

# As For Me and Me Arse

## Strategic Regionalism and the Home Place in Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven*

The narrative of a sensitive soul struggling to survive in a claustrophobic small town is so ubiquitous in Canadian literature as to be practically consonant with it. Think of, for starters, Margaret Laurence's Manawaka novels, W.O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* and (perhaps the pinnacle of the genre) Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. That claustrophobia, furthermore, is often compounded by the dynamics of the dysfunctional family, as in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*, Alden Nowlan's *Various Persons Named Kevin O'Brien*, and, more recently, Lynn Coady's *Strange Heaven* (1998). However, as much as we might be inclined to read such preoccupations as defining the larger national literary culture, those preoccupations (as with so much else in Canada) are shot through with regional differences that complicate the unity that such shared concerns suggest. Coady's novel, for example, which is about a Cape Breton teenager who returns from a spell in a psychiatric ward to her "cuckoo's nest" of a family after giving up her baby for adoption, can certainly be seen as a significant and overlooked comic addition to these Canadian specialties. However, whereas typically the critique of the small town implicitly invites the critical gaze of the outsider, *Strange Heaven* turns that gaze back on the observer in a fashion that foregrounds the cultural politics between centre and periphery. In the process, the novel provides a good example of Atlantic-Canadian literature's increasing and subversive self-consciousness, foregrounding and deconstructing the way in which Canada's eastern edge tends to be framed from outside.

The prevalence of dysfunctional (or at least seemingly dysfunctional) families in Atlantic-Canadian writing notwithstanding, the home place as a nurturing environment, as Gwendolyn Davies has argued, is a key trope in Maritime literature, contributing to a strong association between Maritime literature and a sense of community on the East Coast. In "The 'Home Place' in Modern Maritime Literature" Davies argues that "the emergence of the image [of the home place] in Maritime literature in the 1920s . . . has its genesis in social, economic, and cultural realities on the east coast that distinguish it from similar images in other areas of Canada" (193). "[T]hroughout the outmigration and declining economic and political influence" of the rest of the century, the image of the home place "has continued . . . to illuminate Maritime literature with a sense of cultural continuity and psychological identification" (199). Davies concedes that the pastoral and nostalgic resonances of this image render it susceptible to charges of romanticism, but argues that "to dismiss this literature as static, merely the product of middle class romanticization, is to ignore the elements of realism, irony, and economic cynicism permeating much of it" (196).

Here Davies addresses Ian McKay's skeptical view of modern literature and culture in Nova Scotia, subsequently developed at greater length in *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. McKay's influential study chronicles the formation of a powerful cultural paradigm in which Nova Scotians are constructed as a hardy, simple, innocent people, close to the land and unravaged by modernity: "They lived, generally, in fishing and farming communities, supposedly far removed from capitalist social relations and the stresses of modernity. The Folk did not work in factories, coal mines, lobster canneries, or domestic service: they were rooted to the soil and to the rockbound coast, and lived lives of self-sufficiency close to nature" (26). McKay points to how pervasive and influential such pastoral, nostalgic, romanticized images of the Folk have been in shaping cultural identity in Nova Scotia. He also underscores how those images have been increasingly reconfigured and subverted by contemporary artists and writers. McKay argues that the "romance of the rural Folk," though intensified in response to certain conditions of postmodernity, such as the desire for images of authenticity in a consumerist culture of simulacra, "has run aground on the shoals of its own implausibility. In the context of a countryside that bristles with satellite dishes and shopping-malls . . . and that is in a hundred ways so evidently *not* a haven set apart from late twentieth-century capitalism, the notion of the 'simple life' of the Folk can only be ironic" (308). Contemporary

cultural and economic conditions in the Maritimes, in other words, render untenable the antimodern, pastoral paradigm in which the region is so often framed.

One of the principal reasons that this hegemonic cultural construction needs to be contested, McKay argues, is that it reinforces and naturalizes an imbalance of social power and cultural capital. The imposition of an essentializing Folk innocence “establish[es] a political and social ‘commonsense,’ based on a commandeering of history and identity, which excludes at the outset a critical dialogue with the past and a realistic grasp of the present” (295). Subscribing to the concept of the Folk is thus politically neutralizing and disempowering, as it “leads one to a complacently organic view of society in which there are no fundamental social contradictions and no underlying differences in perspectives” (298). Thus the attenuation of the Folk within the conditions of postmodernity provides the conditions for the development of an alternative and oppositional culture (308). McKay sees emerging in the latter part of the twentieth century “an entirely new group of cultural producers” whose work subverts “conventionalized commercial images of the Folk.” The concept of the Folk “has come to be a thinly spread rhetoric, vulnerable to articulate and subtle moral critiques, including those of people who were brought up in the rural areas it romanticizes” (310). At the end of *The Quest of the Folk*, McKay lists a series of writers, artists, and cultural commentators (including George Elliott Clarke, M.T. Dohaney, and Gerald Ferguson) whose work heralds a subversive reconfiguration of culture on the East Coast. Ten years after the appearance of *The Quest of the Folk*, many others could be added to that list, including Lynn Coady.

