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The Lie Of The Land: Regionalism, Environmental Determinism, And The Criticism Of Canadian Prairie Writing

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THE LIE OF THE LAND: REGIONALISM, ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM, AND THE CRITICISM OF CANADIAN PRAIRIE WRITING

by Alison C. Calder

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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London, Ontario
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how critics have constructed literary regionalism in Canada, with particular attention to the treatment of writings from the prairie provinces. Nationalist critics have generated and controlled a critical discourse which either defines regionalism pejoratively and in ways that make it inherently regressive, or that universalizes regionalism to such an extent that it has only metaphorical value. Critics have thus constructed a non-political regionalism; works from the regions which do not fit this description are excluded from "regional" categorization. This narrow definition is particularly evident in the construction of writings from the Canadian prairies, as the belief in a deterministic regional genius loci is translated into an insistence on an essential relationship between landscape and literature. The imagined sterility of the prairie is related to an imagined dearth of creative material: Laurie Ricou's statement in Vertical Man/Horizontal World (1973) that the prairie writer must discover "how . . . to interpret a landscape that is without sounds and devoid of anything to catch the eye or stimulate the imagination" (137) is still representative of much critical and popular thought. The critical privileging of what is perceived as a hostile and alien landscape contributes to the naturalization of regional bankruptcy and reinforces the centre-region
hierarchy established in nationalist discourse. But attempts to construct a distinctly Canadian prairie writing centred on landscape ignore the fact that the prairie is also part of a larger North American Great Plains region. My thesis concludes with an analysis of how writers and critics from within the prairie provinces have responded to such constructions. I suggest that while writers from the prairies actively participate in their own definition, their arguments tend to be heard only within the region and have little national effect. Definitions that rely on an essential prairie ethos to confer imaginative citizenship replicate the hegemonic constructions they seek to escape. I argue that viewing region as a cultural construct, rather than as an entity singularly dependent on place, allows a more inclusive definition of the regional which admits intersectionality and hybridity and which can be politically present and meaningful.

Keywords: Environmental determinism, regionalism, nationalism, literature, criticism, prairie, west, Canada.
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INTRODUCTION

For all those who confuse history with the old schemas of evolution, living, continuity, organic development, the progress of consciousness or the project of existence, the use of spatial terms seems to have an air of anti-history. If one started to talk in terms of space that meant one was hostile to time. It meant, as the fools say, that one "denied history," that one was a "technocrat." They didn't understand that to trace the forms of implantation, delimitation and demarcation of objects, the modes of tabulation, the organization of domains meant the throwing into relief of processes--historical ones, needless to say--of power.

- Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography"

On July 1, 1994, Maclean's magazine ran a special issue on Canadian unity. Subtitled "Canada: A Community of Dreams," this special issue "look[ed] beyond the political rhetoric to examine why so many Canadians want to stay united" (1). In keeping with the magazine's focus on tensions between Québec and the rest of Canada, one of the main articles, "Community of Dreams" by Marci McDonald, featured a series of vignettes about the francophone communities in anglophone provinces. Here is one of the two paragraphs this article, "a quest for the heart, soul, and meaning of Canada," allocated to Saskatchewan:

In the summer of 1890, when Lucy Maud Montgomery took the CPR west from her Prince Edward Island home to Regina, she was crushed by her first look at the countryside: "the nearest approach
to a desert of anything I have ever seen." As the caboose carried her north of Saskatoon towards Duck Lake, the writer who would later provide generations of Canadian women with a carrot-topped heroine named Anne of Green Gables was only slightly cheered. "The prairies are jammed with flowers," she wrote in her diaries, then confided, "I am desperately homesick!" For the thousands of European homesteaders who arrived on those expanses, lured only by the promise of a safe haven, her sentiments were achingly familiar. (14)

I begin my analysis of the ways in which the Canadian prairies have been constructed by literary critics with this quotation because it encapsulates several familiar literary and political paradigms. On the surface, the passage seems absurd: what on earth would compel a journalist to select Lucy Maud Montgomery as a voice of the prairies? But as my thesis will demonstrate, the selection of Montgomery's diary entries is ironically appropriate. In including Saskatchewan in this article, Maclean's ostensibly gives Saskatchewan a voice.1 But that voice is ventriloquized: we hear Montgomery, rather than any of the prairie writers of the last 104 years. The article contextualizes Saskatchewan in the distant past—even the

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1 "Viewpoints," an article in the same issue, bears the intriguing subtitle "Regional differences affect attitudes towards Canada." It omits the prairies altogether.
caboose is now obsolete. Montgomery's response to what she sees as an extreme landscape is emphatically negative, and the "crushing" disappointment she suffers is generalized to include all homesteaders. The negative description of the prairie landscape is further highlighted through an implicit comparison with Anne of Green Gables's maritime idyll. Though Montgomery finds the prairie flowers beautiful, the article immediately negates that through its mention of her homesickness. The prairie is home to no one: the use of Montgomery, the traveler, implies that home is elsewhere. Present-day Saskatchewan appears nowhere in this description. Instead, the "heart, soul, and meaning" of the province lies in an anachronistic and desert-like wasteland, timeless and hostile.

As my thesis will demonstrate, this article is far from alone in its assumptions about, and representations of, the Canadian prairies. The excerpt quoted above comes from the popular media, but similar depictions of the prairie turn up over and over again in literary criticism. The imagined sterility of the prairie environment seen here is closely related to an imagined dearth of creative material: Laurie Ricou's statement that the problem facing the prairie writer is "how . . . to interpret a landscape that is without sounds and devoid of anything to catch the eye or stimulate the imagination" (137) is not far removed from Montgomery's desert. This belief in regional environmental and literary sterility affects the
publication, distribution, and reception of literature produced in the region. As I discuss in my second chapter, much of the criticism of Canadian literature in general is predicated on the belief in an essential relationship between landscape and literature. "How do you write in a new country," the question Robert Kroetsch asks in his 1980 essay "On Being an Alberta Writer," has informed Canadian literary criticism since the late 1700s. Early critics like Thomas D'Arcy McGee emphasized the difference between Canadian and British or American landscapes, arguing that Canada's distinct geography would inspire and determine a unique national literature. This geographic determinism remained influential, eventually appearing in its most widely-known expression in the writings of critics like Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood. It is my contention that this same geographic determinism, legitimated through nationalist tradition and only rarely questioned, underlies concepts of literary regionalism in Canada. That Canada is a nation essentially composed of regions is an assumption taken for granted. But as Janine Brodie points out in The Political Economy of Canadian Regionalism (1990), naturalizing the status of regions leads to a corresponding naturalization of regional status, and the institution of a centre-region hierarchy which is perceived as natural and which has real political and cultural effect. I argue that, as literature and politics are not discrete spheres but instead interact and exist in relation to one another,
Brdie's analysis of power relations can be extended to a consideration of the construction of Canadian literary regionalism as well. As my later chapters will demonstrate, to be called "regional" a literary work must meet certain criteria, the most basic of which is that it must be perceived to represent a true regional environment. Thus, the truth-value and authority assigned to "regional" texts demands an examination of what "truths" critics recognize, and cannot be separated from a consideration of how critical analyses reflect perceptions of what the "reality" of a region really is.

I have chosen to concentrate on the criticism surrounding writings from the Canadian prairie provinces because, as I will discuss in my first chapter, literature from the prairie is perceived to be particularly dependent on environmental conditions. Subsequent chapters will demonstrate that critical response to writings from the prairie is also largely dependent on the critic's own thoughts about the prairie itself. I argue that writings from the prairie provinces are analyzed almost exclusively through a regional framework, and that that frame largely determines the critical treatments those writings receive. The overwhelmingly negative view of the prairie which exists in general Canadian culture, an example of which occurs in the Maclean's article quoted earlier, is related to the critical valorization of prairie writings that use realist techniques to promote a view of regional
powerlessness and dependency, and to the corresponding devaluation of writings which work against such a model. Similarly, critical views of regional homogeneity, coupled with the belief that the prairie landscape must govern prairie writings, have led to the construction of a narrow category of landscape-based "prairie" regional writing; writing which deals with something other than the human relationship to the land is not designated "prairie." Such valorization is complicit with the imposition of a Central Canadian cultural hegemony.

All of this is not to argue some sort of a simplistic conspiracy theory. As Ann Markusen emphasizes in Regions: The Economics and Politics of Territory (1987), regional definitions are constructed from within the region as well as by those without. Regional dwellers do not passively accept outside definitions, but participate in the development and refinement of these definitions through varying degrees of acceptance and rejection. The same is true of literary regionalism: my fourth chapter explores how recent writers and critics from the prairie provinces are now responding to the critical paradigms that continue

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2The homogeneity enforced by the regional label creates a narrow definition in other ways as well. Because the label cannot admit intersectionality, a writer is either "prairie" or something else. Thus, Thomas King is not a "regional" but an "aboriginal" writer; Rhea Tregebov is a "Jewish" rather than a "prairie" poet. There are individual exceptions to this rule: Rudy Wiebe is seen as "western Canadian" and "Canadian" rather than as only "Mennonite." I suggest that the multi-dimensional aspects of Wiebe's subject matter contribute to his anomalous status: as will be discussed, writing which is labeled "regional" or "prairie" is by definition limited to a consideration only of the immediate environment.
to be imposed on them. In turn, the paradigms change and adapt to accommodate or refuse these responses. Rob Shields's insistence on the mutability of place-myths in *Places On the Margin* (1991) is crucial:

Places and their images are not scientific 'objects.' . . . Place-images, and our views of them, are produced historically, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture that can be 'filled in' since the perception and filling of a gap leads to the awareness of other gaps. . . . And, if individual place-images or even an entire culture are not objects to be described, neither are they a unified corpus of symbols and meaning that can be definitively interpreted once and for all for every person. (17-18)

Depictions of the prairie provinces and the writing that comes from them are neither entirely hegemonic nor entirely fixed. Nor are these depictions consciously malicious: culture tends to replicate itself unthinkingly. But I must stress that while writers from the region participate in their own self-creation as "prairie writers," regional self-definitions do not carry the same cultural authority as those which emanate from the metropolitan centres of Canada. Creative and critical works by writers from the prairie provinces are frequently published only by small or regional presses: the vast majority of critical and
literary anthologies of writings from the prairie are published by Turnstone Press in Winnipeg, Coteau Books in Moose Jaw, and NeWest Press in Edmonton. Similarly, those people who are interested enough in prairie writing to seek to critique it are, again, overwhelmingly from the region in question. As a result, their ideas are usually heard only by a small audience, and may have little influence outside the region. George Melnyk describes this condition in his article "On the Cultural Revolution in the Hinterland" (1981):

The hinterland is considered by the metropolis to be suited to absorbing mainstream culture, but not suited to generating it. In a metropolis-hinterland relationship the metropolis rather than the region determines what is important. The culture that occasionally arises from the hinterland to be absorbed by metropolitan culture stops being for itself and starts being for the other. This occurs, for example, when Western fiction is made a major vehicle for Canadian identity. (17)

The concerns this thesis expresses are not passé, nor are they confined to an abstract literary milieu. Ursula Kelly writes in *Marketing Place* (1993) that "it would seem the problem with 'regional' writing is not that it concentrates on a particular place, but that the place on which it concentrates is seen to lack social, cultural, and
economic significance" (22). I close this introduction with an anecdote that again draws on Maclean's, to illustrate the effects of "Canadian" literary power on writers from the regions. David Carpenter, a writer living in Saskatoon, published his novel God's Bedfellows in 1988. Maclean's indicated they were going to review it; Carpenter waited anxiously for the review and finally wrote to inquire. The reply he received read, in part:

The reason why you haven't seen a review of your book is that it appeared only in copies of the magazine that went to Alberta. You see, the magazine is not uniform across the country, and when I was presented with book-review space for Alberta only, I chose your book because of its western setting. Had I been able to predict that the reviewer would be so enthusiastic about it, I would have slotted the piece for a page that would be seen across Canada. (1-2)

*   *   *

A note on terminology: in this thesis I will be using the term "prairie writing" to describe writings from the prairie provinces. I am aware that this term is inaccurate, both in its assumption that Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba are comprised solely of prairie landforms, and in its implication that there is, in fact, one type of literature that can or should be called
"prairie writing." To use this term in some ways perpetuates that beliefs that I argue against. Writings from the prairies are as eclectic as the writers themselves; there is no one prairie literature. But as this thesis concerns itself largely with the criticism of writings from the prairie provinces (rather than with the creative writings themselves), and as that term is employed by most of the critics I will be discussing, I will continue to use it for the sake of clarity. Ursula Kelly points out that while the terms "regional" and "national" indicate artificial literary categories, they are in no way empty signifiers (14). As my thesis demonstrates, the label "prairie" is similarly loaded.
CHAPTER ONE: THEORIZATON OF REGION

How magnetic and mysterious place is. But problematic.

- Fred Wah, "Contemporary Saskatchewan Poetry"

A review of recent theories of regionalism demonstrates the problematic and contradictory implications of the "regional" label. "Regional writing" is not an easily quantifiable literary category: its use is based on sets of criteria that are often both shifting and unstated. Nor is "regional writing" necessarily interchangeable with "regionalism." Additionally, the meanings of the terms "regional" and "regionalism" depend heavily upon the context in which they appear. As I suggested in my introduction, who does the labeling is as important as the label itself. This chapter will explicate some of the theories surrounding regionalism, and identify some recurring themes in those definitions. I will then move on to an introductory discussion of the ways writings from the Canadian prairie have been critiqued, and suggest some ways in which the constructions of "regional" writings and "prairie" texts intersect.

George Melnyk writes in "Radical Regionalism" that "the basic problem facing regionalism is definition" (77). This difficulty arises from several points: not only is it simultaneously a term of both description and evaluation, but its meaning, as David Jordan points out in New World
Regionalism (1994), changes through time, according to the shifting relationship between Old and New worlds, the dynamic relationship of humanity to the natural environment, and the changing perceptions of the relation of fiction to reality (3). It is, in Ann Markusen's words, "a cantankerous topic" (xiii) in its political implications, both real and perceived.

The concept of regionalism is predicated on both difference and similarity. To be recognized as a distinct region, an area must contain characteristics that are demonstrably different from those of other areas. The criterion most often used to differentiate between areas is geography, as in Canada we have the prairie provinces, the North, and so on.3 This assumption is so naturalized that it is accepted as a given. Ronald Rees's 1984 discussion of landscape painting from the Canadian West is representative. He explains what he means by "west":

Because regions are defined by consensus not decree--political or academic--the vernacular is used throughout. "The West" or "Western Canada" refers to the flat, open country, drained by the Saskatchewan and Red Rivers, that lies between the Rockies and the Canadian Shield. British Columbia, in Western eyes at least, is West only in a geographical sense. (2)

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3Quebec's regional position is anomalous, as it is distinguished by political rather than geographic boundaries.
Rees's remarks are particularly useful because they point to the slippage in the discourse of regionalism from geographical to metaphysical definitions. "The West" is defined in terms of specific landforms, but it is also defined by something else, something in the air. That something, spirit of place or genius loci, is rooted in geography but also goes beyond it, and transcends political boundaries to establish a regional community.\(^4\) Here we see a belief in the determinative powers of distinct regional environments, where each geographic area exerts a specific influence on its inhabitants, shaping their characters to become similar amongst themselves, and different from people in other regions.\(^5\) This belief is not new, nor is it unique to Canada. D.H. Lawrence writes of the power of place to define the individual in his essay "The Spirit of Place":

> Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the

\(^4\) Rees's insistence on "the vernacular" is provocative, suggesting a reliance on common knowledge--everyone knows where the West is—at the same time that it suggests attempts to enforce alternate regional definitions. The regional audience (those in the know) is here opposed to and distinct from academic and political authority. Dennis Cooley argues for a similar construction of region in The Vernacular Muse. See chapter four for a discussion of Cooley.

\(^5\) Thus people from the West Coast are thought to be more laid-back, while those from the prairie are perceived as rednecks. Stephen Tomblin explains the roles that regional stereotypes play in cultural and political negotiations in Ottawa and the Outer Regions (1995), pointing out that "Atlantic Canada is often cast as a conservative monolith or an economic backwater that needs to changed," while the media continually portray Western Canada "as a place where people are incompetent, greedy, and intolerant," and the Globe and Mail characterizes the West Coast as "zany" (16-17).
homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality. (6)

Lawrence's spirit of place is a unifying factor: the influence of a common environment promotes a kinship between people and creates a cohesive regional culture. Rees's previously-quoted use of the vernacular to define "the West" underscores this idea of regional community. Important here also is the way in which spirit of place appears unquantifiable. Though Lawrence bases his spirit of place on scientific elements--stars, chemicals--it is impossible to pin down exactly what he is talking about. Spirit of place is then metaphysical rather than physical, mystic rather than scientific, while at the same time it is also firmly grounded in a specific geography.

As Lawrence's remarks show, belief in the spirit of place is closely related to the ideas of home and community. Harold Simonsen elaborates on this kinship in _Beyond the Frontier_ (1989), writing that "the key that unlocks the multiple definitions of regionalism is caritas [charity]. The true regionalist who loves his home knows it as a metaphor for wholeness, centeredness, and connection" (143, translation his). Here the spirit of place so infuses the individual that he or she feels a
sense of what Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1927) calls *unheimlichkeit*, or not-at-homeness, in other regions; it is only in the region of origin that the individual achieves some unity with the environment. Some critics use this perceived unity with the regional environment to distinguish "regional" writing from that given some other designation—authors are divided into insiders and outsiders, only the first of whom are perceived as being able to provide an authentic regional representation.\(^6\)

Marjorie Pryse writes that when she and Judith Fetterley were compiling the anthology *American Women Regionalists*, for example, they noted the distinction between literary regionalism, which features an empathic approach to regional characters that enfranchises their stories and cultural perceptions, and "local color," which represents regional life and regional cultures as objects to be viewed from the perspective of the nonregional, often urban Eastern reader, and frequently offered for that reader's entertainment. (48)

Here it is the location of the audience as well as of the writer that contributes to the definition of a regional consciousness—the work’s context becomes important. Pryse identifies an oppositional and hierarchical relation

\(^6\)I will discuss the importance of "authenticity" to the "regional" category presently.
between the regional and the nonregional. The idea of empathy, or the kindred spirit, is the kindred spirit of place: the true regionalist views her home with caritas. Pryse elaborates on the ways this empathy manifests itself in the regional text, writing that "delicacy, listening, respect, the ability to move in slowly or not at all in observing, a willingness to see with another's eyes rather than to look at the 'other'," are characteristic of such works (49). Such a definition demonstrates the anti-imperial urge Pryse sees underlying regional writing. By implication, a text by an extraregional author possesses none of these characteristics and uses the region, rather than inhabits it.

Opposing insider to outsider to determine a text's regional qualities is deeply problematic, however, for the problem then arises of determining who, exactly, can represent what region. The simplest criteria is birthplace or childhood home—if an author is born in a particular region, he or she may call that region, and no other, his or her home. Northrop Frye demonstrates this approach in The Bush Garden (1971), asserting that if an artist is brought up in one region and moves to another, he will always be "an imaginative foreigner" in it (ii). Other critics may discard such an extreme belief in the spirit of place or specifically argue against it. Janice Kulyk Keefer, in Under Eastern Eyes (1987), admits as Maritime "those artists whose work reveals a strong imaginative
commitment to that region" (5). Her canon depends not on authorial birthplace or choice of residence, but on the content of the artist's works, "his shaping vision of the worlds his texts create" (5). However, such criteria become irretrievably subjective: she writes that "Hugh MacLennan, despite his having virtually abandoned consideration of the Maritimes in his fiction, has so influenced the way in which the region is perceived that any worthwhile study of Maritime literature must consider his oeuvre" (6). MacLennan's usefulness to her analysis outweighs his lack of appropriateness to her stated criteria. Ronald Weber, in The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing (1992), avoids this problem to some degree in combining authorial birthplace and artistic content as regional criteria, but his definition still raises questions even as it tries to explain them: he writes that his study will concentrate on "works with certain Midwestern grounding (that is, written by Midwesterners and significantly about the Midwest; the work of Midwestern authors set elsewhere is another story) yet some national standing" (12). Weber conserves the idea of environmental unity; one can only write authoritatively about one's own region. The regional environment is seen to shape writing so completely that it (the writing) can apply to only one area.

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7Kulyk Keefer's gender-specific language is worthy of note.
The authority of the insider, or native speaker, is derived from the reader's faith in the insider's capacity to function as a regional representative, to speak for the region and in some way to embody what are perceived to be distinct regional characteristics. This capacity is closely linked to the text's perceived truth-value: readers trust the author to provide them with a true, insider's view of regional life. But in order for the native speaker to speak authoritatively, the region in question must be perceived as largely homogenous. Ann Markusen points out in *Regions: The Economics and Politics of Territory* (1987) that each region "requires a latent cultural mutuality and the absence of countervailing internal tensions" (3) in order to be distinguishable. The same appears true of literary regionalism. Edward McCourt writes in *The Canadian West in Fiction* (1947) that "the creation of a native regional literature is dependent in part upon the existence of a relatively populous and stable society" (4). In other words, a regional culture must become fixed to the extent that it is both recognizably and representably different from other cultures. If there is change in the region, such as increasing urbanization or differing immigration patterns, then the regional model (here the "native regional literature") is threatened. As Gerald Haslam asserts in *Western Writing* (1974), "regionalism is nurtured by homogeneity" (4).
While political regionalism requires the presence of cultural solidarity, literary regionalism requires its representation. To this end the critic must identify some unifying force on which to base his or her assessment of the "difference" of a regional culture. McCourt's description of fiction from Western Canada situates that unifying force in the regional environment:

True regional literature is above all distinctive in that it illustrates the effect of particular, rather than general, physical economic and racial features upon the lives of ordinary men and women. It should and usually does do many other things besides, but if it does not illustrate the influence of a limited and peculiar environment it is not true regional literature. (55)

McCourt's statement, like Lawrence's earlier, sees the influence of the "limited and peculiar environment" as underlying regional commonality. To achieve the commonality necessary to this critical model, that environmental influence must be uniform. The human response to the region itself is thus constructed as unified; the regional environment has the same effect on all of its inhabitants and so shapes a unique regional culture. George Melnyk's statement that "regional identity arises from the relationship of man and nature. Its two building blocks are history and geography" (78, 1981),
preserves the same thesis. While the history of the prairie region may be granted some influence, the course of that history is seen as dependent on the region's geography. It is the deterministic powers of the environment that shape regional character, identity, and writing.

*   *   *

It is useful at this point to review why it is that recent critics have felt that the terms "regional" and "regionalism" require redefinition. The ways in which these terms have been used in evaluative as well as descriptive senses have been discussed in some detail by Jeanette Lynes and Herb Wyle in their article "Regionalism and Ambivalence in Canadian Literary History" (1995) so I will only briefly mention a representative article by way of explanation. J. Frank Dobie, in "The Writer and His Region" (1974) describes what he calls "a mind regional in outlook, that in outlook does not transcend the region on which it is focused" (18), and remarks that "good writing about any region is good only to the extent that it has universal appeal" (16). These quotations require little explication; the limitations inherent in Dobie's definition of regionalism are obvious. "Nothing," he writes, "is too provincial for the regional author, but he cannot be provincial-minded toward it" (19). Dobie preserves the idea of regional authors as insiders, but they must focus
their attention on the outside. Regional writings have value only in a universal context:

No sharp line of time and space, like that separating one century from another or the territory of one nation from that of another, can delimit the boundaries of any region to which any regionalist lays claim. Mastership, for instance, of certain locations peculiar to the Southwest will take their user to the Aztecs, to Spain, and to the border of ballads and Sir Walter Scott romances. I found that I could not comprehend the coyote as animal hero of Pueblo and Plains Indians apart from the Reynard of Aesop and Chaucer. (19)

Here we see the critical homogenization of the regional, as the coyote hero of North American Indian mythology is equated with the fox-figures of a Western European literary tradition. All literature becomes part of the same continuum. Anything which appears distinct from this mélange is assumed to be too "regional," or peculiarly provincial and therefore substandard. The important audience, in Dobie's assessment, is outside the region—a large part of a Southwestern audience would not have to resort to Aesop or Chaucer to understand Coyote. Dobie's remarks also raise issues of race and class. His assessment points to one of the ways in which writing from the regions is commonly diminished: if it is not
immediately accessible to a central audience, it is assumed to lack inherent worth and is dismissed as being of little importance.

