconnected from everyday life in Big Harbour, eventually resulting in her disappearance from the community, as she is committed to a "psych ward" in Halifax (338). Yet, she is driven out of Big Harbour as much by the local rumours that were generated by her fantasy as by the fantasy itself. Moreover, her desire for that which is "not from here" is a consequence of her desire to escape the limitations and constraints of life in Big Harbour; it is a product of Big Harbour itself: "You know this town like the inside of your brain. . . . the town is all around and everywhere, there is nowhere you could go you haven't been before" (116). It is not so much that Corinne is lacking a place as a result of the homogenizing influence of popular culture, but that she wishes to escape a place that is confining and all too well known to her.

Gwendolyn Davies has argued that in twentieth-century Maritime writing, "the 'home place' emerges as a symbol of cultural continuity and psychological identification in the face of social fragmentation, outmigration, and a continuing hardscrabble economy" (194). The Aucoin family home is the only site in the novel that could conceivably play that role. Decaying and run down, claimed by Isadore, the house is something to be escaped, as the rest of the family eventually do when they move into an apartment, in part to escape from Isadore (110). By the end of the novel, however, it has been freed of those negative associations, as it is in the process of being renovated by Guy's sister, Louise, and her husband, Dan C. McQuarrie. As Guy notes, the new kitchen cupboards smell of "fresh white paint" on the outside and "the smell of trees" on the inside; they smell simultaneously new and "authentic" (411). The renovated family house exemplifies the ideal sense of place being articulated by the novel. It represents the valuing of the past, but in such a way that allows for change. It represents a sense of place that is rooted but not static, that is flexible and open rather than insular, as suggested by the patio that Dan C. is currently in the process of building. Like the novel's portrayal of the home, the relationship between Louise and Dan C. embodies a sense of place that is rooted in the local but is not nostalgic or static. At first glance, Dan C. may be the type of stereotypically authentic local character one might

expect to encounter in a novel about Cape Breton. A scallop farmer from Glace Bay (103), he speaks Gaelic, and has a “pretty thick accent” (410). Yet, significantly, for him scallop farming is not an occupation determined by familial tradition but rather one he chose as a means of escaping “the mine and the steel plant” (104) in which his family had traditionally worked. Superficially traditional and local, Dan C. refuses to be bound by tradition and does not hesitate to make things new. In marrying Dan C., Louise has escaped the ineffectual masculinity associated with her father and the domineering, destructive masculinity and regressive place-identity associated with Isadore.⁵

In her discussion of contemporary Atlantic Canadian women’s writing, Fuller argues, “By foregrounding the dynamic relationship that exists between place, culture, and identity, contemporary Atlantic writers counter the static stereotypes peddled by the tourist trade” (*Writing* 36). *Saints of Big Harbour* must be read in those terms. It does not articulate “a desire for an impossible or forbidden past” or “express a sense of loss,” which Willmott sees as a defining characteristic for modern Maritime writing (191). For good or bad, the lives of the adolescent characters in *Saints* are formed (and possibly deformed) by the global popular culture that penetrates their everyday existence, not by a static sense of place, locality, and regional identity. In refusing to present traditional culture as a viable source of meaning for the community in and around Big Harbour, by refusing to present life in the town and its surroundings as quaint and more authentic, by emphasizing sameness rather than difference, *Saints of Big Harbour* challenges and resists the conventional and idealized understanding of the Maritimes as it circulates within dominant culture, and thus the traditional conception of regional writing.⁶

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A much earlier version of this paper was presented at ACCUTE. Thanks to my fellow panellist and audience members for their feedback. Thanks also to *Canadian Literature*’s anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

NOTES

- 1 As Ian McKay has influentially argued, such sentimental idealizations of the rural Folk are metropolitan constructions resulting from the urban elites’ anxieties about the impact of modernity (275). He observes that the Folk are “a socially constructed subject-position within antimodernity. *There never were any Folk*” (302; italics his).

- 2 Here Willmott is paraphrasing David Jordan (8-10).
- 3 According to Appadurai, mediascapes "refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . and to the images of the world created by these media" (35).
- 4 Here Harvey is drawing on Alfred Whitehead's description of places "as 'entities' that achieve relative stability for a time in their bounding and in their internal ordering of processes. Such entities he calls 'permanences'" (Harvey 190).
- 5 It should be noted, however, that her escape does seem to confirm a conventional understanding of gender, however positively represented, that is associated with local tradition.
- 6 Herb Wylie makes a similar point in his discussion of *Strange Heaven*: "Coady's East refuses the polarized alternatives of what might be termed a homespun, Made in Canada, lower-case orientalism. It is neither the idealized, pastoral 'ocean playground' of Anne Shirley nor the retrograde, underdeveloped, and parasitic 'culture of defeat' of Stephen Harper" (100).

WORKS CITED

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995. Print.
- Berry, Michelle. Interview with Lynn Coady. *The Notebooks*. Ed. Michelle Berry and Natalee Caple. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2002. 73-89. Print.
- Chalykoff, Lisa. "Overcoming the Two Solitudes of Canadian Literary Regionalism." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 23.1 (1998): 160-177.
- Coady, Lynn. "Books that say Arse." *Victory Meat: New Fiction from Atlantic Canada*. Ed. Coady. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2003. 1-6. Print.
- . *Play the Monster Blind*. 2000. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001. Print.
- . *Saints of Big Harbour*. 2002. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2003. Print.
- . *Strange Heaven*. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1998. Print.
- Creelman, David. *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003. Print.
- . "Swept Under: Reading the Stories of Two Undervalued Maritime Writers." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008): 60-79. Print.
- Davey, Frank. "Toward the Ends of Regionalism." *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*. Ed. Christian Riegel and Herb Wylie. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 1998. 1-17. Print.
- Davies, Gwendolyn. *Studies in Maritime Literary History, 1760-1930*. Fredericton: Acadiensis, 1991. Print.
- Fiamengo, Janice. "Regionalism and Urbanism." *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Ed. Eva-Marie Kröller. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 241-262. Print.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Fuller, Danielle. "The Crest of the Wave: Reading the Success Story of Bestsellers." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008): 40-59. Print.
- . *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2004. Print.

- Harvey, David. *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.
- Jordan, David M. *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994. Print.
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994. Print.
- McKay, Ian. *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1994. Print.
- Tremblay, Tony. "'Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion': The Politics of the Centre in 'Reading Maritime.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008): 23-39. Print.
- Willmott, Glenn. *Unreal Country: Modernity in the Canadian Novel in English*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002. Print.
- Wylie, Herb. "As For Me and Me Arse: Strategic Regionalism and the Home Place in Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven*." *Canadian Literature* 189 (2006): 85-101. Print.