One of the problems with the concept of the Folk, McKay argues, is its exclusionary ideology (308). In *Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, Danielle Fuller extends a similar skepticism about exclusionary and essentialist constructions of regional identity to the idea of the home place. Fuller argues that Atlantic women writers “tend to debunk nostalgic and romantic notions of home as the products of privilege or the reluctance to accommodate cultural change” (34) and underlines that the home place is often the site of physical and emotional conflict (33-4). Fuller is furthermore suspicious of the implications for women of traditional constructions of literary regionalism because they “do not allow us to understand regions as differentiated spaces, and they encourage critics to select texts that fall into a narrowly defined aesthetic” (37). Rather than dispensing with the notion of regionalism altogether, however, Fuller adopts in her study of Atlantic-Canadian women’s writing a “strategic regionalism” that

emphasizes the networks of relationships within which women write but also articulates the “common grounds, intra-class and cross-racial alliances that are informed and made possible by subordinate (non-elite) knowledges of economic marginality, geographic isolation, and various forms of social exclusion” (38).

Having been picked up by a major publisher (Random House) after Fredericton’s Goose Lane published *Strange Heaven* and having departed Cape Breton for the West Coast, Lynn Coady fits uneasily with Fuller’s emphasis on regional “textual communities.” The second sense in which Fuller employs the term “strategic regionalism,” though, nicely articulates the gendered politics of a novel such as *Strange Heaven*, which challenges essentialist constructions of the East and dramatizes the patriarchal strictures that complicate the image of the home place as a nurturing environment for women. As importantly, though, the novel resists the idea of an essentialized Folk culture by highlighting and spoofing the ways in which the region is constructed through the gaze of the outsider.

If prominent Maritime *Bildungsromane* such as Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* and Nowlan’s *Kevin O’Brien* have emphasized development of the masculine subject, *Strange Heaven*, by contrast, emphasizes the challenges of growing up female in a small Maritime community. McKay notes that part of the current countering of essentialist images of the Folk is that “the illusion of a happy seaside patriarchy has been challenged by very different stories” (309); this formulation is readily applicable to the development of Coady’s protagonist Bridget Murphy. To the degree that *Strange Heaven* portrays the traditional rural culture of Cape Breton familiar from the work of Alistair MacLeod, the novel emphasizes the way in which that culture is heavily gendered and affords males and females unequal degrees of agency and freedom. As Coady’s narrator succinctly reflects, “if [Bridget] had been a boy it would have been more fun” (158). Bored by an adolescent female culture characterized by stuffed animals, talk of parties and proms, and the emotional melodrama of relationships, Bridget longs for her cousins’ masculine culture of hunting and fishing, which her brother Gerard has rejected: “Bridget would have gone, if she had been a boy. She would have killed and castrated the deer and gutted them on the spot. She would have sat around the campfire with the boys, passing around a thermos of hot buttered rum” (158). Bridget’s physical and psychic development takes place within what Judith Butler describes as a framework of regulatory social practices that serve to reinforce polarized and essentialist gender identities and to obscure the fundamentally performative nature of gender. Gender, that is, is a behaviour performed according to a tacit collective agreement

about what it means to be male or female, an agreement to be flouted at one's peril (Butler 140). In Coady's novel, the expectations that define the boundaries of gendered identity are reinforced by Bridget's father Robert's ham-handed attempts at socialization, reflected in his choice of religious icons for his children: "Bridget always got the Virgin, the Baby, or the Virgin with the Baby, whereas Gerard always got a grown-up Jesus doing stuff—cleansing the temple or showing Thomas the holes in his hands or what-have-you. Her father had this idea that girls liked Mary and boys liked Jesus just as girls liked Barbies and boys liked G.I. Joes" (117). Robert's differential treatment of his son and daughter suggests the way in which "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires," encouraged and regulated by society's gendered scripts, "create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler 136).