Dobie’s comments show some of the ways in which the term “regional” operates in critical discourse. Because of this evaluative baggage, recent critics have been calling for a redefinition of the label. Jim Wayne Miller, in his article “Anytime the Ground is Uneven: The Outlook for Regional Studies and What to Look Out For” (1987), argues explicitly against the ideas of nostalgia and simplicity that dog so many definitions of regionalism. Miller takes as his starting point an article by André Broyard, which asserted that the regional is inherently nostalgic. Miller writes explicitly against this characterization:

Why do our regions seem forever to be passing away? Why are we always surprised to discover they are still there? Why is it that the concept of region, central to the discipline geography, has been so difficult to establish with any precision as a literary term? Why do literary historians employ regional the way Broyard uses it, leading writers to defend themselves against the term regionalist? (3)

The answer to these questions, argues Miller, is that the regions, as we commonly perceive them, have in fact never

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8The distinction between "regional" and "local color" writing that we have already seen in Pryse's comments is similarly based on a rejection of the nostalgic and the simple.
existed, that they were only ever constructed images with small connection to empirical reality:

What we choose to think of as regions are mental constructs bearing little relation to geography or history; still, they function as preserves where we discover savages or approximations of the natural man, according to our needs, to whom we react with an ambivalence paralleling that of Europeans toward the noble savages of the New World. (3)

Miller's definition of regionalism differs from those we have seen before in its complete rejection of geography and realism. The Wild West, for example, appears only as a manifestation of American society's need for a civilization/wilderness paradigm to justify a new world order, while the idea of the American heartland can be understood in terms of its place in a myth of innocence. There may be a real Southwest, but it has almost no connection to the image of the Southwest maintained by popular culture. Interestingly, Miller preserves the idea of the cosmopolitan audience through his situation of the reader/explorer as regional exploiter: we, the outsiders, create the regions according to our needs. Whether the regions participate in this creation is not mentioned.

Miller argues that definitions like Broyard's are obsolete because such definitions cannot admit the regional changes enabled by technology. He writes:
In a world where monks in India copy ancient stone tablets with a Xerox 900; where Bedouins carry transistor radios atop their camels; where older Eskimos wear tennis shoes and still speak their native tongue, while their grandchildren wear the traditional footwear (mukluks) but speak English and get about on snowmobiles—in such a world regional can no longer serve as a word for denoting mere provincialism synonymous with boondocks and backwaters; as an index to the difference from some gratuitously assumed norm or base line associated with metropolitan areas. (10)

Miller's argument recalls both Marshall McLuhan's global village and Northrop Frye's assertion in his conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965) that, because of technology, we live in a post-regional, post-national world. He argues against regional definition based on external objects, pointing out that the areas that have been popularly defined as "primitive," lacking in technology, are that way no longer, if indeed they ever were, and that regions are not mutually exclusive miniature worlds, but rather exist as part of an interrelated human society.

So far, so good. However, in rejecting Broyard's definition of regionalism as inherently nostalgic and naïve, Miller ends up positing a definition which is in
fact very close to the one he opposes. His definition of regionalism, "the process by which the country continues to become a land and a people" (12), suggests regionalism as a sort of utopian antidote to the global mish-mash permitted by technological advances. He ultimately situates regionalism in a universalist and humanist framework, advocating "a cosmopolitan regionalism—a regional perspective which does not exclude the wider world, but is concerned with and appreciative of the little traditions within the great tradition of human history, and of the ways in which small and great traditions are connected" (13). Miller's definition is thus not that much different from Dobie's in its reinscription of the perceived limitations of regionalism. Can regionalism be "cosmopolitan"? Miller reinforces Dobie's insistence on a centralist perspective through his anxiety about an "exclusive" regional viewpoint; regionalism must include everyone. Additionally, his insistence that regionalism must "not exclude the wider world" once again calls into being the idea of regionalism as limited and provincial. There seems to be a dual focus in Miller's article: on the one hand, he argues that Broyard is wrong, and that the problem lies in the way regionalism has been defined and not with the movement itself, while on the other hand he seems to be stating that regionalism is small-minded and nostalgic, and that it must change to become cosmopolitan and inclusive if it is to be meaningful in the present.
There is no political dimension to Miller's regionalism; to suggest one would be to imply division rather than inclusion, and would threaten what he sees as a holistic and organic "great tradition of human history." He thus recuperates regionalism into a holistic movement, with its potentially fragmentary impact erased.

Miller's redefinition of regionalism empties it of any political content. In contrast, David Jordan's definitions of regionalism in *New World Regionalism* (1994) and *Regionalism Reconsidered* (1994) demonstrate an increasingly politicized way in which regionalism is being critiqued. While such critiques frequently introduce themselves as new or radical, they also tend to preserve many of the fundamental ideas already discussed. Jordan initially defines regionalism through what it is not: it is not local colour, and it is not dependent upon the author's birthplace. However, he preserves the authority of the native speaker, citing Mary Austin's assertion that a region is defined "not as a catalogue of quantifiable entities, but as experience itself" (*NWR* 8). He elaborates: "If we consider this distinct regional experience as the subject of fiction, we might examine the ways fiction reflects not only distinctive external facts, but also a distinct regional existence governed by local forces" (*NWR* 8). The basis for this regional experience is geographic: regionalism "is born of a sense of identity and belonging that is shared by a region's inhabitants;
this sense of community springs from an intimate relation to the natural environment" (RR xv). Here we see once again the idea of the spirit of place, manifested in local forces which create a distinct regional existence marked by a sense of identity and belonging. The regional experience remains homogenous; there is a distinct and shared existence, not a plurality of them. Emphasizing the representation of the regional experience, rather than that of the region itself, allows him to move beyond strictly realistic representations of region and to bring postmodern and self-referential works into consideration. Jordan's retention of the ideas of spirit of place and of identity and belonging are interesting: the regional community seems to exist outside the poststructural continuum he establishes elsewhere.

Jordan's situation of regionalism in the postmodern must be read within the context of a larger critical movement informed both by poststructuralism and by race, gender, and class-based criticism that privileges difference over homogeneity, and resistance over complicity. Kulyk Keefer, for example, suggests that a Maritime perspective is particularly valuable because its marginal position within Canada allows it "an authenticity, even a subversive quality" (x-xi).9 Redefining regionalism in this way allows the regional to emerge as a site of

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9 The extent to which Kulyk Keefer actually permits difference to emerge in her vision of the Maritimes will be discussed later in this chapter.
political resistance, rather than as a nostalgic pastoral. Resistance to a hegemonic central power becomes a vital ingredient in a text which is critically designated as "regionalist." Jordan sees resistance as a crucial component of regionalism, writing that a "de-centred world-view distinguishes regionalism from other place-based literatures, such as nature writing or travel writing" (NWR 8). For Jordan, regional writing is always both marginalized and resistant: "since a region is by definition a small part of the larger whole, a regional community is necessarily a marginal community" (RR xvi). Similarly, Pryse and Fetterley make regional resistance a criteria for anthologization, including "women writers who wrote against the grain of the 'local color' fiction of their day" (47). But while Pryse and Fetterley privilege the representations of race, class, and gender as sites of resistance, Jordan argues that it is the geographic location of the regional text that legislates conflict:

In examining borders that define difference, the regionalist author encounters multiple confrontations not only along geographic borders that contain distinct local artifacts, but also along epistemological borders that define a particular sense of place, cultural borders that separate a distinct regional community from the larger society within which it exists, and
aesthetic borders that define a distinct fictional world. (NWR 10)

The regional author, by concentrating on the experience of a specific place, here exposes difference and plurality in the world at large, undermining both social and aesthetic hegemonies. Such an exposition seems, in Jordan's economy of regionalism, inevitable. Works which do not include such an exploration of limits and limitations exist outside of Jordan's definition.

Miller is not alone in his anxiety about the possible disintegrative potential of a politicized regionalism like that proposed by Jordan. In Canada, regionalism is most frequently assumed to have a silent partner—nationalism, which is to say that whenever the term regionalism appears it is assumed to be operating in unspoken opposition to a united Canada and may therefore be a subversive and damaging movement. Rob Shields describes what he sees as regionalism's unsettling potential:

An alternative geography begins to emerge from the margins which challenges the self-definition of the centre, deconstructing cultural sovereignty and remapping the universalised and homogenous spatialisation of Western Modernity

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10 Interestingly, such a theory still turns around the idea of authenticity: by exposing the fractures in what had been thought of as seamless worlds, the regional author shows us life as it really is.

11 Jordan's theory of regionalism is closely linked to the writing of Eli Mandel. See chapter four for a discussion of Mandel's linkage of regionalism and postmodernism.
to reveal heterogeneous places, a cartography of fractures which emphasises the relations between differently valorised sites and spaces sutured together under masks of unity such as the nation-state. (278)

The anxiety provoked by the revelation of such fractures can be detected in many of the essays in Regionalism and National Identity, a collection of papers from a 1984 conference of the same name. In his introduction, "Regionalism and National Identity: Canada," Richard Preston writes that the question underlying the conference is "how Canadians think about their national identity" after regionalism (3). He elaborates:

Regionalism (as we use this word in this conference) means the advocacy and advancement of the interests, functions, and competence of parts of a nation-state as against those same aspects of the whole state. It is in certain respects a healthy condition . . . on the other hand it may be harmful if it weakens a sovereign state where the best interests of all can be better served by the larger entity. (3)

There is an antagonistic relationship here: regional advancement may be dangerous to the state. Defined thusly, it becomes a threatening movement, in which the regions are constructed as rather selfish and uncaring entities, wanting only what they can get and thinking nothing of
national welfare.\textsuperscript{12} This assessment arises when demands for regional representation are equated with a nationalistic desire on the part of the region in question: Northrop Frye's equation of regionalism with separatism in \textit{The Bush Garden} is one instance. Regionalists argue that such a representation of regionalism displays a lack of understanding of regionalism's basic nature. George Melnyk explains: "as its first act of self-determination regionalism states clearly that it is not a nationalism, and that this identification of regionalism with nationalism is false. The political reality of regionalism is not the reality of a people engaged in a nationalist struggle" (80).\textsuperscript{13} While \textit{Radical Regionalism}, the title of Melnyk's book, may sound seditious, Melnyk's project is the reformation of region, not nation. His regionalism is radical, he explains,

because it thinks of regionalism as something independent of and equal to nationalism and imperialism and because it sees its basic identity as anti-imperialist. The project of radical regionalism is to redefine regionalism itself and to give it a major role of freeing the West of neo-colonialism. (83)

\textsuperscript{12}See David Staines's evaluation of regionalism as "no longer necessary, valid, or even appropriate" (27) in \textit{Beyond the Provinces} (1995), for example.

\textsuperscript{13}It is important to emphasize that Québec's desire for sovereignty is not necessarily a regionalist impulse. See Melnyk and Markusen for more discussion of the difference between regionalism and separatism.
In fact, Melnyk's regionalism is closely allied with Canadian nationalist concerns, as he views regionalism as a means to combat American cultural imperialism (80). Like Jordan and Pryse, Melnyk sees resistance as an integral component of regionalism, and here it becomes regionalism's *raison d'être*. It is not, however, aimed at destroying the nation-state. Ann Markusen emphasizes the need to differentiate between power shift claims (devolution, autonomy, nationalization or denationalization of responsibilities and resources) and separatist demands (secession, nationalism) (36). Failure to do so results in a false conflation of the two: separatism could potentially be a means of regional advancement, but it is not necessarily its end. The conflation of the two can be accidental, resulting from a genuine misreading of regional concerns, or be deliberately done to obscure regional grievances and incite opposition to any restructuring of the regional/central power relationship.\(^{14}\) Such a misconception can be seen in Robin Mathews' 1976 attack on Vancouver's *Tish* group, in which he jumps from acknowledging the group's adoption of an American-inspired poetics to accusing them of fostering "an annexationist response" (552), declaring that "the Black Mountaineers are rushing to disguise their star-spangled torsos with the

\(^{14}\) Deliberate misunderstandings of this sort can be seen whenever power balances are questioned: affirmative action programs are constructed as attempts to throw qualified men out of their jobs and replace them with unqualified women or minorities; expressions of multiculturalism are constructed as ethnic factionalism; and so on.
Canadian flag" (556). Such an extreme exaggeration of the group's agenda represses any genuine discussion of the issues involved.

Two very different constructions of region can be seen in two recent studies of writing from Atlantic Canada, Janice Kulyk Keefer's *Under Eastern Eyes* (1987) and Ursula Kelly's *Marketing Place: Cultural Politics, Regionalism, and Reading* (1993). Kulyk Keefer's examination of Maritime literature reproduces the hegemonic nationalist discourse employed by the central-Canadian critics against whom she writes. In her introduction, Kulyk Keefer states that *Under Eastern Eyes* is written to oppose what she terms 'Laurentian' criticism . . . that school which made imperative the focus on, or actual finding of the Canadian imagination, the Canadian identity, the Canadian response to nature, at the expense of the manifold, obstinately heterogeneous forms of Canadian experience articulated in the west, on the east coast, in the north, and on the prairies. (xi)

In labeling her opposition "Laurentian," Kulyk Keefer draws her geographic battle lines. Against the perceived compression of the regional, she argues for plurality, for the articulation of "obstinately heterogeneous" regional experiences. However, in her critical model this plurality

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15Kulyk Keefer is here referring specifically to Frye and Frye-inspired critics: Frye writes in his Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* of what he sees as the importance of the "'Laurentian' movement" to the formation of Canadian identity.
is limited to plurality between regions, not within them: Kulyk Keefer writes that her aim is "to emphasize the fundamental coherence of the Maritime ethos and vision" (xii). To assert regional difference, she projects an image of regional cohesiveness.

Kulyk Keefer employs aggressive rhetoric to describe the perceived suppression of Maritime literature, writing that much of what she calls real Maritime writing is what critics consider "'sub-literary genres'--idyll, historical romance, and that current literary leper, the realist or representational novel." (6).¹⁶ Thus she argues for the necessity of applying what she calls "traditional scholarship" to Maritime literature:

The present vogue for metafiction, mythopoesis, and fabulation which has led to a corresponding dismissal or actual ignorance of traditional narrative forms and approaches results not only in the continuing oblivion to which most of us have consigned Maritime literature, but also in an encroachment upon our freedom and rights as readers. (9)

¹⁶ The validity of such an assertion must be examined. As we have seen, the best-known and most widely-taught Maritime works--Ernest Buckler's The Mountain and the Valley and Lucy Maud Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables--employ realism, as do widely-known novels from other regions like Sinclair Ross's As For Me and My House and W.O. Mitchell's Who Has Seen the Wind. Consider David Jordan's argument that "regionalist works that defy such realist conventions as omniscient narration, past-tense narration, and unity of plot and characters have been either neglected by publishers and critics, or accepted for reasons other than their depiction of a specific place and its effect on human identity" (New World Regionalism 53).
Kulyk Keefer attributes the effacement of Maritime literature to the indifference of uneeducated critics who abandon "traditional narrative forms and approaches" in favour of uncritically adopting what she considers to be the latest trend in literary criticism: "metafiction, mythopoesis, fabulation." To indicate that adopting such critical approaches necessarily excludes Maritime writing implies that true Maritime writing also excludes such creative approaches. Despite Kulyk Keefer's project of recuperating what she perceives as an abandoned and suppressed regional literature, she ultimately reinscribes it in the same terms that contributed to its suppression in the first place. Because her vision of this literature is as a tireless body of work, it is also of a body of work which is ultimately doomed to stagnation. There can be no experimentation; writers of the region who transgress the boundaries of "the fundamental coherence of the Maritime ethos and vision" cannot be admitted to Kulyk Keefer's critical economy. Metafictive, mythopoetic, and fabulative texts unsettle narrative authority and thus undermine the belief in a transcendent truth-value on which Kulyk Keefer's assessment is based. To unsettle narrative authority is to admit the possibility of multiplicity and difference, the possibility of questions rather than certainty. The presence of such possibilities would make obvious the contrasting and coexisting perspectives within what Kulyk Keefer wants to present as a homogenous region.
Texts that employ such techniques are thus outside her definition of regional writing. While she criticizes the "'Laurentian' critics' focus on consolidating "the Canadian imagination," she transposes that consolidation from a national to a regional level, calling for a literature that will tell us "who we are, have been, and may become" (xii).17

In contrast to Kulyk Keefer's dogmatic regionalism, Ursula Kelly combines considerations of politics, geography, and love of place in examining Canadian literary regionalism. She discusses the term in both evaluative and descriptive senses, writing that regionalism is a term used more often by government officials than by those governed. . . . Furthermore, it tends to be used by those who live outside the region(s) in question, and who live in a place not usually considered a region. In other words, a region is often defined by its difference from a place of social and cultural centrality and, as such, is defined from a position of dominance in which region is "other." (12)

Kelly's assessment of regionalism points to the importance of its contextualization, and is similar to that of Pryse and Fetterley in her examination of the politics of

17Kulyk Keefer's consolidation of a maritime ethos is in many ways similar to Dennis Cooley's treatment of writing from the prairie provinces in The Vernacular Muse. I will discuss Cooley in Chapter Four.
exclusion, or perceived exclusion, from "a place of social and cultural centrality." Kelly's conception of region is based not on a belief in environmental determinism, but on a regional model that includes social and cultural as well as geographic factors. Her argument that "the problem with 'regional' writing is not that it concentrates on a particular place, but that the place on which it concentrates is seen to lack social, cultural, and economic significance" (30) is important to my discussion because it points to the self-replicating nature of the "regional" label, with all its attendant evaluative baggage. If Newfoundland, for example, is popularly and politically viewed as insignificant, then writing from and about that region is also likely to be viewed as insignificant. The reverse is likewise true: if we are repeatedly told that representations of Newfoundland are charming but somehow not up to "national" standards, then we are likely to see the province in that light as well. Such beliefs have real social and cultural impact. Rob Shields agrees, writing that

imaginative divisions become causative sources of further divisions because they are institutionalized or rendered as a natural division. In this process of misrecognition, the geographic distinction becomes a new origin for further distinctions, and more importantly
economic divisions and social segregations.

(261)

Kelly stresses that people within areas considered regional participate in the creation and modification of these imaginative divisions. While any image of regional homogeneity is artificial, since regional populations are divided along lines of race, class, and gender, among others, she argues that the image of such homogeneity is nurtured both by those inside and outside the region. For regional insiders, the presentation of a unified region functions as "a cultural nationalism which . . . may be a facade of solidarity against, and difference from, the outside world" (14). But while such a solidarity may be initially useful in fostering regional political mobilization, it ultimately supports "the idyllic postcard 'gloss' presentation of regionalism" (14) that allows regional demands for change to be ignored.

Kelly explicitly links regional cultural and economic marginalization to an Ontario-based capitalist system18:

With fewer representations of and from the periphery, and an overabundance of representations of central concerns and interests, the latter representations through pervasiveness, take on authority which can result in hierarchies of social, cultural, and human subject positions in which "peripheral"

18Kelly defines "the centre" as Ontario.
work is seen as "inferior" and "central" is seen as "superior". Therefore, cultural products from the regions are marginalized, as are the economic positions of the regions. These products become of "national" concern only when they meet quality and interest criteria determined by central interests. (25-26)

While it would be helpful if Kelly specified the "quality and interest criteria" she has in mind, her yoking of culture and economics is important in its recognition of the economic dependency informing regional-central relations. With limited means of financing cultural productions of their own, the regions depend on cultural materials imported from the centre, materials which display a not-surprising preoccupation with central concerns. Kelly points to the establishment of three Newfoundland publishing houses, Breakwater Books, Jesperson Press, and Harry Cuff Publications, as alternatives to Ontario-based publishing ventures.¹⁹ She locates her discussion of

¹⁹The establishment of regional presses in response to perceived neglect by national (meaning Ontario-based) publishers is nothing new, as is demonstrated by the explosion of regional journals and small presses on the west coast and the prairies in the 1960s. Frank Davey's comments on the aim and effects of Tish's publication are representative of the goals of a small press: he writes that, in his view, Tish established "a tradition of B.C. poetry virtually unconnected with Toronto-based CanLit, with presses, magazines, and major writers mostly unknown east of the Rockies" ("Introducing" 160). See Patrick Lane's article "The Saskatchewan Presses" (1981) for a discussion of the impact of regional publishing in Saskatchewan. Lane also critiques small-press regional publishing in general, raising issues of quality and editorial selection. It should also be noted, as Kelly points out, that as many small presses today depend on provincial and federal funding, their claims to absolute freedom are contingent at best. The same was not true of the independent ventures of the 1960s.
regional presses within a larger critique of commodity culture, writing that "Book publishers produce books as commodities to meet the perceived and real needs of potential consumers. Book publishing, as a capitalist enterprise, also constructs need," and points out that "the production of regional books is no exception to this rule of the marketplace" (29). 20 However, Newfoundland-produced books occupy a privileged position for Kelly, as she views them as meeting an authentic rather than a constructed need. The publications of such presses then function as guarantors of an authenticity which is lacking in extra-provincial publications. 21 Such an implication raises questions of cultural commodification: can one actually buy regional culture? Or, more cynically, the impossibility of regional publishers avoiding a capitalist economy—they too must sell books to survive—suggests that regional difference becomes a self-conscious and marketable creation, a simulation of a culture rather than a culture itself. Paul Horgan describes this commercialization of region:

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20 Kelly's discussion of regional publishers in Newfoundland highlights the ambiguities within which the regional press exists: Newfoundland's first small press, Newfoundland Book Publishing, was founded in 1967 by then-premier Joey Smallwood; its catalogue included No Apology From Me, his defense of Confederation (Kelly 34).
21 Kelly's view of post-capitalist consumer society thus differs from that of theorists like Baudrillard in that Kelly believes it is possible to step outside the circulation of meaningless signs and so discover the real; it is possible for the consumer to establish an authentic relation with the object of consumption. Such authenticity is necessary for the genuine political change Kelly urges.
Its ways are studied, reported upon in various modes of expression, and before long, the whole localism itself, in a sort of social feedback, becomes self-conscious, self-exploitable, and finally, commercially profitable. When this happens, where regionalism becomes self-conscious, its very validity disappears. (168)

If regional publishers are granted the status of producing and disseminating a self-consciously regional culture, it is necessary to examine the terms in which that culture is described. Kelly quotes Clyde Rose, the founder of Breakwater Books, on the purpose of the press:

In the same way that a Newfoundland breakwater, a wall of rock, keeps the elements from destroying or endangering the boats within, we set up Breakwater Books as a cultural bulwark against the outside elements that would appear to be threatening our culture. (34)

Here the regional press appears as a bulwark for an endangered region. Key to this statement are the ideas of conservation and protection. The regional voice, as it is articulated in the publications of the regional press, is limited in that it cannot admit change. To admit change is to threaten the breakwater; without homogeneity there is no specific regional culture to protect. Regional writing

\[22\text{An example of this cultural limitation can be seen in the chilly reception Maritime critics afford the non-traditional fiddler Ashley MacIsaac.}\]
then appears trapped in the model Brown articulated much earlier - always backward looking, always necessarily nostalgic, and, in some ways, always obsolete.²³

Kelly's final chapter is valuable in the ways it acknowledges and wrestles with issues of cultural homogenization, nostalgia, and literary quality. Like Kulyk Keefer, Kelly ultimately values realist texts, with the caveat that cultural, class, and gender differences must be accurately presented. Without the accessibility that generally accompanies realist texts, regional texts cannot have the political impact she seeks. It is in this desire for political impact that Kelly is caught in a Catch-22 situation. She sees the Newfoundland reading audience as split between those who desire a more "present" literature (meaning a move into postmodern techniques and more contemporary topics) and those who prefer a more traditional literary style. Kelly privileges the latter group: the readers who want change are complicit in their oppression, seeking "homogenization--a condition demanded by the dominant order and a condition of nation-building," while more traditional readers want "inclusion through valued difference--a condition both for solidarity and the formation of strong community, a condition of social change and a compelling argument for reclaiming nation-building" (67). Traditional Newfoundland literature, then, will

²³See Roberto Maria Dainotto's article "'All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt': The Literature of Place and Region" (1996) for a discussion of the ways such nostalgic regionalism replicates the repressive and hegemonic nationalism it seeks to avoid.
produce a strong region. But, paradoxically, "in doing the work of subject production, Newfoundland books, with their present preoccupation with a rural past, aid and abet the process of reproducing the status quo" (79). Here the nostalgic pastoral bred by a focus on the past leads only to regional disenfranchisement. Regional writing cannot stay the same, and it cannot change either.

Kelly's study struggles with many of the contradictions and difficulties encountered when attempting to redefine and theorize regions and regionalism. I suggest that some of these difficulties result from the perceived need to defend the regions. Many of the critics, myself included, who are working to understand and redefine regionalism are from places considered regional. Our critical discourse is an uneasy conjunction of intellectual inquiry, hurt feelings, and an increasing amount of anger. As Wallace Stegner remarks in Wolf Willow, his prairie memoir, regions ought to be considered "without the scorn of a city intellectual or the angry defensiveness of a native son; and it is not easy" (287). Theorizing about literature and actually doing something concrete are vastly different exercises. This tension between theory and practice manifests itself in the somewhat confused focus of Kelly's final chapter, which wavers between a recognition of the importance of nostalgic texts to the reading population, and a desire for a more theoretically aware
(and thus, in her terms, a less "Newfoundland") literature.