Such rigid gender divisions frustrate Bridget's spiritual as well as social development. As a young girl, the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Bridget not only aspires to the Catholic priesthood, but also aspires to be John the Baptist and ultimately Jesus: "A religion teacher had told her that Jesus was perfect, and the more perfect Bridget was the more like Jesus she would be. So Bridget had walked around trying to be perfect for a while." Subsequently voicing her dismay "that she would never be Jesus," Bridget is reassured by a kindly priest that "she could do no wrong in the eyes of Jesus because she was a child." With puberty, however, comes the Fall: "once Bridget hit fourteen, saw the lumps pushing their way up under her shirt, started getting all the stuff at school, the movies and the pamphlets, started cramping and bleeding, began to witness her parents' horror, Gerard's disgust, she knew she had left the state of grace and could get away with nothing any more" (157). Reconceptualizing gendered identity as a performative effect, Butler argues, is necessary to open up "possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed" (147), and Bridget's dilemma in *Strange Heaven* is rooted precisely in such a foreclosing of possibilities. As a narrative of thwarted development, *Strange Heaven* resembles what Susan Fraiman in *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* sees as "those dissenting stories that cut across and break up the seemingly smooth course of female development and developmental fiction" and "account for growing up female as a deformation, a gothic disorientation, a loss of authority, an abandonment of goals" (xi). In various respects, Bridget is thus an "unbecoming woman."

The crisis of identity around which the novel revolves comes when this fall from grace is completed by Bridget's pregnancy. Not only does she feel even more betrayed by her body but she is also forced by her mother to give up her baby for adoption. Having weathered the psychologically abusive and volatile behaviour of her boyfriend Mark prior to the pregnancy, Bridget afterwards emotionally disengages herself from the past: "a thing could be so entirely annihilating that the things responsible for it happening in the first place were not there any more" (71). Suffering from post-partum depression, Bridget ends up in the psychiatric ward of the children's hospital because she is too young for the adult hospital. Here Coady's hilarious but chilling portrait of an alienating, pathological institutional culture evokes and alludes to Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, as Bridget struggles not only with her own ennui and her body's stubborn will to persist but also with the institution's perverse and arbitrary culture of surveillance, discipline, and rehabilitation. Mistrustful of their motives and wary of doing anything that will stall her release, Bridget strives to elude the institution's attempt to diagnose her and treat her, while being subjected to the collective and individual humiliations of the institutionalized.

Bridget's experiences in the institution are recurrently juxtaposed with her life back home, and one of the novel's central motifs is the implicit parallel between the bedlam of the psychiatric ward and the tumultuous atmosphere of the Murphy household. Bridget's obsessive-compulsive "retarded" uncle Rollie, her senile and demented grandmother Margaret P., and not least of all the profane and overbearing Robert combine to render *chez* Murphy a perfect "[g]oddamn cuckoo's nest"—as Robert himself mutters (133). For the traumatized and alienated Bridget, the Murphy home falls short (to say the least) of providing a nurturing, rehabilitative atmosphere. This is not, at first glance anyway, Davies' Maritime "home place," "a symbol of cultural continuity and psychological identification in the face of social fragmentation, outmigration, and a continuing hardscrabble economy" (194).

Rebellion against the mores of the family and the community, of course, has been a crucial feature of the *Bildungsroman*, and central to Bridget's development is the way in which she reaches the limits of a putatively rebellious adolescent culture that she ultimately finds unfulfilling and stifling. Throughout the novel, Coady develops a tension between the self-destructive inertia of Bridget's social circle and the chaotic climate of a household that drove her into the clutches of her peers in the first place: "Happily, Bridget did it happily, thinking she was making herself free. Drinking and doing hot

knives and puking, always puking, and waking up in the mornings with one eye pointing off in the wrong direction and no feeling in the skin surrounding it" (144). Before her pregnancy, she "could never get out of the house enough, and for a while it seemed as if Mark was her only way out of the house. Then it became the case that she couldn't get away from Mark fast enough, and the house was the only place where he couldn't get to her." In a state of profound ambivalence after her release, Bridget finds herself back in the same liminal state: "she saw now that it was hopeless and it didn't matter what she did. There would always be people, inside and outside, always at her" (123).

Resolving to opt out of the melodramatic emotional politics that obsess her social circle, "like one long, lurid movie she had watched eons ago whose plot she could no longer remember" (153), Bridget comes up against the conformist disapproval so familiar from other fictional portraits of Canadian small towns. As Bridget has come to realize, her peers' absorption in the personal lives of others is ultimately a question of social power and control: "People never want anything except to have power, and that's what knowledge about others gives them. . . . Bridget now believed that most people couldn't tell the difference between wanting knowledge for power and wanting knowledge out of concern. Bridget didn't actually believe there was a difference" (120-21). Partly because it challenges their sense of self-importance and partly because Bridget's plight feeds her friends' craving for melodrama and excitement, opting out is difficult and unpopular. As Bridget is sucked back into the vortex of adolescent histrionics, she realizes, "They make you be in it" (164).

The denial of Bridget's agency as a young woman gives an important twist to the familiar narrative of the sensitive protagonist's resistance to a suffocating social order. Her pregnancy clearly confirms for Bridget that her attraction to Mark was merely a symptom of her own boredom. In turn, Mark's reaction to her rejection exemplifies the town's largely proprietorial and patriarchal attitude towards relationships. Already abusive and volatile before the pregnancy—he sees himself and Bridget as "the next Sid and Nancy" (159)—Mark becomes more belligerent and self-righteous upon Bridget's return from the hospital. His masculine pride has been wounded not only by Bridget's unilateral decision to give up the baby but also by her seeming indifference, breaking the unwritten rule: "Everybody knew that the girl wasn't supposed to dump the guy after getting pregnant" (92).

Bridget's sense of being scrutinized, assessed, under surveillance is a crucial effect of the juxtaposing of Bridget's life inside and outside the institution. Just as Bridget was monitored, interviewed, even videotaped in the

hospital, after her release she is monitored both by her concerned family and by the community at large, institutions similarly desiring to identify and regulate deviant behaviour. Such psychic discipline, distinctly grounded in patriarchal assumptions, has a potentially nasty edge in a climate in which so many (including Mark and Bridget's father) are "eternally spoiling for a fight, a new enemy" (92). After friction had developed earlier in their relationship, Mark had started essentially stalking Bridget, alternately making friendly phone calls and menacing ones, aggressively and self-righteously twisting Bridget's words in order to make her the aggrieved, and him the aggrieved, party. Bridget also describes how "sometimes she'd be on her way to bed and have almost all the lights turned out when she'd spot the double reflection of his glasses outside the front door" (44). After her return from the hospital, Bridget is keenly aware that she continues to be monitored, that her behaviour will be reported to Mark by their mutual acquaintances. Their friend Stephen's self-aggrandizing attempt to play the Good Samaritan and bring the two back together reveals his blind acceptance of Mark's interpretation that he has been wronged and his unwillingness to accept the idea that, from Bridget's perspective, Stephen "wasn't in the middle of anything at all, that there was nothing on either side of him" (152). To put it in Althusserian terms, Bridget struggles against being interpellated with such obviously patriarchal assumptions.

The claustrophobia of such a tight circle of bored, sensation-seeking adolescents is complemented by the fishbowl quality of the town itself. Shortly after her return, Bridget, "practicing being out," wades back and forth through the snowdrifts in the church parking lot, "[j]ust for the hell of it" (137). This mildly eccentric behaviour, however, is observed by her friend Daniel Sutherland and others gathered at a family Christmas party, who collectively diagnose and commiserate: "Poor Bridget Murphy" (138). Forced to work in her family's store, Bridget is looked upon by solicitous or tongue-tied, aloof customers who in either case "seemed to find it in somewhat bad taste to have come across Bridget on display" (118). Bridget contemplates how in a small town "everybody knows your business" and keeps a mental file or "information roster" of the various inhabitants (180). Particularly traumatizing is the idea of people thinking about her "beyond what they already had on their roster. Making suppositions and surmises. People you scarcely even knew. The idea was, for some reason, nauseating" (181).

This impression of the small town as a variation on Foucault's description of the Panopticon—whose effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201)—is consolidated by the staging of the climactic confronta-



tion between Bridget and Mark during a power outage in the central and highly visible post office, temporarily illuminated by emergency lights. Mark claims to have been betrayed by Bridget and threatens to fight back, expressing his custodial rights in a patriarchal variation on the this-town-isn't-big-enough-for-the-two-of-us speech: "If Bridget thought she could live in the same town with him and do whatever she pleased and fuck around with the likes of Dan the big fat fairy Sutherland and Troy fucking Bezanson she was fucking crazy" (194). Bridget fleetingly wonders if she has underestimated Mark's commitment to the relationship, but the outcome of their altercation reveals that Mark's concern is not reconciliation but power. Infuriated by Mark's self-righteous, patriarchal assumption that he "had a son" and that "Bridget had taken him away from him" (195), Bridget finally and unequivocally repudiates Mark. In doing so, she ostensibly gives him the victory for which he is looking by puking on the floor, a sign of weakness that concedes all that matters to him—her relative lack of power: "He wanted to be friends now. It had all been about winning. It had all been about making the woman puke" (196). Despite this apparent capitulation, however, the ultimate victory can be read as Bridget's. She had talked to Mark hoping that "if she could just stand there and listen for as long as it lasted, then maybe she wouldn't have to do it again" (194). Her physical punctuation of the exchange figuratively suggests that she has purged herself of him at last.