As Kelly writes:

Regionalism raises issues of class, gender, race and sexual preference and, in its subordination to nationalism, (which works in similar ways to produce unequal relations of power), is an ideological production of these inequalities within the structures of capitalism and patriarchy. This point, however, makes no less real people's identification with and commitment to 'place' and to region. (13)

In other words, it is possible to recognize the potentially negative dynamics of "regionalism" while still feeling a strong love for and commitment to a home place. The tension is somewhat ameliorated if one remembers that a love of place and a belief in an essentializing spirit of place are not the same. Similarly, a love of place does not invalidate political interest and involvement; one can recognize flaws in communities or regions without either being "disloyal" to them or discarding them entirely. Such considerations point to the need to develop a regional model sophisticated enough to acknowledge hybridity and intersectionality.

* * *

As we have seen, regional theorization has tended to rely heavily on a belief in environmental determinism:
each region is seen to be governed by a landscape-based
genius loci which shapes a distinct regional character.
More recent models like Ursula Kelly’s have emphasized the
arbitrariness of regional designations, and have pointed to
the importance of denaturalizing conceptions of region.
There has also been a tendency to critique regional
literature in increasingly politicized ways, as writing
which was originally seen as nostalgic and pastoral is
redefined in terms of subversion and resistance. This
redefinition, however, is by no means general. As we will
see, the criticism of Canadian prairie literature is still
largely based on a belief in the deterministic power of the
prairie environment.

Probably the single most influential piece of
criticism on prairie writing is Henry Kreisel’s 1968 essay
"The Prairie: A State of Mind," in which he argues that
"all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian
west must of necessity begin with the impact of the
landscape upon the human mind" (6). This impact, according
to Kreisel, is twofold: the prairie "produces an
extraordinary sensation of confinement within a vast and
seemingly unlimited space" (9) and, conversely, also
provokes the urge "to conquer a piece of the continent, to
put one’s imprint upon virgin land" (10).²⁴ Kreisel argues

²⁴This desire to conquer is masculinized by Kreisel: "The breaking
of the land becomes a kind of rape, a passionate seduction. The
earth is at once a willing and unwilling mistress, accepting and
rejecting her seducer, the cause of his frustration and fulfillment,
and either way the shaper and controller of his mind, exacting
that these contradictory impulses towards expansion and compression manifest themselves in two principle forms in prairie fiction, writing that "Man, the giant conqueror, and man, the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat, form the two polarities of the state of mind produced by the sheer physical fact of the prairie" (6).25

Kreisel's thesis requires little explication. As with the regional models examined earlier, here the environment determines the character of its inhabitants—the prairie's influence governs both writer and character. This statement recalls Edward McCourt's remark that the true prairie writer "should be a psychologist with sufficient knowledge of human nature to be able to understand and describe the influence of the region upon the people who live within its confines" (55). Like McCourt, Kreisel bases his belief in the uniqueness of prairie writing on the prairie environment: it is the distinctive impact of that environment that dictates a unique literature. This uniqueness is located not only in content, but also in form, as the land affects the writer. I have already explored the perceived determinative impact of the spirit of place, the genius loci immanent in the prairie geography. But such a reliance on landscape, while

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25 We will see the continued influence of Kreisel's paradigm throughout the writings of later critics, particularly Laurie Ricou's Vertical Man/Horizontal World.
seemingly innocuous, has a few strange effects. Francesco Loriggio discusses the impact of this dependency:

when we label a novel "Southern fiction," or, in Canada, "Prairie fiction," we are implying that no matter how much the characters are spurred on by private or personal motivation, their behavior will be seen as a function of their relation with the place in which they live. (14)

As a result, the actions of the characters, and indeed the constitution of the characters themselves, are seen as the effect of environmental determinism, or, in Kreisel's phrase, because of "the impact of the landscape upon the human mind." Writings depict that impact and also result from it; they unfold the way they do because such an unfolding, given the environment, is inevitable. Such a theorization is built on a fundamental slippage—the critic slides from consideration of fiction, to consideration of empirical reality. In other words, the way in which the critic perceives the real prairie overrides the writer's fictional representation. The effect of this slippage is demonstrated in Kreisel's remarks on the frequent melodramatic scenes in prairie realist fiction: he writes that "though this sudden eruption of violence sometimes seems contrived for the sake of a novel's plot, it is also clearly inherent in the life the novelists observed" (14). Here the idea of environmental determinism works to normalize extreme situations and render them "realistic"
and inevitable. Rather than being viewed as the product of a creative imagination, these scenes are constructed as natural to an environment which is itself depicted as extreme. A cause-and-effect chain is set up: the landscape is the cause, and the literature is the effect. Aritha van Herk comments on this naturalization of extreme situations in her article "Appropriations, the Salvation Army, and a Wager" (1991), in which she points out that anyone reading prairie realist fiction with such a thesis in mind could reduce the experience to the equation "prairie plus woman equals infidelity" (96). The sense of inevitability in Kreisel's environmental determinism confers the truth-value associated with regionalism onto prairie realist fiction. As discussed earlier, such truth-value turns on the idea of a regional homogeneity which is at best arbitrary and artificial. According to Kreisel's theory, the human imagination will always respond to the landscape in exactly the same way, regardless of historical change or individual situation. Characters are seen not as individual creations, but as representatives of a general regional ethos; they appear as types rather than individuals. Predicating a critical economy on the idea of environmental determinism, as Kreisel does, stabilizes the

26Rob Shields takes up this same point in his discussion of environmental determinism in Gaile McGregor's The Nacousta Syndrome (1985), writing that "one result of this treatment of spatiality is that [the critic] is led to propound an ideology of eighteenth-century rationalisms that the physical world is support. i by a transcendent order. . . . experience is knowable, controllable, and real. Human nature is assumed to be uniform and unchanging" (185).
multiple meanings of "prairie" through erasure of the region's many internal conflicts, as attention to landscape precludes consideration of gender, race, and class conflicts included (or suppressed) in these texts. This effacement permits the region to be constructed as a seamless microcosm, in which any troubles are both regionally-produced and regionally-contained.27

Eli Mandel's 1973 essay, "Images of Prairie Man," is largely supportive of Kreisel's thesis, agreeing with his analysis of the major themes and images of prairie writing. "All that I could add," Mandel writes, "is that I would go further and find the unifying theme and images in the mind itself, projecting onto the land its image of redemptive powers in the figure of a child, and its image of demonic powers in a hostile father or tyrant who is the land" (546). Mandel's distinction is important, as it recognizes that literary depictions of the prairie originate in the creative mind, rather than in the land itself. He neither valorizes nor demonizes the land, as do some of the later critics I discuss: any valorization or demonization which occurs is a result of projection. Such imagery is then not

27J.E. Conway argues in The West: The History of a Region in Confederation (1994) that the role of the extreme prairie environment has been overrated in historical narrative as well: "Part of the popular historical mythology of the Prairie holds that much of the [regional discontent] can be attributed to the harsh environment the settlers confronted and conquered. Nothing could be further from the truth. A close examination of the record shows that from the outset, the farmers' agitations had more to do with senators than seasons, with railway changes than grasshoppers, with land policies than frost, with tariffs than poor yields--indeed, with the many man-made calamities wrought by a distant political and economic system than with the natural disasters faced and overcome" (33).
a result of something innate to the landscape, though Mandel may see it as a result of something innate in the human psyche.

Mandel's emphasis on projection points to a section of Kreisel's essay which, to the best of my knowledge, has not received critical comment. "The Prairie: A State of Mind" is usually discussed as though it began with Kreisel's thesis statement about the importance of the landscape's influence upon the mind. But this statement is prefaced by an anecdote that complicates any simple acceptance of his view. The article begins with the revelation that, shortly after Kreisel's immigration to Alberta, "there appeared in the Edmonton Journal a letter in which the writer . . . asserted with passionate conviction that the earth was flat" (3). The letter's effect on Kreisel was profound. He describes his response:

The tone of the letter was imperious. Surveying his vast domains, a giant with feet firmly rooted in the earth, a lord of the land asserted what his eyes saw, what his heart felt, and what his mind perceived. I cut the letter out and for some time carried it about with me in my wallet. I don't really know why I did that. I do know that in my travels round the prairie in those early years of my life in the Canadian west I looked at the great landscape through the eyes of that unknown man. At last I threw the
clipping away, but the imagined figure of that giant returned to haunt my mind. (3-4)

Kreisel thus does not come to the prairie by himself; his experience of it is already textualized. He does not experience "the impact of the prairie upon the mind"--instead, any impact is mediated through literary representation. I suggest that what Kreisel constructs as the natural effect of the landscape upon the psyche is, in fact, not natural at all. Kreisel does not come to the prairie tabula rasa; instead, he experiences a landscape which is already framed for him. This frame governs the impact the landscape has on him: he sees the prairie not through his own eyes, but "through the eyes of that unknown man." Kreisel's assessment is mediated and directed by the words of that letter and is therefore not only an individual response, but is also socially constructed. His discussion of the literature of the Canadian west does not begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind: it begins with a discussion of the impact of textual representations of that land.

That even Kreisel does not experience the prairie in an unmediated way points to a difficulty that occurs in the critical paradigms that follow his model. Kreisel's argument that depicting the impact of the landscape on the mind is the most important aspect of prairie writing suggests that certain types of writing are then "natural" to the region. I have already mentioned the sense of
inevitability such a suggestion engenders. Such inevitability has been extended to formal as well as thematic considerations: critics as diverse as Laurie Ricou, David Bentley, and Robert Kroetsch have suggested that there are certain "natural" formal responses to prairie space. As I will later be discussing this topic extensively, I will here comment on it only briefly, using Rudy Wiebe's criticism as an example.

In his short essay "Passage By Land" (1972), Wiebe describes his poetics, writing that they are rooted in the feeling that to touch this land with words requires an architectural structure, to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or a skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric, will not do. You must lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and, like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build a giant artifact. No song can do that; it must be giant fiction.

The way a man feels with and lives with that living earth with which he is always labouring to live. Farmer or writer. (259) Wiebe's analysis centres on the land's determinative powers--it is the landscape that determines the form
literary expression must take. Like Kreisel, Wiebe emphasizes the mental impact of the landscape in his assertion that the writer must "break into the space of the reader's mind" through reproduction of the vast prairie landscape in epic prose.\textsuperscript{28} And, also like Kreisel, the response to the landscape is generalized: both farmer and writer react to it in the same way. Such a critical model is strangely ahistorical, as both prairie literature and prairie life appear frozen in time, and the imagination always responds to the prairie in exactly the same way. Similar dehistoricization is seen in Wiebe's comments in his introduction to \textit{Stories from Western Canada} (1972). He asserts that fiction writers from western Canada are formally conservative (and therefore continue to structure their fiction in cause-and-effect fashion, unlike writers from elsewhere who have abandoned plot) because time is much more important to them than it is to city dwellers:

The world of the prairie human being is dominated not only by the great space around him, but also by time. . . . For those people who do live in space close to nature are genuinely dominated by time; not by invented city hours, certainly, but by the cycles of their bodies, and of the seasons. (xi-xii)

\textsuperscript{28}David Bentley's later assessment of the "ecological fitness" of poetic forms to landscape in \textit{The Gay Grey Moose} (1992) is very similar.
The western Canadian writer here is peculiarly primitive and, in contrast to the city dweller, appears unsophisticated and without technology. This lack of sophistication is used to justify the absence of formal experimentation—such experimentation does not occur because it is not "natural" to the prairie. While elsewhere in his introduction Wiebe mentions the increasing urbanization of the prairie, that change seems to have no effect on his theory.

Kreisel's thesis has also led in another direction. As I have discussed, theorizations of region frequently assume that it is the determinative power of landscape that makes a region unique. Regions are distinguished by particular spirits of place which are rooted in landscape and permeate the environment. Kreisel's thesis fits this model: it is the unique impact of the prairie landscape on the mind that creates a distinct regional character and so makes writing from the prairies a distinct and recognizable body of literature. Unfortunately, in the criticism of prairie writing "unique" has often metamorphosed into "extreme"—it is the "extreme" prairie environment that makes the landscape, and its impact on the mind, so important—and from there has evolved into "indescribable"—the prairie is constructed as the most hostile and most extreme landscape, and so the most difficult to represent. This metamorphosis, evident to varying degrees, underlies critical assessments like Robert Thacker's in The Great
Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination (1989). Thacker's project is, in general, to analyse what he sees as a collision between inherited literary forms and the prairie landscape. He argues that the effects of this collision are most pronounced in writings from the Great Plains because this landscape is particularly extreme, writing that:

it is a critical commonplace that nineteenth-century American literature reveals a tension between romance and realism, but in looking at prairie fiction... it becomes clear that tension was exacerbated by the nature of the landscape itself, forcing the demands of prairie space into literary consciousness. (104)

The writer is not the only one who feels this tension—Thacker reports that all prairie dwellers "have had to grapple—and indeed, grapple still—with the determinative effects of prairie space" (189). Here we see again the sense of inevitability such environmental determinism suggests. Writings from the prairie have developed as they have because of the impact of the environment; there is little connection to other literary or theoretical movements. Regional identity, literary or otherwise, is rendered unique because of "the degree to which the impact of prairie winds and spaces are integrated with the

29Thacker's project thus closely follows Dick Harrison's earlier Unnamed Country (1977).
character" (216). Such integration is general within the region: Thacker remarks that "for an inhabitant, the feelings engendered by prairie space are . . . ingrown and inescapable" (216). Thacker sees Kreisel's thesis as limiting, but only because Kreisel applied it solely to the Canadian west: he argues that

on the p-arrie, the great fact is the land itself and it has been so since Castañeda's first European incursion. Intersection by the Canadian-American border has made minimal difference, despite the attempts of Canadian critics to see the prairie as distinctively their own landscape. (224)

Diane Dufva Quantic's article "The Unifying Thread: Connecting Place and Language in Great Plains Literature" (1991) pushes this environmental extremism even further. Quantic links what she perceives as the essential "lack" in the prairie landscape to her analysis of the literature from that region. She writes:

Since the Puritans first looked into the forest, American writers have been exploring the meaning of place and the human community, but on the plains and prairies, this relationship seems especially significant, perhaps because the landscape is so sparse that, to some observers, it seems non-existent: by its apparent absence, landscape overwhelms. (67)
Indeed, not only are literary tensions exacerbated, as Thacker argues, but, writes Quantic, "the vast expanses force writers to create meaning from an apparent void" (69). We have moved a considerable way from Kreisel's insistence upon the importance of landscape--in following his instructions, Quantic paradoxically erases the landscape entirely, as the prairie moves from significant presence to complete absence. She argues that the influence of such a "featureless" region (79) has led to the development of a minimalist prose style on the plains although, as she observes, "other writers are just as adept at creating scenes with a minimum of words" (79). Despite this qualification, Quantic sees this style as not only natural to the environment, but as a direct and unmediated result of it. "The way an author views the reality of a place will control the language he or she uses," she writes, "when a writer tries to describe a place with only two seasons and no rain, even the words dry up" (71).

Quantic here confuses life on the prairie with life on Mercury, but her reliance on a belief in environmental determinism is clear. She is correct that how an author views a place controls the way he or she chooses to articulate it, but I suggest that her statement could just as easily be rewritten to include herself: how the critic views regional life controls the way he or she constructs writing from that region. If he or she views the region as a vacuum, a place in which it is particularly difficult for
the artist to flourish (Quantic remarks that "on the Great Plains, the artist, the sensitive individual, feels especially vulnerable" (71)), then he or she will be particularly inclined to believe that little of value could come from there. Additionally, if the critic constructs a theory which posits that certain styles are natural to the region and therefore represent the region most "authentically"—and we have seen that authenticity is an important criteria in the critical evaluation of writing from the regions—then he or she will privilege works that conform to that style and devalue those that diverge from it. In later chapters I will discuss how definitions of the prairie as "lack" can become even more damaging, as a critic like Laurie Ricou constructs a malevolent prairie to validate his theorizations.

One of the most basic problems with adopting a thesis like Kreisel's, which emphasizes the prairie landscape and the human response to it, is that both landscape and response are removed from historical context. This dehistoricization is significant, for if one of the requirements of "good regional writing" is accuracy, then surely the prairie which is depicted ought to be changing as quickly as the real prairie is. But this critical model allows no such change: if the influence of the environment is what renders a regional writing unique, then to admit change is to destabilize the critical ground on which these theories stand. In order for Kreisel's arguments about the
dominant thematics of prairie writing to be valid, the landscape's impact on the human mind must always be the same. We see similar dehistoricization in Thacker's comment that the response to the prairie has not changed since Castañeda first viewed the plains, and in both Laurie Ricou's and Dick Harrison's assertion that the prairie has not changed since Henry Kelsey first saw it.\textsuperscript{30} But, as R. Douglas Francis points out in *Images of the West* (1989), perceptions and representations of the prairies have altered greatly since the seventeenth century, primarily as a result of the needs of commercial and government interests. Similarly, Martyn Bowden demonstrates in "The Great American Desert in the American Mind" (1976) that not only do perceptions of the plains environment change, but so do ideas about how the plains have historically been perceived. He argues that our images of the historical plains are filtered through recent events—the Depression lent credibility to the idea that the plains had always been thought of as a desert, for example. Images of the plains have also been filtered through changing conventions; for example, the romanticization favoured in

\textsuperscript{30}It bears repeating that the Canadian prairie represents one of the most drastically altered ecosystems in the world. Human habitation and cultivation has changed the prairie since the disappearance of the buffalo, and continues to change it with newly available technology. Barry Potyondi makes clear the extent of that environmental change in *In Palliser's Triangle* (1995), writing that 90 percent of the once-grassland extent in the 1850s has been cultivated and that, as a result, "almost the entire tallgrass prairie is gone. Only one-fifth to one-quarter of the once-abundant short-grass prairie, the mixed grass prairie, and the aspen parkland remains in what we, too optimistically, call a native state" (7).
the nineteenth-century led to the conventional representation of plains settlement as a heroic endeavor in the face of extreme environmental hardships. Bowden contrasts the conclusions of two environmental historians, Walter Preston Webb and James Malin, pointing out that while Webb postulated a huge natural division between the Great American Desert (the plains) and the rest of "normal" America, Malin emphasized that the aridity of the plains was cyclical rather than constant, and that any supposedly natural division was therefore unstable. Bowden argues that social conditioning, rather than empirical science, is largely responsible for the dominance of Webb's position and the general view that the plains are a desert and have always been perceived as such. He writes:

The fifteen years of prosperity on the plains since 1959 might be expected to have favored the spread of Malin's more accurate views of the Plains environment, but good rains and supported prices ensure that the region has enjoyed no visibility in the nation. . . .

In the unlikely event that national attention is focused on the Plains during wet and prosperous years . . . the recent idée fixe about the Great American Desert in the nineteenth century may be replaced by another view. . . . Conversely, in the likely event that the dust bowl returns--and places the Plains in
the national attention--within the next twenty years, Webb's desert idée fixe will set unalterably in the academic mind like reinforced concrete. (5)

As the above-quoted critics indicate, it appears that Bowden's prediction has been fulfilled.

I began this chapter with a consideration of the ways recent critics have theorized regions and regionalism, emphasizing that while critical perspectives and language may have changed, most critics also preserve the basic assumption that regions are natural geographic units which are naturally and recognizably unique from one another. Accompanying this reliance on geographic definition is a belief in the power of the environment to determine regional character, which is largely represented as existing independent of social or historical considerations. When history is included, it is usually seen as a result of geography rather than other factors such as government policy. This environmentally deterministic outlook has led to the perception that regional writing is or should be the expression of, in Edward McCourt's words, "a limited and peculiar environment" (55). Such a perception is given extreme form in criticism of writing from the Canadian prairie provinces which, as the critics show, are seen as a particularly uninspiring landscape that is especially difficult to represent. Despite this perceived lack of any imaginative
possibility, writing from the prairie provinces is seen as uniquely dependent on landscape. As articles like Diane Dufva Quantic's suggest, writing which does not mimic the perceived austerity of prairie space is perceived as "unnatural" to the prairie—"it is not "authentic" prairie writing. The insistence on the truth-value of regional literature intersects with the insistence on the imaginative and environmental sterility of the prairie to produce a critical model of prairie writing which admits only images of a unsophisticated regional population in thrall to the land.
CHAPTER TWO: NATIONALISM WRITES THE REGIONAL

"Gully. Gulch. They're not real words, are they? They sound, you know, regional."

- Carol Shields, "Milk Bread Beer Ice"

Cultivating a national literature has always been seen as vital to Canada's survival as a distinct nation. Thomas D'Arcy McGee's 1857 assertion that "every country, every nationality, every people, must create and foster a National Literature, if it is their wish to preserve a distinct individuality from other nations" (43) is echoed in Margaret Atwood's 1972 statement that "For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive" (19). In this chapter I will explore the ways that nationalist critical discourse has produced and controlled the definition and valuation of the regional. When regional difference is acknowledged, it is either condemned as seditious or recuperated into a "safe" and apolitical model of home and organic identity which can be easily integrated into a nationalist framework. Alternatively, nationalist critics have universalized regionalism to the point that it has only metaphorical value. The combined effect of these strategies is the construction of a narrowly-limited "regional" category which is seen as inherently regressive, empty of political meaning and which, coupled with an insistence on accuracy in "regional" works, reinforces the
image of regional dependency on a centre which is itself constructed as progressive and benevolent.

Early boosters of Canadian literature urged its importance in terms of nation-building, arguing that the nation's unique geography provided both the base and the inspiration for a unique race, as both national identity and national literature would spring from a distinctly Canadian genius loci.\textsuperscript{31} The influence of the autochthonous and unified spirit of place would cement the fragile bonds that linked the provinces of British North America, and reinforce Canadian desire for autonomy from both Britain and the United States. For Canadian literature to have this effect, D'Arcy McGee wrote in 1857:

It must assume the gorgeous colouring and gloomy grandeur of the forest. It must partake of the grave mysticism of the Red man, and the wild vivacity of the hunter of the western Prairies. Its lyrics must possess the ringing cadence of the waterfall, and its epics be as solemn and beautiful as our great rivers. We have the materials--our position is favourable--northern latitudes like ours have ever been famed for the strength, variety, and beauty of their literature. (44)

\textsuperscript{31}Northrop Frye calls this the "harnessing of Niagara Falls" school of Canadian criticism ("Criticism and Environment" 146).
D'Arcy McGee's topocentric vision of a national literature includes no sense of regional distinctions. The literature shares in and reflects qualities of the physical landscape, and Canada's geographic position as a northern nation assures that literature's success. Canada's own expansion is projected: the prairies had not yet been settled--indeed Canada as a confederated nation did not yet exist--but this remark leaves no doubt that they are rightfully Canadian rather than American possessions. D'Arcy McGee's comment is typical in its inclusiveness--Canadian literature will derive its qualities from every region of the country, becoming a pan-Canadian art.

The American Civil War distracted the United States from the serious consideration it was giving to the annexation of Canada, but the deep divisions it revealed in American society caused concern in Canada, which had cultural and regional divisions of its own to worry about. Edward Hartley Dewart's 1864 remark that a national literature is "not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy" (50) makes explicit the links perceived between

32Archibald Lampman's "Two Canadian Poets" (1891) demonstrates similar geographic determinism: "We know that climatic and scenic conditions have much to do with the moulding of national character. . . . A Canadian race, we imagine, might combine the energy, the seriousness, the perseverance of the Scandinavians with something of the gaiety, the elasticity, the quickness of spirit of the south" (135). For an excellent discussion of how ideas of "nordicity" have shaped Canadian national mythologies and legitimated continued exploitation of the north, see Rob Shields's chapter "The True North Strong and Free" in Places on the Margin (1991).
national political and cultural unity. Fears of national fracture were somewhat diminished by Confederation in 1867, which emphasized Canadian solidarity and further distinguished the Dominion of Canada from Britain and America. However, Confederation produced only the shell of a nation; large portions of the country, particularly in the west and north, were still unsettled.\textsuperscript{33} While the newly-confederated Canada experienced a rush of nationalism, it also experienced radical domestic strife which peaked in the Riel Rebellion in 1885. The uprisings and dissent on the prairies, provoked in large part by unfair western expansion and the exploitative construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, emphasized the flaws in nationalist dreams of an unproblematically united Canada, and highlighted the regions' divisive potential. Goldwin Smith's 1894 letter to the Editor of This Week shows a national vision that constructs Canada as inherently and unchangeably split into distinct and competing regions. This regionalism negates any possibility of national solidarity:

Without any disparagement of our native genius, . . . no such thing as a literature Canadian in the local sense exists or is likely ever to exist. "Canada" is a political expression. There is no literary unity, there is not even

\textsuperscript{33}The Dominion of Canada at this point consisted of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. British Columbia did not join the Dominion until 1871.
unity of language among the several seats of population, some of them divided by great spaces from the rest of which the Dominion is made up.