Bridget's extrication of herself from her oppressive relationship with Mark and their peer group, though, is coupled with a renewed understanding of her responsibility to and engagement with others. She realizes that her retreat from her family has been motivated by a myopic self-interest: "Wanting to be herself, wanting to be alone. That was selfish. You can't be that way when there is an old woman and her retarded son to look after" (144). As David Creelman contends, "the last pages pull us back from the abyss of meaninglessness" when Coady affirms, against the nihilistic tide of much of the novel, "that an identity is possible, though it is available only when the protagonist freely produces it from her own, painful, emotional experience" (192). As Franco Moretti notes, the *Bildungsroman* moves between "[s]elf-development and integration," which are "complementary and convergent trajectories, and at their point of encounter and equilibrium lies that full and double epiphany that is 'maturity'. When this has been reached, the narration has fulfilled its aim and can peacefully end" (18-19). In Coady's novel, the typical resolution and closure of the *Bildungsroman* come about through a rapprochement with the family. In that respect, the ending of *Strange Heaven* seems compatible with Davies' claim that an "'intensified realization' of self is what the 'home place' conveys in Maritime

literature” (199). But that reconciliation more specifically takes the form of an identification with the resilient Margaret P., evoking Fraiman’s suggestion of an alternate resolution to the *Bildungsroman*, which is “to reconceive a girl’s progress as the building of solidarity between women” (10). Nonetheless, in its underscoring of the patriarchal culture that limits Bridget’s sense of agency and that psychically and emotionally warps her, the novel reflects what Fuller describes as “a resistant regional sensibility, one that is ideologically opposed to regionalisms that represent social and cultural coherence where there is none, and that, by doing so, mask acts and articulations of protest” (39).

The denizens of *Strange Heaven* are obviously a far cry from the simple, content, unreflective fisherfolk who are the staples of the Folk ideology that McKay describes. At the same time, though, Coady’s portrait of an oppressive, patriarchal small town, and the self-destructive adolescent histrionics its lack of opportunity breeds, lends itself to the obverse of the paradigm of Folk innocence: pervasive constructions of the East Coast as Canada’s social, economic, and cultural basket case, populated by alcoholic deadbeats, welfare mothers, and rockbound trailer trash. However, Coady complicates the politics of this exposé of small-town claustrophobia through her portrait of Bridget’s relationship with Alan Voorland. An “older man” from Guelph, Alan works as an engineer at the local mill and wanders “around town examining and exclaiming at everything like an anthropologist” (32). Alan exemplifies McKay’s observation that despite the obvious, undeniable artificiality of the ideology of the Folk “certain central Canadians will probably always have a soft spot for the notion of the happily underdeveloped east coast Folk—but probably not as a source of powerfully unifying myths and songs in Nova Scotia itself” (308). The characterization of Alan highlights how Coady’s strategic regionalism involves contesting the ways in which the region is constructed not only from within but also from without.

Through her portrait of Alan’s relationship with Bridget, Coady turns back on itself the anthropological gaze that *Strange Heaven*’s dissection of the small town otherwise seems to invite. As a “come-from-away,” Alan, although working, is consciously transient, and his attitude is reminiscent of John Urry’s description of the “tourist gaze”: “When we ‘go away’ we look at the environment with interest and curiosity. It speaks to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that it will do so. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter” (Urry 1). Through Alan’s commentary on the town, his parodic media discourse, Coady stresses his assumption of an ironic superiority to his surroundings that for Alan “were positively alien” (33). Though Bridget finds his posture amusing—“You sound like a

newscaster” (33)—the tenor of his commentary is commensurate with negative stereotypes of the region so aptly summarized by Conservative leader Stephen Harper’s infamous attribution of Atlantic Canada’s troubles to the prevalence of a “culture of defeat” (“Negative talk”). “Do not get me wrong,” Alan tells Bridget. “This is a wonderful place, a fascinating people with a thriving, unique culture. And yet there is a sadness. A hopelessness about it all. The dependence on welfare, unemployment insurance. The bottle” (32).

Though Alan sees Bridget as a refreshing exception to his impression of Maritimers as evolutionary throwbacks, he nonetheless treats her as a regional novelty and employs the same commentator’s voice in framing his interaction with her: “Here I am with Bridget Murphy. . . . A fascinating young lady” (33). Even his taking advantage of Bridget is ironically framed through, and associated with, the language of sensationalist media. “Here I am in love with pregnant teenager Bridget Murphy” (40) he intones, after he and Bridget make love in his Ford Escort—an ironic tone distinctly different from, but no less stylized than, the melodramatic histrionics of Bridget’s peers. If Bridget is a novelty for Alan, however, the loquacious Alan is equally of interest to Bridget, who is used to a culture in which masculinity is consonant with monosyllabic reticence: “He talked just for the sake of talking, using words that weren’t even necessary to get the meaning across. He may as well have had a horn coming out of his forehead” (34). Equally exotic are the images of an affluent, dynamic, middle-class Ontario with which Alan longingly regales Bridget, underscoring the culture of deprivation in Cape Breton: “To think of her and Alan and Deanna and all of Alan’s cool buddies who worked in television and were photographers and played in rock and roll bands, real rock and roll bands, not George and Mark mangling Aerosmith in Chantal’s living room” (39). Alan and Bridget’s mutual attraction, in other words, is grounded in an exoticism born of both regional and class disparities.

*Strange Heaven*, however, provides a particularly regional variation on the old cliché that familiarity breeds contempt. The authority of Alan’s reportorial stance, for instance, wavers as the “place that had once been so fascinating [loses] its rustic charm” (38) and as his distance from the subjects of his “field work” shrinks. Reporting that Mark has been telephoning him as well as Bridget, he purses his lips: “It was all too sordid. Tabloid news. Alan couldn’t wait to go home” (40). Alan’s simultaneous fascination with and revulsion toward his surroundings—his tabloid irony—is implicitly associated with the media’s lurid coverage of the murder of Bridget’s schoolmate Jennifer MacDonnell by her estranged boyfriend. The incident is sensationalized not only as an instance of adolescent violence—“there was a

piece on the local news about violence in our schools, even though it happened outside of a donut shop” (11)—but also, in keeping with the concept of the Folk, as an instance of urban depravity migrating to the margins: “What was happening to the young people? This, according to the news, was what people of the area were asking themselves. It was because of television, and music, and videos. It was getting as bad as the city” (11). The murder further jars Alan out of his complacent anthropological distance. Reflecting on how the murder happened near his apartment, Alan responds to Bridget’s skeptical query “They don’t shoot people in Guelph?” with mild hysteria: “It’s not so close. Not right under my nose like that. If I hadn’t been at work, I could have stood at my window and watched the whole thing. Oh, I want to go home,” he said, loudly and suddenly, not like he was reading the news” (39). Clearly, Alan’s fascination with a “thriving, unique culture” imbued with a sense of disappointment and despair reflects another form of Folk innocence, and his authoritative newscaster’s tone falters when the proximity of the murder shatters that illusion and his sense of detachment.

Unconsciously presuming superiority, Alan takes for granted Bridget’s acquiescence to his critical perspective, and for the most part she passively demurs, mesmerized by his apparent sophistication. However, prior to his departure, the gulf between them—and, more broadly, the caricature of the East Coast as Canada’s lumpenproletariat—is dramatized during a brief encounter with two stoned acquaintances of Mark and Bridget. As the two emerge from their “basement shit-box” (90), eyes “at half-mast” (91), Alan chirps “‘How’s she going?’ . . . stupidly imitating the local idiom,” and then observes, blithely unaware of the blanket condescension his comment entails, “I see even the Maritimes has white trash.” Though Bridget says nothing in response, the insult registers all the same: “You have more or less just pissed on my flag, she might have said to him then” (92).