(124)

Goldwin Smith's depiction of Canada as a nation existing solely because of arbitrary political boundaries runs sharply counter to earlier assertions of Canada's organic cohesiveness like those evident in D'Arcy McGee's commentary. Geography, rather than uniting Canada, divides it into a series of naturally occurring and mutually exclusive regions. There is no literary or cultural unity because there is no commonality between the seats of population; each functions as a separate island. Goldwin Smith is writing of the linguistic and cultural gaps between Ontario and Quebec, but later critics will assert that even when all the regions are speaking the same language, there is little or no meaningful communication between them.

Goldwin Smith elaborates on the obstacles facing a "Canadian" writer:

A writer in Ontario has hardly any field beyond his own province. Quebec, saving the British quarter in Montreal and the British remnant in Quebec City, affords him none. There is very

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34 Goldwin Smith reversed the argument for environmental determinism used by critics who argued that geography made Canada a unique and organic nation; Smith felt instead that geography indicated that Canada should be part of the American empire— "the Scotland of North America" (McNaught 8).
little chance of him reaching beyond Quebec to
the Maritime Provinces. On the other side
neither Manitoba nor the Territories have as yet
much of a reading public, and British Columbia
is in another world. Ontario is his sole
constituency, and Ontario is a farming province
with little over two millions of people . . . .
(124)

Here the Ontario writer functions, not for the last time,
as the representative Canadian writer. The regions are
depicted as obstacles rather than as supports for "his"
endeavors; the books cannot get over Québec or the prairies
to reach a potential public. 35 This assessment of the
Canadian literary scene is at once centralizing—the only
possible Canadian writer is an Ontario writer—and
decentralizing—no nation-wide Canadian literature is
possible since the only national unity is politically
created and therefore artificial. Economic, historic and
geographic conditions make the successful development of a
national literature impossible. Because of these isolating
factors, literature produced in Canada cannot help but be
regional, an outlook which Smith equates not with literary
worth but with parochial tripe:

Memoirs or essays on local subjects may find a
local market, though the source of material for
them has been pretty well drawn upon. A local,

35Goldwin Smith excludes French-Canadian authors from consideration.
or rather a personal market may be found for those photographic appeals to personal vanity of which so many are peddled about, but we can hardly hope that a writer on any general subject will publish in a Canadian Province. (125)

Goldwin Smith introduces the idea of regionalist writing in terms which will haunt it. Regional writing is a diminished writing worthy only of condescension, concerned solely with the local and of no interest to anyone not immediately in the area. It has limited market appeal. As well, the regions are of finite interest and provide limited subject matter which, in Smith's analysis, is all but tapped out. We also see regional writings being defined in terms of realistic representation; the writings are "photographic." Smith establishes a hierarchy of subject matter, with general writings much more highly rated than those dealing with a specific locale. We have seen similar comments in J. Frank Dobie's essay "The Writer and His Region," which I discussed in my first chapter. Interestingly, there is an audience for these local works, since Smith complains that "so many are peddled about," but that same audience seems not to exist for the works on general topics that he promotes.

The negative implications of regional writing were further refined by E.K. Brown in On Canadian Poetry (1943). While Goldwin Smith had little patience for "those photographic appeals to personal vanity" that he equated
with the regional, Brown argued that what he called regionalism was a necessary evil, one which had to be endured in order to be surpassed. Canadian writers must explore their own milieu, he wrote, for "a great art is fostered by artists and audience possessing in common a passionate and peculiar interest in the kind of life that exists in the country where they live" (17). Brown's criticism, arising in part from the nationalism inspired by Canada's participation in World War II, expresses his dismay at the Canadian public's reluctance to read its native authors:

A novel which presents the farms of the prairie, or the industrial towns of south-western Ontario, or the fishing villages in the Maritime Provinces will arouse no more interest in the general reader than a novel which is set in Surrey or the suburbs of Chicago. . . . It is almost impossible to persuade Canadians that an imaginative representation of the group in which they live could clarify for the reader his own nature and those of his associates. (18)

Brown's view of Canadian literature is thus in some sense pedagogical: the value of the imaginative representation lies in its potential to teach the "general reader" about Canada. However, in this critical model Canadian writings not only reflect Canadian reality, but also create it. In clarifying his or her nature to the reader, the books in
effect teach the reader what it is to be a Canadian—in short, these works define Canadianism and establish criteria for evaluating its presence.\textsuperscript{36} Such definition is necessary, Brown contends, because of the dangerous ignorance Canadians have about their country: he remarks that "there is little eagerness to explore the varieties of Canadian life, little awareness how much variety exists, or what a peril that variety is, in time of crisis, to national unity" (23).

Brown's statement is particularly interesting in its relation to the political context surrounding it, when the question of conscription had once again caused deep rifts between Quebec and English Canada and renewed domestic resentments. He writes:

There is little doubt that the Fathers of Confederation, or the majority of leaders among them, expected and planned for a much more unified whole than has so far come into being. In time of war the tendency to self-aggrandizement on the part of the Provinces is arrested, and even reversed; but there is ground for fearing that the return of peace will start it into vigorous being once more. (23)

Here Brown links literary unity (a "national literature") to political unity. Regional diversity, the "self-

\textsuperscript{36}If a book is "Canadian," it will display particular qualities; if a book displays particular qualities, it is "Canadian."
aggrandizement on the part of the provinces," is a serious threat to Canada's stability. While Smith had described regional divisions as inescapable, Brown constructs them as the product of regional selfishness: it is their "tendency to self-aggrandizement" that threatens Confederation. He is a little unclear on where danger to national unity lies, writing that regional variety is dangerous to Canada "in times of crisis," but also asserting that it is at the cessation of the crisis and the return of peace that the provinces are most likely to begin jockeying for position. The implications of this disjunction are provocative, suggesting that Canada is at its most vulnerable when it is not at war, that its most dangerous enemy is, in fact, itself. Canadian unity then appears to be something externally imposed and requiring external stimulus to exist. Without such stimulus, in this case World War II and the patriotism it inspired in many Canadians, the country is likely to fragment internally. Brown's book becomes both an assertion of intrinsic national unity—there is a country which produces a body of poetry that is distinctly Canadian—and a statement of anxiety about a unity that is arbitrary at best. His writing displays containment strategies that surface repeatedly in Canadian literary criticism at national and regional levels and characterize most critical treatments of regional writing.

To clarify his objections to regionalism, Brown defines it at length:
Regionalist art may be expected to possess certain admirable virtues. One of these is accuracy, not merely of fact, but accuracy of tone; and throughout our literature there has been a disposition to force the note, to make life appear nobler or gayer or more intense than life really is in its typical expressions. It would help us towards cultural maturity if we had a set of novels, or sketches, or memoirs, that described the life of Canadian towns and cities as it really is, works in which nothing would be presented that the author had not encountered in his own experience. It should also be acknowledged that a warm emotion for one's petit pays can lead to a very charming art . . . . In the end, however, regionalist art will fail because it stresses the superficial and peculiar at the expense, at least, if not to the exclusion, of the fundamental and universal. The advent of regionalism may be welcomed with reservations as a stage through which it may be well for us to pass, as a discipline and a purgation. But if we are to pass through it, the coming of great books will be delayed beyond the lifetime of anyone now living. (23-24)

Regionalism appears to be a national castor oil. Brown's vision of regionalism is resolutely realistic in style,
presenting Canadian life "as it really is" and concerned, above all, with accurate reporting. The regional writer, denied the use of his or her imagination, can only reveal the precise events of his or her own life; nothing must be included that "the author had not encountered in his [or her] own experience." Here we see the insistence on the truth-value of regional writing, and the related belief in the authority of the native speaker that I discussed in my previous chapter. However, the emphasis Brown places on actual life experience is troubled by his remark that Canadian writers have tended "to force the note" and intensify that life experience. Since all life experience is necessarily personal and subjective, Brown's assessment appears as an attempt to regulate the representation of reality, to control the way in which regional writers articulate their experiences. While he feels it important that a record of "real life" in the provinces exists, for that record to be valid it must match Brown's own perceptions.

Key also to Brown's definition of regionalism is the idea of regression. Regionalism is a stage, like childhood, through which we must pass in order to achieve "maturity"; it is an exercise but not an art. It may be a

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37 Herb Wyle points out the pressure this definition of regionalism places on the regional writer to represent the region and its inhabitants as they are popularly perceived, from within the region as well as without. Should the writer present a different view of the region, he or she may jeopardize his or her place in the community from which, or for which, he or she writes. ("Regional Writer" 8).
tool to help us achieve maturity, but it can never itself be mature. This immaturity is built into the very definition of regionalism—it will fail because it must focus on the limited, enclosed region rather than attempting to treat "fundamental and universal" values. Should it attempt such a treatment, it could no longer be considered "regional"; the genre's definition has a built-in obsolescence.\(^38\) The best a regional text can hope for is to be "charming," a word which again evokes the world of childhood in its diminishment. Regional works are then, by their nature, doomed; they must always be nostalgic, must always look backwards, providing an unchanging picture of life as it was, rather than as it is or might be.

Brown's lament about the delayed "coming of great books" indicates a critical model in which real literature transcends place, in which the universal takes precedence over and excludes the particular. Regionalism is figured as a retreat from and denial of the modern world; Brown's denigration of it is common to a modernist agenda which saw the future in technological change and literary internationalism. Such internationalism is most clearly seen in modernist critics' response to the foundation of the Canadian Authors Association in 1921. In contrast to the high modernist ideals beginning to be espoused by critics like A.J.M. Smith, and later promoted by Brown, the

\(^{38}\) Brown's definition provides an example of the narrow "regional writing" model outlined in Chapter One.
C.A.A. promoted a more popular poetry. Modernist objections, while varied, centred on the C.A.A.'s promotion and dissemination of what it called "Canadian" works. Critics charged that their "Buy Canadian" projects ultimately promoted a false image of Canadian literature. A.J.M. Smith's 1928 complaint in "Wanted—Canadian Criticism" makes clear the modernist assessment of the C.A.A.'s criteria: "If you write, apparently, of the far north and the wild west and the picturesque east, seasoning well with allusions to the Canadian goose, fir trees, maple leaves, snowshoes, northern lights, etc., the public grasp the fact that you are a Canadian poet" (32). Douglas Bush's "Making Literature Hum" (1926), makes explicit the perceived link between inferior writing and the local. Bush argued that the C.A.A.'s commercial boosterism led not to a national literature but a "provincial" one:

we have bulky histories of Canadian literature appraising the product of every citizen who ever held a pen; bulky anthologies preserving almost everything metrical that has sprung from a Canadian brain; little books celebrating the genius of people who in another country would not get beyond the poetry corner of the local newspaper; reprints of Canadian 'classics' which not even antiquity can render tolerable; respectful consideration of inferior Zane Greys as literature—in short, an earnest and sincere
desire to establish a completely parochial set of values. (216)

Bush's complaint about the proliferation and celebration of bad local colour writing recalls Goldwin Smith's similar objections in 1894, though Bush complains about the institutionalization of the literature while Goldwin Smith argued against individual works. Critics like A.J.M. Smith and Bush urged the application of international or universal standards to Canadian writings to counter what they saw as the spread of "a completely parochial set of values" fueled by "little books." International standards, they felt, would disqualify the "bad" writers, but allow the few who could meet such standards to flourish, thus establishing a more discriminating literary selection and making possible "the coming of great books." The emphasis on the universal, accompanied by a corresponding dismissal of the local, is perhaps most vigorously advocated in Smith's "A Rejected Preface," which was to have been included in the 1936 anthology New Provinces. He writes:

We do not pretend that this volume contains any verse that might not have been written in the

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39Modernist critics also objected to the specific type of writing they felt the C.A.A. promoted. As Andreas Huyssen discusses in After the Great Divide (1986), modernists consistently gendered the mass culture they opposed as feminine. In Canada, they also equated it with an obsolete Victorian tradition. This equation of femininity, obsolence, and consumerism is obvious in the terms in which modernist poets evaluated the C.A.A.; F.R. Scott's poem "The Canadian Authors Meet" (1945) provides a striking example of this characterization.
United States or in Great Britain. There is certainly nothing specially Canadian about more than one or two poems. Why should there be? Poetry today is written for the most part by people whose emotional and intellectual heritage is not a national one; it is either cosmopolitan or provincial, and, for good or evil, the forces of civilization are rapidly making the latter scarce. (39-40)

For Smith, nationalism of any sort is not an issue in anthology selection. Rather than dividing the poets into "Canadian" and "non-Canadian," Smith introduces a new dichotomy. The imbalance of this dichotomy is obvious, however, in the terms Smith uses to define it: to be cosmopolitan, with its cachet of sophistication, is clearly better than to be provincial. Indeed, provincialism is figured as uncivilized, as a vehicle for only "a parochial set of values." It is a necessary phase through which poets will, hopefully, pass, and which will give way to cosmopolitanism. Additionally, to be provincial is to be necessarily doomed; its decline is presented as inevitable. Cosmopolitanism is linked with progress, while provincialism is degenerate and regressive. The anthology's title can be read ironically; Smith is not so much exploring new provinces as declaring the end of old ones.
The anti-provincial bias of the international school privileged a highly-educated, highly literate poetry. As such, it is a strongly centralized movement, closely tied to an urban environment. While poets like Smith could write about the Canadian landscape, they had to live in the cities. This urban slant is obvious in P.K. Page's "Canadian Poetry 1942":

Today with three new magazines—*Contemporary Verse*, *First Statement*, and *Preview*—the poet is no longer silent. He has yet to come to grips with himself and stop crying 'Help' from the prairies and woods and mountains. If instead he will hitch-hike to the towns and identify himself with people, forget for a while the country of his own head, he may find his age and consequently his belief. (317)

In Page's description the prairies, woods, and mountains are uninhabited; the options are metropolis or isolation, cosmopolitanism or provincialism. Nationalism and regionalism are not considered here; the assumption of one or the other disqualifies the writer from the artistic realm; and the presence of either, in literature or in criticism, is perceived as hopelessly anachronistic. While modernist art is thought to transcend geographic boundaries, the poetry itself must observe strict guidelines. Page's statement displays the pejorative definition the regional had assumed.
Remarks like Page's demonstrate that while the regional had taken on an abstract aesthetic value as a foil to the universal, it was also tied to place. Hugh MacLennan's article "Canada Between Covers" (1946), clearly shows that while regionalism may be constructed as a general national condition, some parts of the nation are more regional than others. Asking whether "Canadian literature [is] doomed to lie half stagnant in the backwaters of regionalism" (362), MacLennan concludes that all Canadian writing is inherently provincial; the criterion of value he imposes is success in the American market. While Brown argues that Canadian writers must explore their country so that their writings can provide a means for Canadian self-identification, MacLennan asserts that Canadians must write to be identified by the other, in this case the United States. MacLennan's argument, predicated on the idea of North American similarity and difference, displays a continentalist outlook similar to that shown earlier by Goldwin Smith. But while he writes that "Canadians must write for the American market because it is the cultural pattern to which they naturally belong" (365), he also implies cultural difference between the two nations--otherwise, there would be no need to explain Canada to anyone. MacLennan's definition of regionalism, like Brown's, assumes that the function of a regionalist work is to explain an environment and educate the reader about extra-literary issues. However, he writes, authors
must also homogenize their backgrounds and stick to universal themes. Canadian writers are thus disadvantaged because while they must set their work in Canada, no one knows anything about it:

The Canadian novelist must realize that drama always proceeds from the known, not from the unknown. There it devolves upon him to do more than invent his plot and create his characters, and throw in some scenery for a backdrop. He must be prepared to build the whole stage upon which the action occurs. He must explain all the causes of a conflict, not merely assume them to be known because they are a part of the local mores and then rely on his readers to supply the dramatic suspense. (386)

The Canadian novel is clearly something which originates far from the centres of culture. There is no suggestion that American authors should explain themselves to a Canadian audience; Canadian knowledge of American local mores is taken for granted. Despite this nod to American advantage, MacLennan writes that "Canada must be interpreted by her own" (369). Exactly why this must be is unclear. MacLennan is intensely conscious of American/Canadian difference, but never indicates why he feels such a difference should be maintained.

MacLennan's comments about the nation introduce a new twist to regionalism. Where the earliest critics had been
concerned with articulating the entirety of Canada without regard to regional distinctions, and critics like Brown had presented the idea of distinct regions within a greater nation, MacLennan defines Canada itself as a region apart from an American centre. But while the regional is constructed as a universal Canadian condition, MacLennan's discussion of how an author may escape the regional backwater shows that, to him, some places are more regional than others. To begin with, "the region under examination should have familiar personal associations for the reader." Next, "the regions should present a problem which vitally affects the welfare of the whole nation." A novel should "satisfy a wide curiosity which the nation at large may have developed about itself," and finally "the characteristics of a specific region [should] find such broad focus that they appear in the eyes of the world to represent the entire nation" (366-67). The specific region has value only as it functions as a synecdoche for the entire nation. Any distinct regional characteristics must disappear in favour of a general, homogenous Canadianism; the particular has value only as it expresses the universal. MacLennan sets up a model of regional writing in which the region is defined only by those outside of it. Any value the region has is a result of something in it being analogous to something in the centre. If there is no correspondence between the way the region is represented and the way the centre perceives both the region and
itself, then the text fails, becoming "stagnant." This model is true on both national and regional levels, as MacLennan asserts that Canada's "centres" can judge its "regional writing," even as Canada's literature itself is judged by American readers.

MacLennan's version of regionalism preserves the idea that the Canadian novel's purpose is at least partly didactic. Like Brown, he feels that the novel should educate the audience about what it is to be Canadian, but it is a specific type of novel for which he is looking. His own *Two Solitudes*, in some ways a manifesto on Canadian writing, provides an example of the writing which he values. When the protagonist Paul Tallard attempts to write his great novel "The Young Man < 1933," he discovers that he must give it a Canadian setting and write about the 'real' Canada. Paul's book, like MacLennan's novel itself, reflects a resolutely Central Canadian perspective, filtering all of Canada through an exploration of anglophone/francophone relations in Québec and Ontario. The "problem which vitally affects the welfare of a whole nation," the status of Québec, is now and has historically been perceived radically differently in different parts of Canada; west of Manitoba regional priorities are far different. But *Two Solitudes*, purporting to provide a portrait of the "real" Canada, takes its own priorities for granted, subsuming all regional differences under the guise of unity. MacLennan does not doubt that valuable
literature will be produced in Canada: he writes that "human beings are born in Canada, they suffer, love, marry, procreate, injure each other, and die, and so there are enough universal themes, even in Canada, for us all" (371).

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Nationalist universalization of the regional is not always accompanied by explicit disparagement. As E.K. Brown's comments suggest, regional writing is seen as valuable when it "possess[es] certain admirable virtues" (23) which allow it to be recuperated to reinforce ideas of national coherence and identity. Leo Kennedy's article "The Future of Canadian Literature" (1929) demonstrates such a recuperative reconstruction of the regional: he optimistically asserts that the new generation of writers will approach the task of expression fortified by new ideas and original conceptions; they will learn the lesson of all precursors, discovering in a western grain field, a Quebec maison, or in a Montreal nightclub, a spirit and a consciousness distinctly Canadian. Just as the writers of the United States are inclined to segregate . . . so I believe these younger Canadians when properly fledged will embrace this practice, and write each of the soul and scene of his own community. (251)
Kennedy turns to regional writing to produce a national corpus. This position shows a sophisticated model of national literature in its argument that Canadian writers can adapt American models without necessarily becoming "colonized"; Kennedy recognizes that translation and transcription are different things. Goldwin Smith had earlier argued that the series of isolated communities which made up Canada were only arbitrarily related, but Kennedy recuperates that diversity as beneficial and produces regional difference that does not necessarily mean national disintegration; each region contains a unique Canadian perspective which is but one facet of a shared national identity. Though he does not assert regional homogeneity, he does preserve the idea of a singular Canadian consciousness: the soul of each community is part of a collective soul. This regionalism, defined in terms of home and identity and without political content, is easily subordinated to nationalist ideals: in expressing the "soul and scene" of the nation, regional writing is constructed as a unifying rather than a dividing force.

Similar nationalization of the regional through its construction as a general condition occurs in a vastly different context in Linda Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988). Hutcheon argues that Canada is an essentially postmodern nation: "Canada can in some ways be defined as a country whose articulation of its national identity has sprung from regionalist impulses: the ex-
centric forces of Québec, the Maritimes, the west" (4). While Hutcheon ostensibly asserts the importance of, in Robert Kroetsch's words, "staying multiple" ("Disunity" 28), the terms with which she describes regionalism suppress all regional difference by subsuming it into what she sees as a pan-Canadian postmodernism and appropriating it to nationalist discourse.

Hutcheon argues that the national condition of postmodernity is geographically and historically produced, writing that Canadians "may be primed for the paradoxes of the postmodern by their history . . . and also by their split identity between regional and national" (4). Regional identification is thus normalized: all Canadians are divided between region and nation in the same way and are thus united by their split identities. Assertions of regional difference are neutralized in the reconstruction of regionalism as a national condition. It is necessary to quote Hutcheon's description of regionalism at length to understand the extent to which she assimilates regional writing into a national literature:

The postmodern has also translated the existing Canadian emphasis on regionalism in literature, for example, into a concern for the different, the local, the particular--in opposition to the uniform, the universal, the centralized. . . . Northrop Frye, Robert Lecker, and many others have addressed the importance of both Canadian
cultural disparity and local tradition. The particular and the occasional have always been important to Canadian literature's regionalist focus. . . . [Margaret] Atwood is one of the many Canadian writers who have tried to articulate the difference that defines Canada. Canadian novelists have refigured the realist regional into the postmodern different. . . . Robert Kroetsch writes of his desire to record and invent . . . the Canadian west: 'That pattern of contraries, all the possibilities implied in record and invent, for me finds its focus in the model suggested by the phrase: a local pride.' To render the particular concrete, to glory in a (defining) local eccentricity—this is the Canadian postmodern.

Hutcheon quotes from Kroetsch's essay "On Being an Alberta Writer" (1980) without any recognition of irony. The point of Kroetsch's essay is his dissatisfaction with the definitions of the prairie imposed on it by Eastern Canada, but Hutcheon suppresses that regional dissatisfaction to make Kroetsch function as a representative "Canadian." 40

She shows no recognition of the way Kroetsch's rejection of centralist notions of the prairie troubles her assumptions.

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40 Robert Lecker performs the same centralizing strategy in "Prairie/Nation: Region in the Criticism of Robert Kroetsch" (1985), writing that "in articulating prairie, Kroetsch articulates Canada: the two go hand in hand" (506).
of Canadian uniformity, a trouble nowhere more evident than her implicit equation of Kroetsch and Atwood. Hutcheon here appropriates regionalism to her construction of a Canadian tradition in which postmodernism is seen as a natural development. While Hutcheon claims that postmodern literature is politically engaged, her smothering of regional difference beneath a blanket of postmodernism obliterates any political effect or agenda contained in regionalism. "Region" has value only in its ability to stand in for nation: George Melnyk describes this condition in his discussion of the appropriations that occur "when Western fiction is made a major vehicle for Canadian identity" (17). The refusal to differentiate between "differences" succeeds only in centralizing the regional "ex-centricity" Hutcheon claims to value.

Nationalist criticism seeks to assert Canadian difference from the rest of the world. As I have discussed, that difference may be produced through constructing a national literary identity that ignores or consumes any signs of regional dissent. Raymond Williams describes such regional "inclusion" in Towards 2000 (1983): "'Local' and 'regional' identities are still allowed, even at a certain level encouraged, but they are presumed to exist within, and where necessary be overridden by, the identities and loyalties of this much larger [national] society" (181). A definition of regionalism has thus been produced which is politically neutral and easily
appropriated to a nationalist discourse that permits the construction of pan-Canadian literary unity and discourages cross-border identification. In such a model, a national literature can only function on an East-West axis, from Newfoundland to British Columbia: any North-South connections with the United States must be rejected. Morley Callaghan described the anxieties such cross-border connections produce in "The Plight of Canadian Fiction" (1938):

It leads you to wondering just what Canadian literature really is. And then you take a look at the map and you wonder if a recording of the life of Vancouver on the Pacific in creative prose is closer culturally or regionally to a recording of the life and landscape of a lake city way on the other side of the continent like Toronto than it is, say, to a novel about Seattle. (261)

Callaghan's comment points to the way concepts of regionalism trouble national literary models. Robin Mathews's extreme response to Vancouver's Tish group suggests that regionalism is a truly terrifying concept. Not only does regionalism suggest that there is no one particular "Canadian" literature, but it also points out that regions, which as we have seen are perceived as environmentally determined, extend across national borders. The distinct "regional character," the shaping force of the
regional literature, can no longer serve as a guide for national self-identification. Mathews violently rejects such cross-border extension, writing that Tish's American-inspired localism is a symptom of the cultural invasion of British Columbia and the rest of Canada, coming from the south, beginning decades ago and reaching the point, now, at which British Columbians--in the arts especially--are invited to consider themselves part of the U.S.A. (the Pacific nation) and not part of Canada" (Preface 7).