Nobody ever said federalism was easy, and the faltering romance at the heart of *Strange Heaven* metonymically dramatizes the undercurrent of ambivalent desire running through regional cultural politics in Canada. In “Books That Say Arse,” her introduction to the anthology *Victory Meat: New Fiction from Atlantic Canada*, Coady could well be referring to Alan as she describes the fetishizing of the region by outsiders:

every initial infatuation must inevitably mature into respect or else degrade into contempt. . . . It can also be called resentment, the other side of infatuation, when instead of fetishizing a culture that clearly differs from the one you inhabit, you become annoyed with it. You make fun of the accent, so to speak, as if it’s not genuine but some kind of folksy contrivance affected to score personality points. Somebody told me recently of a complaint some writer made about “all these

new books from the east coast that say 'arse.'" So resentment—the state of the disenchanted lover—permeates the arts community too, but to me it's like complaining about British novels for using words like "chap" and calling elevators "lifts." (3)

Indeed, Bridget had worried that Alan's friendship might simply have been infatuation, the "allure of a quiet, tortured, passive teenager" (88), and their parting of ways at the end of the novel certainly corresponds to Coady's description of regional disenchantment. When Bridget calls Alan in Guelph as she reaches a crisis of sanity, Alan starts out by making fun of her accent, implicitly assuming his southern Ontario idiom as the norm:

"How are you?"  
"Good, good. It's stormin out."  
"Stahr-min, is it?" he said.  
"Ha, ha."  
"Well dat's how ya sound, lord t'underin."  
"I do not."  
"Ah doo nut." (189)

Alan's treatment of Bridget, furthermore, emphasizes not only his centrist presumption of superiority but also his subscribing to the same patriarchal assumptions as Mark. Like Mona, Bridget's central Canadian friend on the psychiatric ward, whose "eternal point of reference had been herself" (81), Alan narcissistically expounds on his own problems and ultimately shuts Bridget out, oblivious to her unarticulated *cri de coeur*. Expressing the same masculinist wariness of heterosexual platonic friendship as Mark, he lectures Bridget about what his pregnant girlfriend will think of him getting nocturnal phone calls from another woman: "Don't take this the wrong way, but this isn't the kind of thing you can do" (190). Despite Alan's farewell salutation, "From my strange and wonderful Bridget Murphy" (191), it is clear that the novelty—Bridget's appeal as an anthropological curiosity—has worn off. For all his sympathy and kindness, Alan confirms his own advice to Bridget: "Guys are fucking pigs and the sooner you get that figured out the better off you'll be" (170).<sup>1</sup>

While Coady's portrait of Alan rebuffs the paternalistic gaze of a central Canadian and his self-fulfilling, derogatory stereotypes of the East, however, her intent is not to reinscribe a sense of an innocent, authentic Folk culture. Indeed, an important part of her subversion of the gaze of the outsider is her parodic approach to the idea of an authentic Folk culture. This subversion is carried out principally through Coady's depiction of Robert as a parodic Folk artist. Disillusioned by the community's resistance to his attempts to revolutionize the town's spring festival to bring in more tourists—including

doing away with “the traditional bagpipe contest that led him to refer to the festival as ‘Cat Killing Days’” during a radio interview (73) —Robert retreats to his workshop. Resistant to the idea that his woodworking is art rather than a craft, Robert declines an invitation to “be on some program about Maritime folk art. ‘I’m no dope-smoking hairy-faced fruit’” (74). Though Coady satirizes Robert’s reactionary, homophobic caricature of the artist—he makes “flitting gestures with his short yellow fingers” (74) —she nonetheless employs his approach to his craft to deconstruct the concept of Folk art, “an art that supposedly inhered in materials and in people enjoying an unmediated relationship with nature and an unproblematic, ‘fresh,’ ‘spontaneous’ relation between conception and execution” (McKay 292). Robert playfully carves caricatures into diseased, bulbous (and particularly sexually suggestive) pieces of wood, delighting “in any chunk of wood that bore a passing resemblance to parts of the human anatomy” (74). Robert’s subversive inclinations extend to his business practices, as he cannily “over-price[s] his art work outrageously for the tourists” (74-5) and exploits his reputation as “a character” by browbeating customers into making purchases if they linger too long in his shop.

Robert’s other creations likewise suggest Coady’s parodic presentation of regional culture. Similarly overpriced are Robert’s handcrafted golf balls, to produce which “he peeled away half of the ball’s pitted skin and then carved goofy faces into the hard rubber beneath. Everyone thought this was ingenious” (75). Set in contrast with Robert’s decoys, such apparent kitsch suggests Coady’s playful questioning of purist notions of authentic Folk art. Whereas Robert’s golf balls are individualized creations crafted out of mass-produced objects, Robert’s decoys are handcrafted originals that appear mass-produced:

His decoys were simply beautiful, more beautiful than any actual duck. They were completely smooth and flawless—he did not bother with feathers or any other realistic detail that might disturb the decoy’s linearity. The result was a perfect, liquid platonic ideal. Perfect duckness. He stained—never painted—and then varnished them. The wood was what mattered. The acknowledgement and refinement of the wood rather than any attempt to deny it was what made the carvings very nearly sublime. People came from far and wide to purchase one of Bridget’s father’s ducks. They were all exactly the same. (75)

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin argues that “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” and that “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). Robert’s production of identical decoys blurs the boundaries between the

lost aura of authenticity in capitalist mass production and the erstwhile authentic individuality of the handicraft, and hence blurs the boundary between premodern Folk innocence and the homogeneity of industrial modernity. His golf balls and his decoys playfully confound Benjamin's argument that the "whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical . . . reproduction" (220).