Mathews's critique represents a critical model which entirely effaces regional possibility in asserting an aggressive nationalism.41 Thus, he writes that the poetics of Frank Davey (whom he views as metonymically representing the Tish group) are "only the latest in a long line of protoannexationist and annexationist arguments" which will ultimately "'continentalize' poetic imagination" ("Poetics" 553, 554). As Mathews points out, American movements were influential long before Tish adopted a Black Mountain aesthetic; Leo Kennedy advocated an American-inspired

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41 The same erasure of the regional appears in Keith Richardson's *Poetry and the Colonized Mind: Tish* (1976), in which he glosses over Tish 11's assessment of Gwendolyn MacEwen, which begins "it is about time certain Toronto magazine editors learned to investigate and think before speaking out," continues with a discussion of what "anyone with any sort of awareness of poetry outside of Upper and Lower Canada would know," and concludes "how ignorant can an eastern Canadian be?" (Tish 220-21) with the remark that the editors believed that she had the incorrect poetic stance (37).
localism in 1929. But while Tish operated in explicit opposition to what it considered "Toronto poetry," Mathews's critique entirely erases questions of geography and region: the only alternative to Canadian nationalism that he presents is the nationalism of a different nation. Such an extreme equation of regional dissatisfaction with a wish for secession suggests that the national unity for which Mathews argues is in fact tenuous at best, as he constructs any regionally-based disruptions as potentially dangerous to the nation-state.

The extent to which a recognition of the similarities between nations—rather than a blind assertion of difference—has the potential to explode nationalist appropriations of regional writing is shown in a recent article by two American critics, Frances Kaye and Robert Thacker. I have already discussed the way Hutcheon creates Robert Kroetsch as a "Canadian" author by valorizing the postmodern aspects of his writings and suppressing his regional identification. Kaye and Thacker insist on an alternate construction:

While Kroetsch, as Linda Hutcheon asserts, may well be seen as "Mr. Canadian Postmodern," a countervailing argument may be offered in which he is, far more urgently, Mr. Great Plains Postmodern. Indeed, given Canada's regional

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42 For a discussion of earlier American influence, see Davey, "Black Days on Black Mountain" (1965) and Louis Dudek, "Lunchtime Reflections on Frank Davey's Defence of the Black Mountain Fort" (1965).
fissures, claiming the preeminence of the Great Plains in Kroetsch's work makes far more sense than any pan-Canadian sensibility, no matter how much Central-Canadian critics... wish to make him their own. This is not to say there are no distinctions between Canadian Prairies and U.S. Plains... At the same time the human response to a physiographic region does create a tangible human culture of the Great Plains north and south of the 49th parallel. (181)

In constructing Kroetsch as a Great Plains writer, Kaye and Thacker posit a model of regional writing which acknowledges that a critical economy of regionalism based on a belief in environmental determinism must admit cross-border similarities. Kaye and Thacker offer a way of reading Kroetsch which permits articulation of regional difference. It is important to maintain such intersectionality: Kroetsch can thus be prairie and Canadian. However, the geographic essentialism underlying the assertion of plains/prairie commonality must be interrogated as well: as I discussed earlier, the human response to the environment is not uniform within the region, and the radically different agricultural policies of the American and Canadian governments trouble any arguments of American/Canadian similarity based on human adaptation to the land.
While some critics, like Kennedy and Hutcheon, recuperate and project a generalized regionalism, other critics like David Staines defuse its disruptive potential by reinforcing regional definitions which rely on ideas of obsolescence and limitation. Central to this regional construction is the idea that place is meaningless, that we live in, as Northrop Frye suggested in The Modern Century (1967), a "post-national world" (17) which is so generalized as to render historical and cultural specifics obsolete.43 Thus Staines writes in Beyond the Provinces (1995) that the desire for the recognition of regional difference reflects only a colonial attitude, in its articulation of "Canada's colonial preoccupation with here in relation to there" (15). As Staines's title indicates, he feels that literary critics in Canada should transcend what he views as a regressive and anachronistic insistence on difference, in favour of becoming homogenized citizens of the global village. Given the overwhelming internationalism of the marketplace, insistence on region and place is obsolete: he writes that "now, at century's end, the here of Canadian fiction is not defined but indefinable. The earlier obsession with the question "where is here?" has faded into memory, a question no

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43 Frye's contribution to the construction of region will be discussed presently.
longer necessary, valid, or even appropriate" (27). However, his commentary on Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook* highlights the necessity of continuing to ask that question.

Staines describes Watson's novel as "an anti-regional novel, rejecting the colonial implications of regionalism and denying any difference in the life lived in the local community and the life lived at the centre" (17). This description seems to me to be a fundamental misreading of the novel, which does not make any claims for a universalization of the local. Rather than asserting that there is no difference between centre and region, as Staines suggests, *The Double Hook* rewrites the region as the centre. There is a considerable difference here, and it is within that difference that Staines appropriates the text to a homogenized national vision.

Staines quotes Watson's description of the novel's genesis:

I began the writing of *The Double Hook* as an answer to a challenge . . . a challenge that you could not write about particular places in Canada: that what you'd end up with was a regional novel of some kind. It was at the time, I suppose, when people were thinking that if you write a novel it had to be, in some

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44 Staines himself seems a little obsessed with the question.
45 Staines does not clarify what he means by "the centre."
mysterious way, international. It had to be about what I would call something else. And so I thought, I don't see why: how do you... how are you international if you're not international? If you're very provincial, very local, and very much a part of your own milieu? (17)

Staines reads this statement as a rejection of regionalism, but I read it as a rejection of the internationalism Staines himself espouses. Watson's statement seems an affirmation of the local, a rejection of the insistence on universal values and a celebration of one's own milieu. This statement rejects the kind of definition Staines imposes on regionalism: a narrowly limited and naïve genre which can only describe a strictly circumscribed world in realistic terms. Because, clearly, The Double Hook cannot be fit into that definition, Staines redefines it as "Canadian" rather than redefining regionalism itself. As a result, The Double Hook is subsumed under the blanket of CanLit: "Here is the end of colonial writing and the assertive beginning of post-colonial fiction; here is the first naturalized Canadian novel, the first novel that is unselfconsciously Canadian" (18). And as the novel's content has now been claimed for Canada, the form can be similarly appropriated—rather than exploring ideological implications of its formal disjunction, Staines unproblematically promotes it as "a language totally new to
Canadian fiction" (19). Ultimately, all signs of novel's or author's connections to region and place are effaced; its value lies in its "evocation of literary and human patterns traditionally associated with the world's centres and other places" (19). While Staines ostensibly argues that in a post-national world place is no longer important, his insistence on absorbing *The Double Hook* into a specifically Canadian canon suggests his real belief: as MacLennan suggested earlier, some places are more important than others.

It would be impossible to discuss nationalist constructions of the regional without an extended consideration of Northrop Frye's criticism. Frye's writings define regionalism in a variety of ways, both positive and negative. What is consistent, however, is the continual production of a non-political regionalism linked to ideas of identity and home, and nestled within a larger Canadian context. While he rejected reductive "a Canadian is..." declarations, Frye argued that there is a distinct national imagination which is, unfortunately, unable to transcend the nation. In his Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), he writes that the temporal and geographic specificity characteristic of regional writing is incompatible with great art, which must transcend the particular and function in a universal context. Canadian literature, he claims, has not yet been able to escape the local, but he adds that this inability might benefit what
he sees as the project of the Canadian public, the "obvious and unquenchable desire . . . to identify itself through its literature" (823). If," writes Frye, "no Canadian author pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself, then at every point we remain aware of his social and historical setting" (822). However, the price of the Canadian public's self-identification is figured as exclusion from "the centre of literary experience." To gain access to that centre, the social and historical setting in which the work is produced must be effaced; the work must somehow hang suspended, existing independent of its production. Such a work would obviously not depend on a particular region, or even a particular nation, but on an international (meaning European) literary tradition itself, reflecting not empirical reality, but other texts. Regionalism is then beside the point; since by whatever definition regionalism as a literary movement must have something to do with a specific area, it remains outside Frye's terms. Frye makes explicit the extraneous role of place:

46Margaret Atwood demonstrates such a desire in Survival (1974): "A piece of art, as well as being a creation to be enjoyed, can also be a mirror. The reader looks at the mirror and sees not the writer but himself; and behind his own image in the foreground a reflection of the world he lives in. If a country or culture lacks such mirrors it has no way of knowing what it looks like; it must travel blind. If, as has long been the case in this country, the viewer is given a mirror that reflects not him, but someone else, and told at the same time that the reflection he sees is himself, he will get a distorted idea of what he is really like. He will also get a distorted idea of what other people are like: it's hard to find out who anyone else is until you have found out who you are" (15-16).
Canada, of course, or the place where Canada is, can supply distinctive settings and props to a writer who is looking for local colour . . . . But it would be an obvious fallacy to claim that the setting provided anything more than novelty. . . . The forms of literature are autonomous; they exist within literature itself, and cannot be derived from an experience outside literature. What the Canadian writer finds in his experience and environment may be new, but it will be new only as content: the form of his expression can take shape only from what he has read, not from what he has experienced. (835)

Canadian literature, for Frye, can be Canadian only in its coloration; thematic and formal considerations must rely on what he considers to be a universal tradition. But perhaps more interesting about this quotation is the way in which Frye qualifies Canada: "Canada . . . or the place where Canada is." The tension here is provocative: is there a place called Canada? Frye's hesitation seems to suggest not, or at least that geography and culture are not necessarily contiguos. Canada here functions not only as a constituted whole, definite and defined, but also exists alongside a far less determinate place which both is and is not Canada. What is "the place where Canada is"? This question is like Frye's famous "Where is here?", but the difference between the two queries suggests the
impossibility of them ever being satisfactorily answered. Canada becomes a sliding signifier, a term used not to describe an absolute thing, but one instead used subjectively, as a term of critical evaluation. As such, the term is open to question, operating somewhere in the indeterminate space between what Margaret Atwood calls, in Survival (1972), "Canadian literature," and "literature that happened to be written in Canada" (13). Frye's construction of the Canadian condition is initially rooted in geographic determinism. The human response to the landscape defines Canada and distinguishes it from the United States: Frye writes that "to enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent" (824). Central Canada functions here as a

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47 "Where is here?" suggests that there is a here, that there is something about Canada that is recognizably here, something is recognizably different from there. "What is this place where Canada is?" indicates that Canadian-ness is not fixed, that it shifts from one position to another.

48 Atwood's remark that she studies "Canadian literature—not just literature that happened to be written in Canada" troubles any acceptance of her Survival thesis. Since she does not conduct a general literary survey, but examines only a narrow catalogue of books which she has already determined meet her pre-existing Canadian criteria, it is not surprising that she discovers particular continuities between them. Her argument is not based on a consideration of the literature, but is imposed upon it.

49 Frye retains this distinction in his later essay "Sharing the Continent" (1977), where he writes that the most important difference between Canadians and Americans is "the Canadian sense of the close relation of people to the land. . . . The sense is not that of the possession of the land, but precisely the absence of possession, a feeling that here is a nature that man has polluted and imprisoned and violated but has never really lived with" (68). See Victor Konrad's "Symbolic Landscapes of Nationalism and Regionalism in Canada" (1985) and Rob Shields's Places on the Margin (1991) for elaboration on how the idea of Canada as a "silent" and "alien" land has historically been, and continues to be, used to differentiate
metonym for the nation—the Maritime provinces are curiously erased from the map. Frye further writes that the Canadian imagination is characterized by what he calls a "garrison mentality," which results when "distinctively human values [are] . . . confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting" (830). Frye's "Canadian identity" is thus environmentally determined: if the physical environment were more hospitable, the national identity would be different too. But the belief in a geographically-dictated, pan-Canadian garrison mentality is made possible only through an assertion of national geographical and cultural homogeneity. In his 1971 preface to The Bush Garden, Frye revises such assertions. Here, Canada is geographically and culturally diverse: Frye constructs this condition as a cause-and-effect relation. He writes:

the question of Canadian identity, so far as it affects the creative imagination, is not a "Canadian" question at all, but a regional question. . . . What can there be in common between an imagination nurtured on the prairies, where it is a centre of consciousness diffusing itself over a vast flat expanse stretching the remote horizon, and one nurtured in British Columbia, where it is in the midst of gigantic trees and mountains leaping into the sky all the "true north strong and free" from what is constructed as the American technocracy to the south.
around it, and obliterating the horizon everywhere? (ii)

Instead of the landscape determining Canadian unity, as it did in his 1965 Conclusion, it produces dispersal. The collective Canadian imagination is seen as a mirage; imagination and creativity are derived not from nation but from specific regional environments which are geographically, not culturally, determined. Interestingly, such creativity is non-transferable, as Frye writes that an artist who moves from one region to another may "live with its people and become accepted as one of them, but if he paints or writes about it he will paint or write as an imaginative foreigner" (ii). Individual creativity is thus tied to an immutable landscape, which here is the landscape of origin. The subject is then also immutable; identity is fixed at the point of origin and cannot be reconstructed through geographic or social dislocation, as the artist will always remain "an imaginative foreigner." This critical model produces an authoritative native speaker perfectly in tune with his or her own environment, with his or her imagination created by a nurturing spirit of place.

Frye writes further that "identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective and rooted in a political feeling" (ii). This dichotomy is provocative: the regional imagination is the source of identity, but remains introspective and lacking
in political involvement. While many would argue that regional identification is anything but politically uninvolved, for Frye to construct a symmetrical argument (as he does in contrasting regionalism and nationalism) requires that he suppress the political agenda frequently connected to regional identity. Eli Mandel points to this suppression in "The Regional Novel: Borderline Art" (1978):

one of the political manoeuvres . . . used to deflate political tensions implicit in any claims made for the value of regionalism is to detach cultural considerations from political ones, to distinguish, as Professor Frye does, between imaginative identity and political unity, or to describe the essential meaning of Canada as the balance between the two. (105)

Regionalism, when connected with politics, troubles the national unity Frye tries to discover and maintain:

Whenever the east-west context of the Canadian outlook begins to weaken, separatism, which is always there, emerges as a political force. Every part of Canada has strong separatist feeling: there is a separatism of the Pacific Coast, of the Prairies, of the Maritimes, of Newfoundland as well as of Quebec. Ontario, of course, began with a separatist movement from the American Revolution. But since the rise of
the great ideological revolutionary movements of our time, whether communist, fascist, imperialist, Islamic or what not, separatism has been an almost wholly destructive force. The successful separatings, like that of Norway and Sweden in 1905, took place before the rise of these movements. (iv)

Regional identity, while laudable for its originary powers, must for Frye remain politically neutral. Should that neutrality wane, separatism and disaster would inevitably result. Frye's position is reminiscent of E.K. Brown's earlier warning of "what a peril [regional] variety is . . . to national unity" (23). The difference between a politicized regional consciousness and a separatist agenda, discussed in my first chapter, is here elided; the two become the same. Frye is forced to play fast and loose with history to explain how some separatist movements have been not "wholly destructive," and his assertion that the separation of Norway and Sweden predates ideology displays a surprising ingenuousness.

In an interesting rhetorical move, Frye uses separatism to unite the country—"every part of Canada has

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50 Frye writes in "Levels of Cultural Identity" (1989) that a belief that secession would be beneficial to the regions is misguided: "In every part of Canada there are strong separatist feelings, and separatism can only lead to increased American penetration, especially economic and ideological. This is not to say that such penetration must be sinister, merely that it is the opposite of what separatism aims at" (168-69).
strong separatist feelings." However, his claims assert a false parallelism. The Pacific Coast, the Prairies, the Maritimes, Newfoundland, and Québec may occasionally want to separate from Canada, but Ontario never does. Indeed, it is possible to view the other provinces as wanting not to separate from Canada, but from Ontario. Ontario may have begun from a separatist movement, but that separatist impulse no longer exists—Ontario cannot separate from itself. The implicit equation of Ontario and Canada buried in this statement provides grounds for regional division even as it stresses unification.

Frye's writings can be read as exercises in containment. The Bush Garden was published just after the FLQ crisis of October 1970 had culminated in the séparatiste kidnappings of James Cross and Pierre Laporte and the subsequent declaration of the War Measures Act by the federal government. Writing against the Québec separatist movement, Frye posits the idea of a nationally-based unity as an alternative. Unity, he writes, does not mean nationalism, but something rather more nebulous:

51 Robert Kroetsch's essay "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" (1985) uses a similar thesis in the assertion that disunity is a Canadian meta-narrative, comparable to the American Dream. But Kroetsch is comfortable with "a low level of self-definition and national definition," arguing that it is by "staying multiple" that Canada survives as a nation (28). He distinguishes between his project and Frye's: "A great Canadian critic like Northrop Frye is at heart a modernist, trying to assert the oneness, the unity of all narrative, but the writers of stories and poems nowadays, in Canada, are not terribly sympathetic to Frye and his unifying sense of what a mythic vision is. Against this overriding view, we posit an archaeological sense that every unearthing is problematic, tentative, subject to a story-making art that is itself subject to further change as the 'dig' goes on" (24).
Real unity tolerates dissent and rejoices in a variety of outlook and tradition, recognizes that it is man's destiny to unite and not divide. . . . Unity, so understood, is the extra dimension that raises the sense of belonging into genuine human life. Nobody of any intelligence has any business being loyal to an ideal of uniformity: what one owes one's loyalty to is an ideal of unity, and a distrust of such loyalty is rooted in a distrust of life itself. (vi)\(^52\)

Unity, like Canada itself, is constructed as a containing force. Unity "tolerates dissent," just as Canada contains a number of regions with separatist impulses. However, the kind of dissent Frye's unity is willing to allow is strictly legislated. Regional identity is tolerated as long as it does not lead to political unrest; regionalism is permitted as long as it doesn't threaten national stability. Such destabilization, should it occur, would be rooted in a case of displaced loyalty, carried on by people of little intelligence, and counter to the very destiny of humankind. The hyperbole of Frye's discussion suggests the considerable opposition he faces: even as he asserts the unity of humankind (and Canadian humankind in particular),

\(^52\)There is an interesting comparison to be made between this statement and David Bentley's description of "a benign nationalism" (7) in The Gay/Grey Moose. I discuss this passage in my next chapter.
the terms with which he discusses it reinscribe its opposition. 53

Frye's attempts to contain the dispersing potential of regionalism can also be seen in his initial definitions of unity and identity. After writing of the diversity of regionally-based Canadian cultural expression, he remarks that "there are, of course, containing imaginative forms which are common to the whole country, even if not peculiar to Canada" (ii). If the containing imaginative forms are not particularly Canadian, then whether they are common across the country really bears little relevance to the discussion. The logic here is empty: there is nothing in these containing imaginative forms to unite a specifically Canadian imagination. Indeed, all that is left is diversity.

Frye's rhetorical strategies, in both his Preface and his Conclusion, can likewise be read as attempts at containment. Particularly in his Conclusion, Frye constructs a series of symmetrical oppositions, into which he slots Canadian culture: the divisions in Canada are between Canadian and American (825), French and English (824), sophisticated and primitive (825), north-south and east-west (824). Canadian literature has two moods, either "romantic, traditional and idealistic," or "shrewd,

53 Atwood's Survival expresses a similar fear of disintegration, in her assertion of a unified national culture that is distinct from, and exists in opposition to, American culture. Frye sees the threat to Canadian stability as internal, whereas Atwood writes at a slightly later date (1974) against a continentalism which she sees as complicit with American cultural, political and military imperialism.
observant, and humourous" (825). Overall, he writes, "Canada has two languages and two literatures," divided along French-English lines. What is interesting here is the way in which this deliberate division of Canada into two parts produces the illusion of balance and unity. English Canada is nowhere divided; the reader is left with the impression of symmetry and solidarity throughout. There is no room for regional identity, hybridity, or intersectionality here; to admit it would be to tip the scales in one direction or another. As we have seen, Frye is able to recuperate a non-political regionalism in his preface to The Bush Garden, but even a relatively "safe" regionalism would disturb the balance of the Conclusion.

Frye's version of the regional is further modified in his later writings, where regionalism becomes both increasingly specific and entirely universal. In "Criticism and Environment" (1981), he writes against the fallacy of the exclusive characteristic. . . the attempt to distinguish something that is, in this case, "truly Canadian" and not to be found in other literatures. There are no exclusive or even defining characteristics anywhere in literature; there are only degrees of emphasis, and anyone looking for such characteristics soon gets as confused as a racist looking for pure Aryans. (145)
The search for the "exclusive characteristic" is rendered fallacious, in part, by what Frye sees as Canada's essentially regional nature. "As one previously inarticulate region after another has formed an orbit for the imagination," he writes, "we discover that Canada, culturally speaking, is really an aggregate of smaller areas stretching from Vancouver Island to the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland" (149). Frye sees these smaller areas as nourishing Canadian writing, remarking that there is "something vegetable about the creative imagination, something that needs roots and a limited environment" (148).

But while Frye explicitly rejects any essential national identity, his construction of "vegetable regionalism" remains in many ways regressive. Frye may reject essentializing nationalist criticism, but he still maintains that literature in English Canada has "an imaginative coherence" ("Criticism" 149).
Newfoundland or southern British Columbia will be much less likely to do so. (25)

Frye's distinction between the provincial milieu and the international "cultural heritage" recalls earlier Canadian modernists' division between the provincial and the cosmopolitan. The regional experience is allowed to inform the work of the writer from the "provincial" region—and it is interesting to note where Frye locates the "provincial"—but it cannot be too obvious; if the writer is too concerned about "expressing a distinctive subject matter with enough emphasis" (23), the resulting work will be flawed. Regional content must appear only coincidentally; a cosmopolitan tale may occur in a regional setting, but only as long as that setting remains in the background. Frye's 1965 assertion that "what the Canadian writer finds in his experience and environment may be new, but it will be new only as content: the forms of his expression can take shape only from what he has read, not from what he has experienced" (865) can easily be rephrased to describe the regional writer.

But if Frye sees Canadian culture becoming increasingly specific, he also constructs a regionalism which is entirely universal. In The Modern Century (1967), he argued that Canada's destiny was international rather than national, writing that "we are moving towards a post-national world" (17). The implications of this post-
nationality for literary culture are explained in "Across the River and Out of the Trees" (1980):

In an "instant world" of communication, there is no reason for cultural lag or for a difference between sophisticated writers in large centres and naive writers in smaller ones. A world like ours produces a single international style in which all existing literatures are regional developments. This international style is not a bag of rhetorical tricks but a way of seeing and thinking in a world controlled by uniform patterns of technology, and the regional development is a way of escaping from that uniformity. (31)

Frye's international regionalism is so diffuse as to lose all regional specificity. If all literature relates to "a single international style," then it has little relation to specific place. The effect of such a construction is similar to that generated by Linda Hutcheon's production of a pan-Canadian postmodern regionalism: literary difference is normalized and seen as part of a universal continuum. Thus, literary movements which can be seen as specific to a historical and geographical moment, such as various post-colonial endeavors, can be emptied of political meaning and reconstructed merely as different expressions of universal themes. Regional dissatisfaction is instead seen as resistance to "a world controlled by uniform patterns of
technology," and so any specific regional demands for change or recognition can be ignored or deflected from a particular context to an abstract and generalized condition of global "uniformity." Frye's claim in *The Bush Garden* that "every part of Canada has strong separatist feelings" worked to defuse a politicized regionalism; the remark that "all existing literatures are regional developments" works the same way.

In this chapter I have explored the ways that nationalist critics have produced and maintained a critical discourse which either defines regionalism pejoratively and in ways that make it necessarily regressive, or that universalizes regionalism to such an extent that it becomes only a metaphor for a generalized human condition. While the amount and variety of writing generated within the regions continues to increase, these regional definitions have not changed. Critics have constructed a non-political regionalism which threatens no one; works which suggest political action are reviled as secessionist and excluded from the regional category. Additionally, the regions are seen almost invariably as isolated islands with little contact either with each other or with the perceived centre. Maintaining such distinctions allows nationalist discourse to determine what works display "regional" characteristics without having to acknowledge the power relationships that underlie such definitions. If the regions can be constructed as entirely other to the centre,
then no connection between central affluence and regional poverty can be made, and the responsibility for any inequality can be deflected onto the regions themselves. My next chapter will examine how the critical production of "prairie writing" is complicit with such a centralist construction of the regional.
CHAPTER THREE: CRITICAL FICTIONS OF THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

In Great Plains literature, the common elements that inform symbols and images, language attitudes, and values, arise from the land itself . . .

- Diane Dufva Quantie, "The Unifying Thread: Connecting Place and Language in Great Plains Literature"

In my last chapter I traced the development of Canadian nationalist discourse and the related subordination of the regional. This regional devaluation is particularly acute in critical constructions of prairie writing which, as I discussed in my first chapter, is perceived as especially dependent on the environment. Henry Kreisel's 1968 statement that "all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the human mind" (6) is paradigmatic of critical approaches to writings from the prairies. The belief in the deterministic power of the prairie environment, coupled with a belief in regional homogeneity, has created a narrowly defined category of "prairie writing" which frequently depends more on the critic's perception of the prairies themselves than on the actual writing. This chapter examines critical constructions of literature from the Canadian prairies and demonstrates how the critics' demands for "authentic" regional representation have led to a valorization of works which reinforce images of regional dependency and
helplessness, and to the related devaluation of writings which work against this model.

Paul Hiebert's satirical study of Sarah Binks, the fictional "Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan," won the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour in 1947. Successful satire always contains an element of truth, and Sarah Binks is no exception. But if the aim of satire is to effect change, then Sarah Binks can be said to have failed on that account. The things Hiebert's Author celebrates in Sarah—her embodiment of Saskatchewan, her ability to represent rural life accurately, her dependence on landscape—turn up again and again in serious critical evaluations of prairie writing. Hiebert traces Sarah's poetic career from her earliest influences to her premature death, and covers a wide range of poetic form and content. The book successfully satirizes not only Sarah Binks but also the critics who try to construct her as a poetic genius: Sarah Binks comes complete with footnotes directing the reader to such important monographs as the Rev. Beckus Puddy's *A Comparative Study of the Literature of Saskatchewan with that of Easter Island* (32). The Author locates Sarah's particular significance in her ability to encapsulate the Saskatchewan experience, writing that "no other poet has so expressed the Saskatchewan soul. No other poet has caught in deathless lines so much of its elusive spirit, the baldness of its prairies, the alkalinity of its soil, the richness of its insect life" (xix). Sarah is "an
expression of her environment and her age" (xvii), and she "speaks for the Canadian West in the language of all poets at all times" (xvi). The Author, intent on a biographical survey of Sarah's writing, painstakingly researches the real-life occurrences behind such classic poems as "The Cursed Duck." While generally championing Sarah's work, he expresses reservations about her translations of German poems ("she has lost not only the spirit but the form and content as well") because "they do not express the Saskatchewan soul" (27). He sees Sarah's greatest contribution as the "geo-literary school of poetry," in which she is both founder and sole student: her inspiration springs directly from Saskatchewan's soil, as well as the rock formations below it. But this reliance on geology does not mean that her poetics are petrified. As the Author points out, Sarah's ingenious use of trochaics in "Hiawatha's Milking" ("Give me of your milk, oh moo-cow,/ Of your pure white juice, oh do, cow") indicates that she is "only too well aware that the milking of a Saskatchewan cow calls always for new forms of expression" (128). Hiebert's satirical identification of critical concerns--the articulation of a genuine Saskatchewan voice and true prairie experience, the determinative power of landscape and the importance of human response to it--is worth keeping in mind, for Hiebert's satire is unintentionally replicated over and over again by later critics.
Edward McCourt's *The Canadian West in Fiction*, published in 1949, was the first and for a long time the only book-length study of Canadian prairie fiction. McCourt's critical survey summarized the fiction that had so far appeared, and tried to set a course for later writers to follow. The extent to which his work affected prairie writers is unknowable but, as we will see, he certainly influenced later critics. McCourt bases his discussion of the Canadian West on a combination of geography and metaphysics. He writes that "the prairie provinces constitute the most homogenous of the great natural geographic divisions in this country," and that despite the considerable political differences between Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, "there is a remarkable unity of spirit among prairie dwellers; and a way of life as distinctive as the region which fosters it" (v). McCourt's reliance on the spirit of place as determinant of regional distinction places him in the tradition of topocentric criticism that was explored in my first two chapters. Like those critics, McCourt bases his belief in a *genius loci* on what he considers to be general knowledge; everyone knows what that Western unity of spirit entails, though few could ever quantify it. He explains his terminology:

> It may be objected that the title, *The Canadian West in Prairie Fiction*, is inaccurate, since the most westerly province of all is not
included in the discussion. But British Columbia is a world apart from the prairies: regional unity begins near Kenora and ends in the foothills. To the native of the prairies Alberta is the Far West; British Columbia the near East (vi).

Since McCourt's vision of regional unity is so firmly based on a spirit of place which is itself rooted in landscape, articulation of that landscape, and its impact on people, is of primary importance to him. To produce a successful novel of the Canadian West, McCourt writes, an author must concentrate on that which makes the region unique:

The writer who seeks to inform his readers of the peculiar quality of a region such as the prairie provinces should be a pictorial artist able to describe accurately the physical features of a characteristic prairie landscape; he should be a poet with power to feel and re-create imaginatively the particular atmosphere which invests the prairie scene; and lastly, he should be a psychologist with sufficient knowledge of human nature to be able to understand and describe the influence of the region upon the people who live within its confines. (55)
McCourt's interpretation of the role of the regional writer follows E. K. Brown's very closely. Here we see the emphasis on realistic representation: the writer must provide accurate and characteristic descriptions of a generalized region. McCourt's definition is strongly based on environmental determinism, as it is the influence of the region that shapes human character. The writer appears as an anthropologist, exploring a strange culture and explaining its peculiarities to the reading audience. The overall impression given is that regional culture is somewhat primitive: prairie dwellers do not control their fate, but have it defined for them through their dependency on the land and its deterministic power. McCourt writes from within the prairie region, but he is also writing for an extra-regional audience, as shown in his explanation of the term "west" in his title. That the prairie is foreign territory is also implied in McCourt's invocation of the psychologist, whose knowledge of "normal" human behavior allows him to discuss the aberrations the prairie environment produces.

McCourt's dependency on realism and environmental determinism naturally shapes his criticism. He dismisses the popular romantic thriller, writing that

in part [it] reflects the influence of American frontier literature which was legitimately exploiting the bloodcurdling and sensational, in part the inability of our writers to comprehend
the dramatic impact on character and ordinary human relationships of an environment whose most obvious characteristic was—and perhaps still is—monotony. (12-13)

To be anything other than monotonous seems unWestern Canadian. McCourt's statement demonstrates the limitations of an environmentally deterministic perspective—here, writers are restricted to techniques of flat-out realism. And, as with Brown, we see how McCourt's ideas of realism and reality are linked. If a work doesn't demonstrate the fundamental monotony of the environment, then it is not realistic and is therefore devalued. Correspondingly, McCourt praises works which he views as arising directly from a realistic response to the prairie. He writes approvingly of Robert Stead's Grain and its main character, Gander, remarking that the "physical environment is described with unaltering vividness and accuracy, and the details of description are artistically justifiable because they are never extraneous to the character of the hero" (83). "Anyone familiar with a farming community," he adds, "has met Gander Stake" (84). McCourt names Ross's As For Me and My House as the novel that comes closest to capturing the prairie milieu, but even it falls short of his ideal. While some authors describe landscape well, and some do justice to the prairie environment, he writes, no one has yet shown
the subtle modifications of character which inevitably result from the influence upon ordinary men and women of a highly distinctive environment. The greatest single weakness of our Western writers is their inability to understand people in relation to their surroundings. Without such understanding the great novel of the prairies cannot be written.

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No other book-length study of prairie writing, either fiction or poetry, appeared until Laurence Ricou's 1973 *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction*. David Carpenter describes life as a graduate student of Canadian literature in the early seventies, when the literary search for national identity was firmly linked to garrisons and survival. He writes: "I became a proselytizer for stark realism, a grim reality snob in the Saskatchewan tradition: grimmer than thou. But was I alone in my glorification of despair, deprivation, and defeat? I think not" (23). *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* certainly fits that mold. Like McCourt and numerous other Canadian critics, Ricou sees the human relation to landscape as the underlying theme of all Canadian literature. Prairie writing, in his view, is no
exception: the difference between a Canadian writer and a prairie writer is that a prairie writer just asks "a regional form of the question" (2). Ricou also sees "the record of man's response to the emptiness, to the hollowness so often found at the core of life, to the void beyond, which is death" (xi) as a fundamental literary theme, though one which is certainly not exclusive to Canada. He uses landscape to connect these two motifs in the context of prairie writing, arguing that the image of a vertical man in a horizontal landscape is seen to inform the works of the past two decades when the literary imagination has faced with a new spirit of adventure and courage, the bewildering emptiness of twentieth-century human experience. For the recent writers of Canadian prairie fiction, the totality of the vacuum in the modern age was dramatically mirrored in their own physical landscape. (xi)

Indeed, Ricou argues that this existential anguish particularly distinguishes prairie writing:

Man on the prairie, as portrayed in Canadian fiction, is defined especially by two things: exposure, and an awareness of the surrounding emptiness. The basic image of a single human figure amidst the vast flatness of the landscape serves to unify and describe Canadian prairie fiction. (ix)
The fundamental battle between man and landscape Ricou perceives is evident even in his title, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*. He explains: "Man, in sum, is vertical—and vertical is waking, consciousness, health; land is horizontal, and horizontal is sleeping, unconsciousness, debilitation" (xii). His position could not be much clearer. To support his argument (that there is an obvious opposition between human and landscape which is apparent in prairie fiction and which relates directly to a cosmic meaninglessness), Ricou must construct a prairie canon that bolsters his view. *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* is extremely anxious about evaluation; Ricou constantly divides prairie writing into "major" and "minor" works. Not surprisingly, the works he calls "minor" are the ones which are not sufficiently angst-ridden: prairie realist writing is thus "mature fiction" (64), and works which view the prairie more positively are "slight, lacking in seriousness, insipid" and "minor" (65, 64). Implicit in this evaluative strategy is the idea of progression: first, a bunch of bad writers wrote about the prairie, but now the good writers have taken over and presented the prairie more faithfully and with deeper understanding. As a result, Ricou can declare that examination of writers like Arthur Stringer and Nellie McClung is necessary "if only to provide one measure of the achievement of later writers" (65).
Ricou's critical reliance on a belief in the essential destructiveness of the prairie environment leads him to demonize the prairie itself, and to reject those writers who do not. While McCourt had praised Stead's Grain for its realistic representation of the prairie milieu, Ricou condemns it for its "pervasive nostalgia and its neglect of the harsher aspects of prairie life" (21). Similarly, he uses this criterion to advance authors who support his view:

Immense flatness mirrors man's infinite opportunities, but Stead shows no sense that this was a country 'that hated a foreign and vertical thing.' An awareness of this aspect of the prairie gives to Frederick Philip Grove's landscape a balance, comprehension and imaginative validity unknown to Stead. (37)

He likewise praises Martha Ostenso: "Wild Geese is the most important prairie novel to be published between the wars. Like Grove, Ostenso is conscious of the inherent cruelty of the prairie and of the great emptiness which encircles man in the landscape" (74). One wonders what hideous prairie experience shaped Ricou's formative years. The prairie is not a particularly easy place to live, but to accuse it of inherent cruelty is critical histrionics.

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55 The phrase in quotation marks is from Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow.
While Ricou's view of the prairie is much more profoundly negative than McCourt's, like McCourt he evaluates writing in terms of realistic portrayal of landscape, praising those works he sees as "true" and devaluing those which present an alternate vision. The idea of truth is important to Ricou's argument, for prairie writing must reveal both a national and a universal condition. We have earlier seen how the idea of truth works in relation to regional writing in general. Ricou preserves the model of regional literature as sociological or anthropological in nature: like Brown, Ricou wants prairie writing to teach us who we are. His argument thus rests on his assessment of prairie reality, which allows him to dismiss early romantic prairie writers because "they leave the actual prairie quite invisible" (65). Likewise, he complains that Laura Goodman Salverson's 1923 novel, The Viking Heart, is "inauthentic," and criticises it and all of his "minor" writers because "the landscape does not seem essential to the story; the reader does not have a strong sense of its distinctive features or influences" (70). This last statement, of course, recalls McCourt's insistence on the "peculiar" effects of the prairie landscape. Like McCourt, Ricou seems to be insisting on "truth" instead of fiction: again recalling McCourt, Ricou praises Ross's As for Me and My House for showing "the psychological impact of the prairie" (94). Ross is thus reduced to skilled researcher, rather than creative writer.
Ricou's valorization of his own version of prairie truth is further shown in his assessment that Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow* provides "the right verbalization of the prairie experience" (111, my italics). Having thus determined that there is a right way and a wrong way to write about the prairie, Ricou can comfortably evaluate texts.

Because his argument depends so heavily upon the perceived truth-value of the texts he discusses, Ricou must construct a thoroughly malevolent prairie to support his contentions. This construction is seen in his discussion of recent prairie writing:

The absolute sterility and life-denying quality of the prairie wasteland anticipates, and blends with, the bewilderment and alienation prevalent in the post-Hitler, nuclear era. In attempting to depict the universal meaninglessness posited by existentialism, the Western Canadian writer found an obvious metaphor in the prairie landscape. (120)

Well, please. The toxic, apocalyptic landscape Ricou sculpts is far more destructive than anything Ross or Grove ever depicted. While Ricou does discuss the barren landscape as metaphor, he also constructs it as a natural metaphor, writing that "as an image for the stubborn

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Ricou's heavy reliance on Wallace Stegner points to one of the problems of attempting to construct an "authentic" prairie writing based on environmentally deterministic criteria - how can Stegner, an American author, articulate a distinctly Canadian vision of the prairie?
resistance of nature, the unchanging prairie was an obvious choice" (43). To properly symbolize the basic man-against-nature conflict that Ricou sees informing all good prairie writing, the prairie itself must be strangely timeless, the harsh conditions of prairie life remaining unchanged despite the radical technological advances and population shifts accompanying the twentieth-century angst with which he is so concerned. A contradiction thus appears in Ricou's terms, as the "prairie wasteland" stands both for the human condition in a particular moment in time, the "post-Hitler, nuclear era," and for a more universalized existential anguish. The literary truth-value he relies on also recurs, as the wasteland metaphor cannot be just a literary conceit: it has, at some basic level, to be true.

In his introduction, Ricou asserts that he is concerned not with the real prairie, but with the way prairie writers have imaginatively constructed it: "the prairie, for example, may in many instances not be as flat as it is described, but it is precisely this prairie—that seen by the artist and conceived to be necessary in his design—which is significant" (5). So far, so good. But real and imagined prairie immediately become confused and conflated:

The myth of the land is imaginatively valid, by virtue of its being shared, often almost intuitively, by a people trying to express their sense of themselves in time and place. The
reflection of the collective consciousness, or subconsciousness, in the repeated references to
the land in prairie fiction is constant, and convincing. (5)

Ricou's assertions of a collective consciousness do not wear well. Here we see prairie writers' depictions of landscape arising not out of creativity, but rather out of some naive intuition governed by landscape. Ricou's introduction of mythology gestures towards the idea of landscape imagery being a cultural production, but he immediately cancels that gesture through a reliance on environmental determinism. He naturalizes his "myth" of the hostile prairie through the idea of autochthonous production: because this universal myth springs from the landscape, it is therefore "true," or, in his term, imaginatively valid. Ricou's reliance on landscape also troubles his basic argument, as he ends up insisting that the existential angst he reads into these texts is at once a product of the influence "of a limited and peculiar environment," and a universal response to the late twentieth-century.

Like the critics I discussed in first chapter, Ricou links himself to a critical narrative which asserts that the prairie landscape is particularly hard to represent. Ricou situates this difficulty in what he views as the

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57 This statement also demonstrates Ricou's necessary homogenization of the region: prairie dwellers are constructed as "a people" who respond to the landscape in only one way.
prairie's utter lack of redeeming features, writing that "the basic problem of the prairie writer" is "how . . . to interpret a landscape that is without sounds and devoid of anything concrete to catch the eye or stimulate the imagination" (137). Not only is the landscape particularly difficult to represent, he explains, but it actually works against representation. He discusses Henry Kelsey's prairie verse:

Kelsey's remarks, scant as they may be, indicate the lengthy fictional history of the attitude that the typical prairie landscape is unremarkable, if it does not, in fact, inhibit verbal expression. The prairie farmer is often as laconic, especially about landscape aesthetics, as Kelsey seems to have been. (6)

It would be interesting to know where in the world the farmer is who has time to engage in vigorous discussion of landscape aesthetics. Here we revisit several of Ricou's arguments. The lack of articulation Ricou sees in the landscape is extended to its inhabitants: both are silent, both uninteresting. As well, both are figures from the past, as the prairie, and the human response to it, are permanently ossified, unchanged since 1690. A cause-and-effect relation between the landscape and the culture is posited—if the prairie farmer is silent, it is because the land makes him or her that way.
What Ricou seems not to notice about a prairie that supposedly represses verbal expression is that he has based his study entirely on articulations of the prairie experience. Mrs. Bentley may see a silent prairie, but Sinclair Ross was able to express it. To say that the prairie is unrepresentable is to ignore the considerable corpus of prairie writing with which Ricou himself deals. One suspects that Ricou has forced himself into this bind with his insistence that there is one proper way to write the prairie. By saying that the prairie is virtually unrepresentable, he is able to discredit versions of it that do not support his own position. No wonder there were so many "minor" writers if the task they had was almost impossible.

Ricou's reliance on "natural" and "imported" literary forms is also troubling. As mentioned previously, Ricou constructs prairie literary history as a continuous narrative of evolution, which moves from the imposition of foreign models towards a genuinely native voice. Early romantic writers thus are bad because their "bubbling description" (11) owes much to British tradition: Ricou writes that "such reliance on conventional literary formulas is clearly inadequate to the evocation of a new land; it stands as a measure of the challenge which the prairie writer faced in articulating his sense of place"
From this point, Ricou sees Canadian and prairie writing undergoing an "evolution" which eventually culminates in a depressing realism and "the writer's use of the prairie to reveal not the local and provincial, but the universal. This aspect of prairie fiction . . . provid[es] one test for the quality of Western Canadian fiction" (14). Ricou's argument thus displays opposing impulses, as on the one hand he condemns British tradition for failing to articulate a sense of prairie place, and on the other insists that the particulars of that prairie place must be universalized. The writer must be accurate in his "evocation of a new land," but he must then use the prairie to depict "not the local and provincial, but the universal." Ricou's comments about the "quality of Western Canadian fiction" suggest that Vertical Man/Horizontal World is an attempted justification of prairie writing, and explains the study's extreme anxiety over evaluation and canon formation. Through universalizing prairie writing by concentrating on what he sees as a general existential despair, Ricou hopes to prove its value. Such an attempt smacks of what earlier critics like Smith referred to as a colonial mentality: the effort to prove that prairie writing is just as good as that produced elsewhere betrays a fear that the opposite is true. Vertical Man/Horizontal World's continual distortion of prairie fiction and its

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58 As Paul Hiebert noted, "the milking of a Saskatchewan cow calls always for new forms of expression."
overwhelming and hysterical demonizing of the prairie
itself provide only a disservice to the literature Ricou
hopes to elevate.

Dick Harrison's 1977 study of prairie literature,
*Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie
Fiction*, provides a far more balanced account of prairie
literary history than *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*.
Harrison provides a historical survey of prairie fiction
from settler accounts until the mid-1970s, and covers a
variety of genres, including the popular romance and
adventure tales. He is refreshingly aware that literary
representations of the prairie do not come out of some sort
of vacuum, writing that "literary convention undoubtedly
played a part in developing the stark image of the prairie
from Grove onward, as it did in determining which prairie
fiction would be taken as central by the critics" (155).
He also recognizes the critic's role in constructing a
prairie literature, and argues that "the ascendancy of the
tragic view of prairie life outlined by Grove and Ross has
been largely the work of critics and the academic community
over the past twenty years" (154). His own role, then,
would seem to be corrective.

Harrison summarizes prairie literary history in his
introduction:

The settlers themselves who faced the unnamed
country must have felt the promise as well as
the threat, and both are reflected in the mass of popular fiction, but we generally accept the development of prairie realism with its preference for the stark and threatening aspect of the plains as the culmination of prairie fiction. At the head of this tradition we place Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* as the central expression of the prairie experience, because Ross's narrator, Mrs. Bentley, expresses so well the reactive, defensive function of the imagination confronting the prairie. (xi)

It is difficult to assess the degree of irony here, whether or not Harrison includes himself in the "we" he writes of. Certainly he does not go on to ask the questions such a statement demands: why is the stark aspect of the plains preferred? Does the imagination react defensively to the prairie? Can there not be more than one reaction? Does prairie literature have to be judged on the basis of "truth," here the accuracy of Ross's depiction of Mrs. Bentley? Can we not get beyond McCourt's "influence of the region on the people who live within its confines"?

Like Ricou, Harrison bases his study of prairie fiction on the depiction of human relation to the land, asserting that "Canadian prairie fiction is about a basically European society spreading itself across a very un-European landscape. It is rooted in that first settlement process in which the pioneer faced two main
obstacles: the new land and the old culture" (ix).
Harrison's work is thus predicated on a fundamental opposition between humanity and landscape, though defined in far less hysterical terms than Ricou. "The struggle for a Canadian prairie fiction" reveals itself to be "the encounter between the civilized imagination and an unnamed country" (xii), or in other words, a battle between the creative writer and the landscape he seeks to articulate. The result is estrangement and alienation: Harrison sees much prairie writing as a record of the failure of the imagination to deal adequately with the environment.

Again, we have seen this idea repeatedly in Canadian criticism in general. To make his study relate specifically to the prairie, Harrison must follow the idea that the prairies are particularly difficult to express.
He writes of settler accounts:

It might be asked how these women's struggles differ from that of Margaret Atwood's farmer in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer," or of the trapper in Earle Birney's "Bushed," or of Susanna Moodie back in Upper Canada fifty years earlier. But as further accounts will show, the prairie with its openness and isolation does make its own peculiar assault on the civilized mind. Because of the strange topography, the experience of pioneering on the plains made
unpredictable demands upon man's sense of order.

(2)

Why settling in Ontario is any less disturbing than settling in Saskatchewan might indeed be asked. Saying the prairie is freakishly unspeakable does not make it so. I am willing to grant that to early settlers the prairie likely was a strange and unimagined place, though it is hard to visualize anyone more dislocated than Susanna Moodie in the forest.59 However, the prairie has changed vastly since those days and is certainly no longer "unnamed." But for Harrison's structuralist theory to work, he must construct a timeless prairie to which the response is always the same. Thus he asserts that the clash between a new land and an old culture "is simply more acute on the prairie, where the topography as well as the climate is extreme. The landscape, with its vastness and its paucity of visual detail, lacks human dimensions. It remains particularly tough to humanize, particularly intractable to the imagination" (xiii). Again we have the idea that the prairie is only absence, that it is, as Harrison later writes, "visually incomplete" (13). The prairie's intractability to the imagination occurs because it is a region defined by a fundamental lack. This lack is the prairie's definitive characteristic for both Harrison and Ricou. Harrison writes that the human response to the prairie does not change because the land does not: like

59Georges Bugnet's La Forêt, which is set in Alberta, provides another example of extreme alienation from the forest environment.
prairie does not change because the land does not: like Ricou, he believes that "the austere face of the prairie has not changed that much since Henry Kelsey first saw it" and that "the incongruities of that first response to the plains has never been overcome" (28). Such a statement requires a certain blindness to empirical reality, as what was once unnamed land has become some of the most intensively cultivated property in the world. Here the prairie appears impossible to "civilize," as even people who were born there are unable to make it home. To make his case, Harrison must situate any sources of alienation in the landscape itself (which he portrays as static and eternal), rather than in any historically specific way of dealing with the land. Thus any difficulties settlers may have had in their initial encounter with the prairie are rooted in the land. Harrison writes that "as the settlers fortified their separate farms with fences and windbreaks they were shutting themselves in, aggravating the loneliness and isolation which were among the most threatening aspects of the prairie landscape" (22). Loneliness and isolation are not intrinsic to any landscape; they are abstract human projections. The loneliness here is traceable to population distribution and settlement patterns, not to anything inherent in the land. As Harrison himself points out, the Mennonite settlers who farmed communally had a far different experience of the prairie, suggesting that "the prairie experience" is more a
response to cultural conditioning than to some geographical immanence. While Unnamed Country can be read in many ways as a response to and contradiction of the thesis advanced in Vertical Man/Horizontal World, Harrison preserves the fundamental belief in environmental determinism and the unchanging and hostile prairie which Ricou takes to extremes. While both Ricou and Harrison strive to establish prairie fiction as respectable areas of study, they each end up reifying images of regional powerlessness through their depiction of a prairie population dependent on and in thrall to the land.