Robert's taking on his brother Rollie as an apprentice likewise reflects his canny, subversive exploitation of consumerist desire for Folk authenticity. When Rollie's school is shut down, Robert turns him loose in his workshop and retails the results as the work of "a religious artist" (77): "Little cards in front of each announced what the wooden blobs were supposed to represent, from 'Jesus Heals the Sick' to 'Saint Paul on the Road to Damascus.'" Shrewdly exploiting the notion of Rollie as an *idiot savant*, as well as tourists' readiness to conflate price with quality, Robert

daringly set them at the same price as his carved golf-balls, a great favourite among locals and tourists alike, and in a flash of inspired business savvy put up a bigger sign above them all which read:

*Religious Wooden Statues.  
Done by Retarded Man.  
Twenty-five dollars a piece. (78)*

Coady's depiction of Robert as a happily cynical cultural entrepreneur provides a playful indictment of the tourist industry in Nova Scotia, which represents a paradoxical commodification of Folk innocence and authenticity, "simultaneously celebrating the pre-modern, unspoiled 'essence' of the province and seeking ways in which that essence could be turned into marketable commodities within a liberal political and economic order" (McKay 35).

A final element of Coady's parodic commentary on folk culture is the popularity of "The Ballad of Jenny Mac," reflecting with arch irony the community's morbid fascination with the death of Jennifer MacDonell. Here a murder outside a donut shop—emblem of postmodern consumer culture—takes the form of a traditional ballad:

*A sweeter girl you never saw,  
Her parent's special pride,  
She had a smile for all she knew  
Until the day she died*

The ballad goes "on and on, actually going into lurid detail about Jenny meeting Archie and Archie chasing her with a gun and pointing it in her face and saying: 'If you'll not be my love, / You'll be the love of none'" (161).

Cleverly synthesizing the tabloid's obsession with murder victims and the narrative lyricism of the traditional Folk ballad, Coady underscores the sentimentality and idealization behind the memorializing of Jennifer. As if cryptogenically frozen in a state of innocence, Jennifer is transmogrified and commodified: "Jennifer MacDonnell, who had never been called Jenny in her life, had sunk entirely beneath the horizon. Something else being erected in her place. She was queen of the prom, on her parent's mantelpiece forever, now" (163). The posthumous perfection of Jenny has a macabre appeal for the underachieving and passively suicidal Bridget. Indeed, Jennifer's violent death at the hands of a distraught boyfriend implicitly suggests a fate that might well await Bridget; Mark ends one of his phone calls with the enigmatic but chilling line, "Jennifer MacDonnell rots in the earth" (160). Thus Coady dramatizes the dangers of proprietorial patriarchal attitudes toward women while simultaneously spoofing what McKay sees as the preoccupation in constructions of the Folk "with essence—with locating the genuine wisdom, the true and original ballads, the cultural bloodstream uncontaminated by the virus of modernity, the fixed and final forms of culture" (275).

*Strange Heaven* thus presents us with a familiar portrait of a sensitive soul straining against the prevailing social mores of a small town, not in a pastoral, romantic, premodern Maritime landscape but in a "fallen" postmodern world of welfare apartments, tabloid violence, and donut shops—call it *Anne of Tim Hortons*. 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. The "home place" is, as ever it was, a complex site, and Lynn Coady, like so many East Coast writers writing today—David Adams Richards, Christy Ann Conlon, Wayne Johnston, Edward Riche, Lisa Moore, Michael Winter, George Elliott Clarke and others—explores those complexities with a dark and combative humour. Culture of defeat me arse.

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NOTE

- 1 Coady provides a sequel to the relationship between Bridget and Alan in the story "Look, and Pass On" in *Play The Monster Blind*, in which Alan, having phoned up Bridget on a whim during a return trip through the Maritimes, agrees to drive Bridget to university in Ontario. In this story, Alan's self-regard proves much more vulnerable, as his sense of confidence is shaken by Bridget's impervious passivity during their road trip.

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