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W.H. New's Articulating West, which came out in 1972, approaches the prairie from a different angle. His study of Canadian literature opens with the statement that "Canada's regional identities have always fairly readily reduced to two: 'East' and 'West'—and these two have always engaged in rather heady opposition" (xi). New argues for metaphorical as well as geographical usage of the terms "East" and "West," aligning them with both states of mind and specific regions. "East" stands for civilization and order, and "West" represents a frontier ideology. These terms are applicable to Canadian literature in general. New explains that "to speak the language of 'West' is not to be merely regional in bias,
therefore, but to articulate the tension between order and disorder, myth and reality, that underlies Canadian writing" (xi). Writing from the regions becomes a subset of a general Canadian experience.

While New's approach, emphasizing the metaphorical aspects of the terms "East" and "West," seems quite distant from the insistence on landscape found in Ricou and Harrison, their terms are actually not that far apart. Like Ricou and Harrison, New situates his critical narrative within a nature/culture opposition. Also like Ricou and Harrison, New sees these terms as antithetical; the opposition between them can never be resolved. We see once again the conflict between a new land and an old culture. However, New's "West" is a dynamic and imaginative place. He elaborates on his division:

Implicit here is an equation of "East" with a settled order which may be imaginatively static. By pandering to such stasis, however, the "West" denies both its real distinctiveness and its mythic potential. No one knows these distinctions better than the inhabitants of a new frontier, for their realities and the imaginative designs of outsiders are constantly at variance. But the urge to clarify their realities leads them, too, into "sentencing" their landscape. By ordering their world, they "easternize" it, and the dilemma is compounded
when they realize that not ordering it at all would leave their identity articulated only through outsiders' preconceptions. (xiv)

New's invocation of the frontier is somewhat ambiguous: while he uses the term to represent a state of mind, "the frontier mentality," he also uses it to represent a specific region, namely the Canadian West. And while that West may be a place of tremendous imaginative possibility, it is also doomed never to realize that potential. Any attempt to articulate the West becomes an act of "sentencing," imposing an old and imported literary culture over a new and native frontier land. Underlying New's theory is the idea of authenticity, where any attempt to write (and thus order) what he sees as a chaotic and unrepresentable landscape becomes intrinsically false. Should the "West" be written, it would cease to exist. New's thesis situates any attempt to "clarify the realities" of life in the regions as an act of betrayal. Such a definition is not particularly helpful in political terms: in fact, in its construction of region as inherently chaotic and individualistic, it works against ideas of regional solidarity and power. If regional dissent can be constructed as a series of isolated and maverick responses rather than as concerted and well-considered opposition, then any expression of that dissent can be more

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60 New's essays are largely on writers from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.
61 We will see a similar construction of region in David Bentley's analysis of the prairie hinterland in The Gay Grey Moose.
easily devalued and ignored. As Gerald Haslam writes in an American context, "Archibald MacLeish has called the West 'a country in the mind,' a compelling definition except that the West is also a real place or series of places, inhabited by real people" (2).

In New's invocation of the idea of authenticity we see again the belief that any writing from the regions must by definition be dependent on the opposition between form and content; its regionality, its frontier quality, lies in that tension. The difficulty with this approach is that it suggests that the opposite is also true, that there can be a genuine, or at least a more genuine articulation of "civilization," or "East." An example of this correlation is shown in William Westfall's article "On the Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature" which was published in 1987. He summarizes his reading of Eli Mandel and Robert Kroetsch: "regional literature then is characterized by the tension between content and form--by the tension of trying to pour local experience into imported literary genres. Regional writers express, and in some way try to resolve, this tension" (236). Westfall argues that this paradigm is true of Canadian literature in general, citing Dennis Lee's "Cadence, Country, Silence" as an example of a non-regional occurrence. Lee's essay is particularly significant, according to Westfall, because

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62 I will discuss Kroetsch and Mandel in detail in the following chapter.
Lee is not from a region but from a metropolis, "where such a tension seems singularly out of place" (236). Westfall's surprise indicates the extent to which the idea of the metropolitan experience has been generalized as the norm, and metropolitan writing seen as the product of a unity of form and content. Additionally, Westfall seems unaware that a metropolis is itself a region, as the word region has become so synonymous with wilderness or hinterland. It would be interesting to see a study of Toronto writers undertaken within a regional context.

Westfall's article is only one example of the many critical articles which replicate New's thesis. The more strictly geographically-based assertions of Ricou and Harrison are also replicated, sometimes in the most surprising places. We have already seen how David Jordan's self-conscious redefinitions and retheorizations of regionalism in *New World Regionalism* (1994) and *Regionalism Reconsidered* (1994) have in many ways departed from the traditional geographically-based conception of the genre. Yet his discussion of Canadian prairie writing reproduces almost exactly Ricou's earlier assumptions about the determinative power of an essentially hostile prairie landscape. In his explication of Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*, Jordan first invokes "the reaction of the settlers

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63 Consider Frank Watt's remark, "Can a city be a region? Not if it's a city the mayor can boast about," in response to Eli Mandel's presentation at the 1978 Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel. 64 For example, a number of Margaret Atwood's novels, particularly *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, could be seen as intensely regional in nature.
described by Harrison in *Unnamed Country* and by Ross in *As For Me and My House* to the prairie: the construction of artificial defences against the prairie nothingness" *(NWR 113)*. He asserts that "the predominant reaction to the prairie environment that *Gone Indian* describes is the need to find or build a vertical structure that breaks the horizontal monotony of the prairie environment" *(NWR 113)*, and follows that up with the statement that all flying scenes in the novel "are tied to the inherent need of the region's inhabitants to break free of the horizontal monotony of the prairie landscape" *(NWR 114)*. Again we see the reduction of a potentially very complex text into an essentializing vertical/horizontal paradigm, accompanied by a similar compression of the landscape into unbroken monotony. Such a reduction is particularly ironic because of Kroetsch's outspokenness about the need to reassess perceptions of the prairies. Jordan's willingness to read prairie writing only through the lens of landscape seriously compromises his own agenda. Rather than empowering the marginal, Jordan's environmental reductionism replicates the conditions that led to the marginalization of the prairies in the first place.

A more extended example of the continuing presence of environmental determinism in Canadian criticism is found in David Bentley's *The Gay/Grey Moose*, a book-length study of Canadian poetry which was published in 1992. Like *New*, Bentley interrogates the ideas of order and chaos, opposing
a civilized central Canadian baseland to an uncivilized regional hinterland. However, he moves in the direction of Harrison and Ricou in his rejection of a strictly metaphorical wilderness, preferring one which is also firmly geographical. He is explicitly concerned with the clash between, in Harrison's words, the old culture and the new country, writing that his study primarily concerns itself with "landscape and patriation--the bringing to the country of forms and ideas originally generated elsewhere" (1). He explains his basic tenet:

With the recognition that an orientation towards the baseland or the hinterland can manifest itself anywhere in Canada and in any magnitude or form, comes the inescapable deduction that the same preferences for order or freedom from order that are evident in the landscape and social preferences of Canadian poets will also be apparent in the forms and techniques of their poems. As ineluctably as they are drawn towards openness in Canada's physical and social landscapes, poets of the hinterland orientation will exhibit preferences for enjambement and free (or loosened) verse and for strategies that resist closure and encourage a sense of open-endedness. . . . By the same token, poets of the

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65 It is interesting that Bentley, unlike New, chooses not to ironize such value-laden terms as "baseland" and "hinterland"
baseland orientation will manifest their preference for order by using such forms as the sonnet and the end-stopped couplet, and in a respectful adherence to the rules and conventions of their art. (9)

Bentley's study is thus concerned with what he calls the "ecological fitness" of the poets he examines, how their baseland or hinterland environment and outlook is reflected in their formal choices. He argues that specific forms are appropriate to each: "'compartmentalizing' stanzas of various kinds provide the fitting forms for the structures of Canada's baselands, the more spacious and continuous forms such as blank and free verse will be ecologically suitable to the 'huge,' 'endless,' 'boundless,' and 'vast' shapes of the hinterrain" (36).

Bentley initially presents baseland and hinterland as interior landscapes, which can exist anywhere at any time. Such landscapes are not dependent on geography; they are subjective rather than objective, with a hinterland able to exist in the middle of a metropolis. However, his collection demonstrates an immediate slippage from "a hinterland," which is a matter of individual perception, to "the hinterland," which exists as a given and is never questioned. "The baseland" means southern Ontario and Toronto, while "the hinterland" embraces anything else: "hinterrains" include "the Prairies, the Rockies, the Laurentian Shield, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans" (36).
More specifically, Bentley uses the term hinterland to describe the North and West, which largely translates into writers from the prairies and British Columbia, plus Al Purdy. The ostensible subjectivity of a hinterland which "can manifest itself anywhere in Canada and in any magnitude or form" is repeatedly undercut: Bentley's parenthetical remark that "it is probably not fortuitous that Canada's best-known anarchist, George Woodcock, and one of the most articulate celebrants of the frontier and post-colonial elements in Canadian literature, W.H. New, have chosen to live in Vancouver" (95) is but one example of a strong environmental determinism. Since British Columbia is "wild," it is "natural" that Woodcock and New live there. Such (paradoxical) essentialism is also evident in Bentley's assertion that the fact "that The Wind Our Enemy was written by a poet from Victoria on the basis of three months in Saskatchewan may help to explain its combination of 'cosmopolitan' and 'native' elements" (72), in which Victoria, that most British of Canadian cities, appears as essentially cosmopolitan, while Saskatchewan is essentially provincial. Similar judgment occurs in his assessment of George Bowering's poem "A Sudden Measure," where the impossibility of fitting Bowering's poem into either category is recuperated by the explanation that "its technical and formalistic properties are precisely suited

66 That Bentley considers Vancouver as "hinterland" raises basic questions about his methodology.
to the recreation of the effects of a snowstorm on the prairie yet in a city" (68). 67

Bentley's idea of ecological suitability is based to a degree on the idea of "truth," which is to say that certain poetic forms provide more authentic renderings of certain landscapes. A long poem, then, is "truer" to the prairie than is a haiku. Bentley reaches the conclusion in an interesting way, arguing that looser forms are appropriate to the hinterland because "'compartmentalizing' stanzas are fitting forms for the structures of Canada's baselandscapes." We have seen a variation of this assumption before, in W.H. New's implication (and Westfall's assumption) that "Eastern" writing is characterized by the fit of form and content. But such a conclusion does not necessarily follow. It bears repeating that the landscape of the Canadian prairies has become one of the most highly cultivated, mapped, and organized landscapes in Canada. As a result, its hinterland status is questionable: it could just as reasonably be argued, using Bentley's criteria, that highly structured verse is suitable to the prairie. 68

Since the baseland/hinterland model pivots on the opposition between order and chaos, and since it is also predicated on the idea of fitness or truth, Bentley, like Ricou, must construct a prairie landscape that matches his

67 One wonders where this determinism ends: would Bowering's poem have contain.i more hinterland elements if had been written about a snowstorm in a town?

68 See Tim Lilburn's Moosewood Sandhills, for example.
hinterland theory. And as Bentley's study is generally based on the relation between writer and landscape, we must see prairie poetics coming directly from the land itself, as we did with Ricou and Harrison. Thus we are led into some strange and contradictory assertions. Bentley's repeated references to the "silent prairie" (39, 66, 68) correspond to his assessment of the ecological suitability of poems that have extremely short lines. Such lines are good, he reports, "for this proportion not only reflects the low density of the population, and, hence, of literary and linguistic activity, in the rural areas of the prairie, but also gives to the pristine blankness of the page itself a mimetic function" (39). Such an assessment of "literary and linguistic activity" may have been true when Ed McCourt wrote it in 1949, but it was already outdated when Ricou repeated it in 1973. But it could also be argued that poems with long lines are suitable to the prairie, which Bentley in fact does thirty pages later:

It used to be thought that one tendency of prairie writer, in response, perhaps to the terrifyingly vast spaces and silences of the landscape, was to fill their pages to the margins with words, to produce novels and criticism, but little poetry. The flowering of poetry on the prairies that became very apparent in the late 1970s has made this generalization less true than it once was. Its implications
for the relation between the long line and the prairie landscape have not been diminished, however; rather, such horizontally expansive, not to say verbose, recent poems as David Arnason's *Marsh Burning* (1980) and Aritha van Herk's *Calgary, this growing graveyard* (1987) have made more apparent than ever the ecological relation between long lines, long poems, and western landscapes. (66-67)

Well, the reader asks, which is it to be? Sarah Binks, perhaps anticipating such discussion, wrote both sonnet and epic. Here we see an implicit aesthetic legislation: if you want to be a true hinterland prairie poet, you must write in a particular way. Anything else is unfit. Writers from the prairie who use other forms are labeled as baselanders who clearly do not express the true frontier prairie.

My objections to Bentley's arguments become clearer when we look at how his ideas of environmental determinism extend not only to prairie poetry but to the prairie population as well. He quotes Ricou's 1976 introduction to *Twelve Prairie Poets* to justify his remarks: Ricou wrote that "there is a nice harmony between the preference, in modern poetry, for spare language and open rhythms, and the prairie poet's most immediate subjects. An unadorned style, a simple landscape, and the tradition of an honest, direct, laconic people are neatly linked" (67). It's
simple: simple landscape, simple folk. In a related vein, Bentley remarks that in the prairie provinces and British Columbia, "people are strongly inclined to be either for law and order or against them, pro-British or pro-American, from eastern Canada or hostile to it. No more than the sugar maple is the art of compromise that is so valued in the East likely to be found between Winnipeg and Tofino" (83). Bentley constructs a West whose inhabitants still wear either tin stars or black hats. He suggests that this radical division results from the opposing but simultaneous desires for order and chaos in the hinterland (83). We have seen this argument before, in Harrison's discussion of "the promise as well as the threat" inherent in settling the prairie. Harrison, however, was discussing conditions of prairie life 150 years ago. Bentley transposes those conditions wholesale to the present.

Bentley's construction of the hinterland environment is particularly significant given the nationalist agenda of The Gay/Grey Moose. The study explores the connections between and within two opposing poetic lineages in Canada, and strives to establish a Canadian tradition. Bentley argues that poetry written in Canada, while sound, has been fundamentally derivative, and situates Canadian-ness somewhere between British and American extremes, writing that what he terms Canadian poetry's "distinctive

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69Bentley's choice of words is interesting as the maple is, of course, our national(ist) symbol.
derivativeness" could be a result of "the dialectic between the baseland (British) and the hinterland (American) orientations" (17). His collection explores that tension, but suggests that it will not take sides. The argument for an inclusive and plural cultural tradition is explicit:

Now more than ever it is necessary to overcome the hostility to nationalism that has characterized many of the political and intellectual movements of the last century, not least high (or classic) Modernism. A tolerant and protective nationalism, a nationalism rooted in local pride and responsibility, can provide the wherewithal to counter a multi- and supra-national capitalism that knows no loyalty to particular places and their inhabitants, be they human or non-human. A knowledge of Canada's past, a recognition of the uniqueness of the country's environments and people, and a sense of a shared future: these are the ingredients of a benign nationalism which, by honouring diversity within the Canadian community, can provide a major source of resistance to the forces of globalization and homogenization. (7)

But despite the assertions of plurality and tolerance, hinterland and baseland poets are not treated equally in this collection. Bentley's discussion of baseland and hinterland tendencies in Canadian poetry describes
hinterland poets in highly loaded terms, while baseland poets are subjected to no such evaluation: he criticizes John Sutherland's position, for example, but offers no such critique of A.J. M. Smith. Bentley points out that some critics might see Sutherland's early rebellion and later conservatism as reason "to argue for the adolescence of the hinterland orientation and the maturity of the baseland disposition," but goes on to say that such a construction is inadequate (89). However, Bentley's remark that "few people escape being centrifugal (some might say American) in their adolescence and centripetal (European) in their old age" (85), replicates that innocence-to-experience argument. His characterizations of Wilson MacDonald's "truculent, hinterland-oriented stance" (63) and Al Purdy's "laconic statement of the truculent individualism of the hinterland orientation" (110) reinforce the construction of the hinterland poet as a sulky adolescent going through a rebellious phase.  

Bentley's assessment of hinterland and baseland aesthetics uses a rhetoric implying hinterland duplicity. He focuses much of his critical scorn on the Tish group, introducing Warren Tallman not with a neutral label of "critic" or "spokesman," but as "one of their principal apologists" (94). (Robin Mathews could just as easily have been described as a "apologist" for a conservative

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70 As Purdy has been actively involved in the promotion of new writers through his support of new writing anthologies (Storm Warning (1971), Breathing Fire (1995)) assertion of his "truculent individualism" is suspect.
tradition, for example, but Bentley chooses not to label baseland critics in that fashion.) His assertion that hinterland poets subscribe to a "fiction" of poetic process (92) is followed by the remarks that they "want it to be believed" (93) that their poetry is spontaneous and that they "would like it to be thought" that their poetry is divorced from tradition (95). He takes great glee in exposing Al Purdy's "truculent individualism" as "the Purdy persona, . . . the myth of the hinterland poet" (111, italics his), and sums up the hinterland heyday of the 1970s with the assessment that the poets "wanted desperately to be different, and turned out to be merely different like everyone else" (112). The cumulative effect of such rhetorical devaluation is to construct hinterland poets as dishonest, trying to fool their audience and themselves into thinking that they are somehow producing an authentic writing. Such a criticism is valid. However, it is equally valid when applied to baseland poets, since all poetic composition is inherently fictional. Baseland poets construct their own personas; Bentley chooses not to "expose" any of those. Nor are baseland aesthetics any more authentic or true than those espoused by the hinterland poets. Bentley's chapter is thus in some sense itself deceptive; the differing treatment of baseland and hinterland poets subverts the initial gesture towards an inclusive tradition.
Bentley's critique of the baseland and hinterland poets extends to the level of political commitment he sees each group displaying. Here too the hinterland poets come off badly, as rebellious and unreasonable individualists who engage only in solipsistic writing. Conversely, he writes that the baseland poets always remain unashamedly engaged with the prevailing culture, however, and choose, not to break with the existing social order, but to argue from whatever platform they find congenial...towards the diminution of injustice, the enlargement of humanity, the communal triumph of right or imaginative reason. It is the ultimately political commitment of baseland poets that makes them the working critics of the culture and society of the country—the author of "To a Millionaire" (Lampman) or "Golfers" (Layton), *Survival* (Atwood) or *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution?* (Mathews).

(98)

One wonders how the baseland poets find time to write, in between catching bullets with their teeth and leaping tall buildings with a single bound. Against the baseland poets' political involvement, Bentley argues that hinterland poets are concerned only with themselves. To make such an argument requires a fundamental blindness to, and an extremely narrow definition of, politics. The erasure such
willful blindness requires is encapsulated in one of Bentley's parenthetical comments. He writes:

(Indeed, it is tempting to read in the hostility of Westerners in the 'seventies to the supposedly imposed language and measures of the East--French and metrification--the political and paranoic equivalent of the poetic rejection of the Eastern and European that are under discussion.) (100)

Here we see the attempted erasure of regional dissent. Bentley asserts that Western concerns about central Canadian hegemony are unfounded and paranoid and, in a move the objectivist school would applaud, asserts that colonizer, not colonized, can correctly perceive the effects of imperial actions. That Western Canadian dissent might be at all reasonable is never considered; Bentley refuses to entertain the notion. But in his attempted trivialization of Western political concerns lies the thread that unravels his argument. He is willing to suggest that overtly political Western dissent is analogous to hinterland poetics, but for his thesis to hold he must suppress the correlative: that hinterland poetics are analogous to political involvement. Bentley's assertion that the hinterland poets are concerned only with themselves can be true only if he pretends that literature is not political, that the rejection of European/central Canadian tradition is not a political act.
It is possible to read *The Gay]Grey Moose* as an exercise in totalized nationalism. Bentley's construction of the "hinterlands" of Canada as apolitical and uneducated regions supports such a reading. In its trivialization of western politics and "hinterland" aesthetics *The Gay]Grey Moose* attempts to smother its opposition. Perhaps a better analogy would be critic as ostrich: if he refuses to acknowledge dissent, then it's not really there. What voices of regional dissent do appear are discredited: we have seen Bentley's construction of the prairie dweller as a hot-headed and dogmatic-though-ignorant person to whom "the art of compromise that is so valued in the East" is utterly unknown. There is an obvious hierarchy here: the East is characterized as the seat of reason, while "paranoid" regional objections are correspondingly unreasonable, and unworthy of serious consideration. The tolerant and protective nationalism espoused in *The Gay]Grey Moose* is revealed: the regions must tolerate suffocation by a self-protecting central Canada. The call for change is really an assertion of the status quo.

In this chapter we have seen how major critics of Canadian prairie writing have continued to replicate similar ideas about the prairie and the people who live there. Through their insistence on the primacy of the land, these critics have perpetuated the idea that all prairie writing, whether fiction or poetry, must have some
direct relation to the landscape, either formally or thematically. Because these critics also rely heavily on the idea of truth, or the realistic representation of the prairie environment, they must effect certain strategies to make the actual prairie conform to their theories. As a result, they have constructed the prairie again and again as an unchanging and hostile wasteland in which civilized people can never feel at home. Correspondingly, prairie dwellers are constructed either as hardworking, laconic, and simple farmers, or as selfish mavericks who shoot reasonable central Canadians first and ask questions later. Such representations contribute to the general national devaluation and dismissal of the prairies.

The belief that the prairie is only a wasted earth and a burning sun, that it contains no real imaginative possibility, creates a critical environment in which prairie realist fiction is seen to be the "natural" mode of representing the prairie and is therefore granted a privileged position in a Canadian canon which itself privileges mimesis. These responses are symbiotic: the emphasis on an anachronistic and tragic prairie fiction reinforces a negative view of the prairie itself, which in turn increases the status of these works. At the same time, both prairie writing and the real prairies are contained: prairie writing is slotted into the "regional text" place with all its attendant evaluative baggage, and the real prairies are continually defined as a sparsely
populated, inarticulate, sterile frontier, whose lack of power and/or wealth is natural. If the prairies are continually being reified as a hinterland frontier which is basically unlivable, which is a permanently unsettled Palliser's Triangle, then the political forces that have been to an extent responsible for the continuing exploitation of that region are absolved of any responsibility for the region's decline. Like the failure of the Maritime fishing industries, the failure of the prairie provinces' agriculturally-based economies is seen as the fault of the people who live there: since the region is clearly unlivable, the attempt to pursue a life there seems laughable at best. I am not blaming the criticism of prairie literature for such cultural conditioning. But the continuing critical insistence on replicating ideas of regional failure, powerlessness, and dependency is complicit with the assertion that central Canada knows best how to govern this country, and that arguments to the contrary are selfish and unreasonable. My next chapter will consider the ways that contemporary writers from the prairies have responded to such treatment.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRAIRIE VOICE(S)

Some . . . poems can be identified as being from Saskatchewan in that they occasionally refer to a place such as Veregin or Wood Mountain, use nouns such as cistern, magpie, and gopher, or expressions like correction line. But these are not enough to isolate a whole poetry. Good poems are part of the human world. Saskatchewan is not an island cut off from the world, although our critics sometimes pretend the world is an island cut off from Saskatchewan.

- Patrick Lane, "The Exact Shape of Distance"

In my earlier chapters I discussed how writing from the Canadian prairies is most frequently critiqued under the "regional writing" label, and what sort of evaluative baggage that label carries. We have also seen that "regional" writing is supposed to present a true and accurate depiction of life in, as Ed McCourt wrote, "a highly distinctive environment." The prairies have been constructed as an environment which is particularly difficult to represent and, in a related development, writings from the prairies have been constructed as particularly concerned with landscape, with the human relationship to the environment viewed as that literature's unifying thematic concern. As I have tried to suggest, such beliefs have made possible the critical construction of a Canadian prairie canon which reflects these reductive and essentializing views. A number of critics and writers from the prairies have argued against such uniformity and have voiced their rejection of the "monotonous prairie"
stereotype in a variety of ways. This chapter will explore some of those objections and discuss the implications of the alternative models these critics suggest.

Eli Mandel writes against the idea of a uniform prairie literature in his essay "Romance and Realism in Western Canadian Fiction" (1973), arguing that "to speak . . . of something central to the imagination of Western Canada scarcely makes any sense in the light both of the variety of Western Canadian fiction and the virtual impossibility of deciding what it means to speak of the 'West' itself" (57-58). Since the West itself cannot be easily defined, such assertions can be only arbitrary at best. In "Writing West: On the Road to Wood Mountain" (1977), he suggests an alternate definition:

My image for the prairie writer . . . is not necessarily the one who is in the west, but the one who returns, who moves, who points in this direction.

I know that this too can sound heretical or like special pleading but it fits very closely my own sense that it is not place but attitude, state of mind, that defines the Western writer—and that state of mind, I want to suggest, has a good deal to do with a tension between place and culture, a doubleness or duplicity, that makes the writer a man not so much in place, as out of place and so one endlessly trying to get back,
to find his way home, to return, to write himself into existence, writing west. ("Writing" 40-41)

Mandel's definition of the prairie writer is metaphysical rather than physical in its argument that it is the writer's attitude, not geographic situation, that determines imaginative citizenship. "The West" itself appears as a mental rather than geographic space, found not on a map but carried within the artist. The concept of "the West" is thus projected onto the region, rather determined by an environmentally-based genius loci. Mandel writes in "Images of Prairie Man" (1973) that:

"prairie" means something different: a sort of complex conceptual framework with which various social inter-relationships can be viewed and understood. It is difficult to keep steadily in mind that "prairie" means nothing more than this, that it is a mental construct, a region of the human mind, a myth. (541)

The perception of these mythic qualities lead Mandel to reject realism as an adequate means of regional expression, and he argues against the regional definitions proposed by E.K. Brown and Northrop Frye:

if it is meaningful to talk about images of prairie man, one should be able to find in, say, prairie literature a certain coherence or unity or identity, but the attempt to find this in
some kind of realism or accuracy fails, because accuracy of fact and of tone is essentially superficial, if not indeed a contradiction in terms. In brief, if there is a distinct regional prairie literature, it would have to be . . . mythic. (542)

Mandel's conception of the west is then somewhat analogous to W.H. New's, as the prairie exists as a state of mind\textsuperscript{71}, an imaginative frontier characterized by the conflict between, to use New's terms, "West" and "East." The expression of this imaginative conflict is one of the organizing principles of prairie writing: Mandel asserts elsewhere that "the writer's task becomes an increasingly sensitive articulation of this literary tradition--not to write up the experience of the country but to articulate the forms of its fiction" ("Romance" 61). Mandel's conception of literature then is also similar to Frye's in its emphasis on non-experiential writing. Frye's assertion that the best Canadian writer would be one who "pulls us away from the Canadian context toward the centre of literary experience itself" by transcending his or her "social and historical setting" (822) seems in many ways very like Mandel's suggestion that the true regional writer may be one who rejects the realistic depiction of the

\textsuperscript{71}In "Images of Prairie Man" Mandel distinguishes between "state of mind" as used by himself and Kreisel. Kreisel sees the prairie landscape engendering a certain mindset in the writer, while Mandel sees the concept of "prairie" projected out from the writer to the landscape.
prairie environment in favour of embracing what Mandel terms a postmodern aesthetic. (There are, of course, significant differences between Frye and Mandel, as we have seen in earlier chapters). Mandel clarifies his definition of regional writing in "The Regional Novel as Borderline Art" (1978): "I would call on Canadian novels or fictions or 'works' . . . which tend to be representative, that is self-referring or self-defining, about themselves so to speak, and with a great deal of regret simply would not include idylls, family chronicles, novels of local colour" (113). As he points out, this definition would necessarily exclude works like Anne of Green Gables, Jalna, The Mountain and the Valley, and Who Has Seen the Wind.\textsuperscript{72} Such a definition presents a radical break from earlier definitions of regional literature, which as we have seen are largely concerned with the accurate and realistic expression of "real life."

Mandel's recognition that the prairie environment is constantly changing can be seen as one of the catalysts behind his development of a regional model centred on language rather than geography. He writes:

\begin{quote}
insofar as regions are to be defined, outside literature itself, certainly there is reason to think not only of political and geographic definitions but especially in Canada of historic
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{72}This definition also implies that regionalism is a relatively recent movement, since postmodern techniques have not always been generally available to novelists.
ones. Even the prairie, one recalls, is more than physical nature, a human creation in which boundaries are redrawn with virtually the frequency in which population changes, the derrick replacing the elevator, the superhighway the cart or wagon trail, the jet trail so altering the cloudscape one notices with a start the clouds of the filmed *Who Has Seen the Wind* are those never seen in Brian O'Connell's time.

("Borderline" 109)

Mandel's definition of prairie writing explicitly opposes an environmentally determinist model. The predominance of topocentric criticism, he remarks, is "puzzling, because an otherwise increasingly sophisticated criticism settles on a primitive identification which offers as an account of a literature little but a variation on a somewhat simple-minded, not to say on occasion, an odious theme" ("Borderline" 108). Instead, he writes, prairie writing coheres "not in relation to place, society, or history, but to its own developing forms" ("Romance" 71). His argument specifically targets those critics who argue that regional writers are merely mouthpieces for a *genius loci*: "We expected the land would speak... but it has not been so. Not the land, but art. Not experience, but vision" ("Romance" 71). Mandel thus restores creativity to the regional writer who, as we have seen, has often been viewed as an amateur anthropologist whose work should be read as a
regional case study rather than actual literature. Mandel also opens up closed regional boundaries in his recognition that regions are not closed units, that writing from the prairies does not spring from the soil but actually is connected to literature from other parts of the world. Such a recognition allows more complex readings of works previously devalued, and frees prairie writing from the narrow mold imposed by critical insistence on realism.

But Mandel's redefinition of the prairie writer also plays back into the models it explicitly rejects. He gestures towards this difficulty in his description of the problematic "relationship between a cultural symbol and its literal realization. What happens to lunacy after lunar landings? Can the frontiers of literature ever become actual places?" ("Romance" 55). Mandel's problem is similar to New's: if the prairie/region/frontier is a state of mind, and if that prairie/region/frontier is characterized by the tension between form and content, then it is doomed to silence, for to articulate it would be to "civilize" and so destroy it. Representation of the frontier must be endlessly deferred, a condition closely related to Mandel's postmodern model. Like New, Mandel implies that tension between literary form and content exists only in regional writing--non-regional writing would then be marked by a direct correspondence between language and life. As all forms are artificial, to say that regional writing is particularly distinguished by this
tension seems to raise more questions than it answers. Mandel's assertion that self-referentiality is a common feature of all regional literature seems to erase the differences between the regions, homogenizing them all in their status as "other" to the centre. His attempt to distinguish prairie writing ultimately replicates to a degree the environmental determinism he eschews. He writes:

what I have been talking about is the shaping form and sense of otherness, the resistant material. What isn't clear is whether the prairies themselves are a form that imposes itself on the resistant self, or whether it goes the other way around: we possess these stories, not even our own, and try to put their shapes on a world which resists fiercely. ("Western" 47-48)

The argument that prairie literature is particularly distinguished by the tension between writer and environment makes sense only if the prairies are seen as particularly resistant, particularly hard to civilize. So in a way we are back to where we started, with the assertions of critics like Ricou and Harrison that the prairie is particularly hard to represent and especially alienating to the artist. These contradictory impulses in Mandel's criticism towards, on the one hand, what he constructs as a generalized demystification of common literary heritage,
and on the other towards a specific and particular regional environment are not successfully reconciled, as shown in his analysis of Jack Hodgins's writing in "Strange Loops" (1981). His argument that "regional cultures spring out of literary connections, not geographical ones," is prefaced by a quote from Hodgins, who asserts that "Gabriel García Márquez is closer to me than any Canadian writer because the same water washes on the shore of my home as on his" (24).\(^7\) So if regional literature is non-referential, if prairie literature is defined only by its formal characteristics, then how is it regional at all? If "regionalism is one aspect of postmodernism in Canada and . . . it can be thought of primarily in linguistic terms, as language, and as a version of discontinuity or process in poetry" ("Strange" 20), is regionalism different from other aspects of postmodernism, and if so, how? In other words, what's particularly regional about Mandel's regionalism?

Mandel's argument leads him, like Frye, into a somewhat depoliticized literature. While he argues that regionalism works against Frye's conception of Canadian literature as a means to national identification, he distinguishes between literary and political regionalisms, writing that though his promotion of regionalism sounds very like a plea for provincial interests by a local politician, it in fact means

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\(^7\)Thus the connection between García Márquez and Hodgins is to an extent geographical as well as literary; Mandel's assertion that it is not is possible solely if he constructs geography, and regionality, as existing only within discrete national boundaries.
something quite different from political decentralism. In criticism, it refers to 'destructive poetics' which seek to demystify tradition, that is, literary history, traditional forms and structures. ("Strange" 19)

Mandel produces a critical economy in which the regional writer's choice of form is not viewed as a political act. The mythic prairie, existing only in the mind, has little contact with the actual west. Because of this disjunction, Mandel's regionalism can be recuperated back into the universalist mold that sees regionalism as a nostalgic and non-political metaphor for home and identity. Mandel writes that "home...surely is the essence of what we mean by a region, the overpowering feeling of nostalgia associated with the place we know as the first place, the first vision of things, the first clarity of things" ("Images" 544-45). This friendly regionalism is thus similar to that proposed by Jim Wayne Miller, whose redefinition of the regional and ultimate universalization of it was discussed in my first chapter. Because Mandel views regional writing as non-experiential, he sees it as somewhat distanced from real life and therefore containing little political value. He explains:

Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems to me eminently sensible to remain sceptical about what has been added to our knowledge of the Canadian West by discussions or literary
depictions of regional cultures. Like cultural nationalism, the fictional West contributes little, if anything, to discussion in this country of educational policy, constitutional arrangements, or political theory, and it proves nothing at all about the quality of provincial government or even Prairie life. ("Romance" 72). Mandel is, of course, partially right. Literature is not real life and should not be treated as such. But literature, and the way it is presented, does have real political and cultural effects. Insisting that the true prairie is unreachable and mythic is no more helpful than insisting that prairie realist fiction provides a transparent view of the region. Mandel points out that the prairie is constantly changing, but the idea of the mythic prairie, the prairie as state of mind, once again posits a strangely timeless environment, separate from the rest of the world and ultimately inaccessible. Like the idea of prairie-as-hinterland explored in the last chapter, the mythic prairie results from the separation of literary product from literary production. To say, as Mandel does, that the prairie writer's task is to demystify his or her literary tradition through the creation of "strange loops" is to beg the question of what, if anything, is particularly unique about writings from the prairies.
Mandel describes the prairie writer as "a man not so much in place, as out of place and so one endlessly trying to get back, to find his way home, to return, to write himself into existence, writing west" ("Writing" 40-41). The prairie writer's search is thus a search for origins, a search for the home place. To say that this quest for origins also marks the criticism of Robert Kroetsch is to state the obvious. Like Mandel, Kroetsch perceives the prairie writer's task as archeological. He writes in "The Moment of Discovery of America Continues" (1989) that a recognition of the disjunction between the history he was taught and the life he was living motivated his own writing. He explains this recognition: "my sense of the gap between me and history was growing. History as I knew it did not account for the world I lived in. Present here in this landscape, I was taking my first lesson in the idea of absence" (1-2). We have seen the idea of lack connected with the prairie before, but here Kroetsch reverses the relation. The prairie is presence; its absence from official histories indicates a lack not in the region, but in the histories themselves. Kroetsch describes the history he was taught as being part of a central Canadian vision that bore little relation to Alberta. His comment that "the authorized history, the official history, was

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Kroetsch's criticism has been extensively discussed elsewhere (see Open Letter 5th ser. 8-9 and 9th ser. 5-6, and Susan Rudy Dorscht's Women, Reading, Kroetsch: Telling the Difference (1991) in particular) so my remarks will be restricted to consideration of what he says about the prairie.
betraying us on those prairies" (2) reveals the alienation provoked by such irrelevance.

Kroetsch argues that the inadequacy of the "Canadian" literature and history in relating prairie experience is grounded in place. He explains:

Our inherited literature, the literature of our European past and of eastern North America, is emphatically the literature of a people who have not lived on the prairies. We had, and still have, difficulty finding names for the elements and characteristics of this landscape. The human response to this landscape is so new and ill-defined and complex that our writers come back, uneasily but compulsively, to landscape writing. Like the homesteaders before us, we are compelled to adjust and invent, to remember and forget. We feel a profound ambiguity about the past--about both its contained stories and its modes of perception. (5)

He locates the disjunction he experienced between life and literature in the clash between an inherited tradition and a new land. This idea of alienation is partly rooted in his reading of Dick Harrison's Unnamed Country (15-17), but where Harrison emphasizes the struggle with the land, Kroetsch foregrounds the writer's struggle with language. The writer's task then is not to "civilize" the frontier, but to "uncivilize" the language; hence Kroetsch's well-
documented insistence on "unhiding" words. This theorization bears obvious parallels to Mandel's in its suggestion that prairie writing should become process-oriented and metafictional, foregrounding its own attempts at articulation. I find it interesting however that Kroetsch places so much emphasis on the land. His use of landscape, coupled with his insistence on the search for origin—and what is archeology after all but digging in the ground to find one's history—can be read as indicating a desire for an autochthonous prairie culture, one that rises naturally from the soil. Or, put another way, how do you grow a poet?

Kroetsch challenges the prairie realist paradigm in a number of ways, most obviously by advocating postmodernism, rather than realism, as an appropriate means of regional expression. He recalls his initial encounter with Ross's *As For Me and My House*:

> Where I responded with delight to Mitchell, I remember responding with shock to Ross's portrait of a marriage, a prairie town, a prairie house. He made it possible for me, by a system of contraries, to write *The Words of My Roaring*. I had grown up in a house that was so naturally a part of my family and a part of the landscape that I was surprised, even hurt, when I found out that houses are bought and sold... Ross and his characters in the town of Horizon
became a generative principle, the enabling moment that released me into a memory of the politics and the poverty, of the card parties and the funerals and the wedding dances and the sports days and the auctions sales, the silences and the stories of the thirties. (5)

Kroetsch's response to the values of the prairie realist aesthetic points to the inadequacy of that aesthetic as a universal model for representing the prairie experience. The prairie may be difficult to articulate, but it is not actively malevolent. The family home fits naturally into the prairie landscape and Kroetsch's recollections centre on community rather than the alienation from landscape and other people that so traumatizes the characters in prairie realist fiction. It is this sense of community, he argues, that is the true hallmark of prairie culture. This communal culture is most prominently displayed in oral, not written, literature: it is in tall tales and bunkhouse stories that he first locates "the archaeological sites of [his] own childhood" (4). He elaborates: "The great subtext of prairie literature is our oral culture. In the face of books, magazines, films, and TV programs that are so often someone else, we talk to each other by, literally, talking" (4). Such a statement clearly counters the laconic farmer we encountered so often in chapter three. This oral culture is subversive; Kroetsch's declaration that "the bastards can't keep us from talking" (18) makes
the oppositional character of this regional culture obvious. This subversive oral culture is constructed as a means of authentic regional expression in his statement that "the oral tradition, become a literary tradition, points us back to our own landscape, our recent ancestors, and the characteristic expressions and modes of our speech" (7). Kroetsch's rhetoric thus establishes this orality as autochthonous; it is located in, and directs us back to, the landscape.

Kroetsch grounds his genealogy of oral culture in "the beer-talk of our daily lives" (17), writing that "drinking beer is a ritual act, a sharing with each other of values, of pleasures, of aspirations, of suffering. . . . Art . . . is a ritual act, a recurrence, a recognition of suffering" (18). This oral culture may be democratic, but it is not inclusive. Kroetsch's assertions that authentic prairie culture and literature are based in beer-hall orality, in the tall tales and bunkhouse stories told by hired men, point to his construction of the authentic prairie as almost exclusively masculine. Women, of course, could not participate in the communal culture Kroetsch sees arising out of these settings; their place was in the house, in a more "civilized" setting. In "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space" (1979), Kroetsch outlines

75I am intrigued by Kroetsch's admission of only our "recent ancestors." This qualification suggests one of the difficulties with Kroetsch's theory - since a vast percentage of the population of the prairie is descended from European immigrants, the genealogy of prairie culture must of necessity reach far beyond the prairie itself.
the sexual dichotomy he sees in much prairie writing, where women are characterized by a threatening and static silence, symbolized by the house, and men characterized by motion and symbolized by the horse. Women represent limitation, and men freedom. While Kroetsch does not actively endorse this division, neither does he relate this paradigm to his own theorization, which unfortunately replicates it. Kroetsch's theory of an authentic, indigenous, and masculine prairie culture then appears similar to American frontier models in its dependence on traditional, and by now stereotypical, order/chaos, east/west, feminine/masculine oppositions.\textsuperscript{76} We have seen the frontier hypothesis in a Canadian context before, of course, in critics like New.

Kroetsch organizes his essay "Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" around what he sees as the problem of writing the prairie. He suggests an solution:

In a paradoxical way, stories--more literally, books--contain the answer. How do you establish any sort of close relationship in a landscape--in a physical situation--whose primary characteristic is distance? The telling of story--more literally, the literal closedness of a book--might be made to (paradoxically again) contain space. ("Fear" 73)

\textsuperscript{76}Aritha van Herk's response to this model will be discussed presently.
Linked to this response is his division of prairie space into internal and external space. The book, with its ability to contain space and thus mitigate the distance of which Kroetsch writes, might seem to be the means of forming a close relationship with the landscape and thus claiming it as home. But his spatial division virtually negates its value. External space, Kroetsch writes, is masculine, the "needs to be spoken," while internal space is feminine, the "having spoken" (73). The masculine external space, best articulated by the tall tale, is future oriented; it has not yet been spoken, but it needs to be, and will. In contrast, the feminine internal space, the book, is silent; having spoken, it no longer has anything to say. As in every other Western, women, who appear linked only to imported and obsolete cultural models, don't belong out West.

Kroetsch raises an interesting question about his own theorization of the prairie in his critique of realism. He asks:

Might it not be possible that we now look back on the experience [of settling the prairie] as having been a harsh one because the realistic (or even naturalistic) mode of fiction pictured it so? What if the prairies had been settled—as much of the United States was in the nineteenth century—at a time when the Gothic novel was easily available to novelists? (5)
Kroetsch calls for recognition that the way in which a story is told influences its content, or, in other words, that prairie realist models must be seen in the context of literary movements of the time, and that prairie realism must be recognized as a literary convention like any other. As discussed in the last chapter, prairie realist fiction has been frequently removed from its historical context and posited as the "real" way to depict the "true" prairie experience. Kroetsch points to the potential to see the prairie in a different way, to escape from the conviction that realism is the only way to portray the prairie. But I think that Kroetsch's question also begs another, namely whether it is possible that critics now look on the regional experience as essentially postmodern one because that is the critical zeitgeist. The reconstruction and redefinition of region, and regional literature, by Kroetsch, Mandel, and others must be seen in the context of a general theoretical concern with identity, subjectivity, and difference. Such a contextualization puts the postmodern prairie Kroetsch suggests (and, in his fiction, creates) into perspective, allowing it to be seen not as the culmination of numerous attempts to articulate the prairie, but rather as one more link in the chain. If, as Kroetsch argues, the process of writing the prairie is just that, a process, then it is important to remember that postmodern theory is not the end of that project.
Aritha van Herk's analysis of prairie writing descends in part from Robert Kroetsch's criticism, but differs radically from it in her feminization of landscape and, correspondingly, literature. In "A Gentle Circumcision" (1986), she suggests that the role of landscape in prairie writing has been granted too much prominence, writing that "both the fiction and its criticism had relied on endless landscape as a crutch" (92). Despite this overemphasis, she argues in "Women Writers and the Prairie" (1984) that landscape cannot be disregarded: "The impact of landscape on artist or artist on landscape is unavoidable. The two are cellmates, as countless case histories have already established" (139). The difference between van Herk's formulation and the overly simplistic paradigm against which she writes lies in her characterization of the artist as an active force who is not only affected by the landscape, but who affects it as well. She likewise revises the one-dimensional view of the prairie landscape itself, in "Prairie as Flat as . . ." (1989):

It is itself of course a simile, but that one would see the Canadian prairie as flat reveals a terribly myopic view of the secret and undulating world around us. I do not believe in the flatness of the prairie but in its hidden and sinuating folds; and perhaps I am able to

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77The case histories referred to are McCourt's The Canadian West in Fiction and Ricou's Vertical Man/Horizontal World.
believe and write it as un/flat only because of the established archetypes, the images that literature has worked through on its journey to what has now become an upthrust and earthquake prairie. (127)

Like Kroetsch, who credits Ross's *As For Me and My House* with enabling him to write, van Herk's theories emerge as a response to what she sees as the failure of the established archetypes of prairie literature to articulate or give meaning to her experience of the prairie. She characterizes such archetypes as necessary stages which the literature itself has now outgrown, writing that "prairie literature has moved since then from flatness to ululation, the landscape now not written upon but permitted to write, to cry out its own naming" ("Prairie" 134). It is interesting that while van Herk rejects the flat-and-boring-and-hostile prairie stereotype advanced by earlier critics and supported by the continuing institutionalization of prairie realist fiction, she reproduces the rhetoric of environmental determinism: where the land had once had false models imposed on it, it is now declaring itself in authentic ways. (Ricou uses a similar rhetorical strategy in his valorization of prairie realism). Like Kroetsch, van Herk seeks to validate her theories through linking them to ideas of authochthony and the "natural." The effect of such a strategy is to once again foreground landscape as determinative regional
spirit; the writer's task is once again centred on the land.

Van Herk offers a reading of Henry Kreisel's short story "The Broken Globe" which moves beyond its usual interpretations. Instead of reading the story as a realistic and literal depiction of a flat and timeless prairie, van Herk sees it as a metaphor for the loss of faith in what Jean-François Lyotard calls metanarratives, which is to say those overreaching narratives which have governed western civilization and which function both as unifying forces and to legitimate certain ideologies. Lyotard views the loss of faith in these narratives as the moment separating the modern and the postmodern. Similarly, van Herk views Kreisel's story as the moment in which the stable and unchanging model of the prairie proposed by prairie realist fiction, and encapsulated in Kreisel's immigrant farmer's assertion that the earth is flat, is destroyed forever. Thus the story represents, in van Herk's words, a "nexus, a point of breakage. However much we may long for their safe romanticism, their wonderful evocation, we can never return to those visions of prairie as a flat and inexorable landscape asserting itself on the eyes of the beholder" ("Prairie" 128). The destruction of the prairie metanarrative is also linked to the growing skepticism about the other narratives that govern ideas of regionalism: that certain places are inherently more important than others; that artistic
representation of "real life" is possible and desirable; that regions exist naturally and inevitably. Van Herk points to the inadequacy of structuralist models of regional writing to cope with regional assertions of multivalency and difference. She writes: "it is not difficult to envision Grove's prairie, but we can now envision it, thanks to Henry Kreisel's broken globe, as greater than, deeper than, more than simply a flattened sea. It now has irony, and voice, and multiplicity, it's [sic] own becoming, beyond the one simple metaphor of man" ("Prairie" 137).

The difference between van Herk's conceptualization of the prairie landscape (and its corresponding influence on her criticism), and the conceptualization of earlier critics like Laurie Ricou can be clearly demonstrated. In my previous chapter, I discussed how David Jordan's treatment of the flying scenes in Kroetsch's Gone Indian replicated the vertical/horizontal opposition that dominates Ricou's criticism of prairie writing. Despite his explicitly postmodern stance, Jordan asserts in New World Regionalism (1994) that all flying scenes in Gone Indian "are tied to the inherent need of the region's inhabitants to break free of the horizontal monotony of the prairie landscape" (114), thus repeating the earlier essentializing vertical/horizontal paradigm and flattening the land into one-dimensional monotony. Here is van Herk's
analysis of the flying scene in Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*:

Here is the prairie, with an eagle's eye view of itself, laughing at its own configuration, mocking the very themes that man has imposed on it, at last speaking in a voice from above, beyond. A laugh, a cry, prayer, or obscenity, here at last is the falling artist/writer, articulating that forbidden and mysterious and wildly unimaginable landscape. That in this passage Kroetsch has gathered together all possible versions of the prairie, its climate, its weather, its quilted pattern, and coalesced them into one unimaginable and unspeakable cry is revelatory of how far we have come from the flat horizon of Grove and Ross. ("Prairie" 136)

The contrast between these two analyses is obvious. What I find particularly interesting here is van Herk's removal of the human element. While the critics we looked at in previous chapters stressed the importance of the human relationship to the prairie, here in van Herk's analysis that relationship is somehow nonexistent. If she characterizes earlier critics as ventriloquists, throwing their voices onto a silent prairie, she here reverses the relationship: the artist is now the ventriloquist's dummy, speaking the "forbidden and mysterious and wildly unimaginable" words of the prairie. But though the artist
speaks the prairie' words, he or she is also silent, unable to express the "unimaginable and unspeakable" prairie.

Van Herk argues that the prairie has been constructed as a thoroughly masculine space which, as we have already seen with Kroetsch and will with Dennis Cooley, is not far from the truth. Theorizations of the prairie have either ignored questions of gender or have reproduced the traditional female/civilization vs. male/wilderness opposition. Faced with the erasure of any female space, van Herk writes that women writers from the prairie must deal with additional problems: "how to re/appropriate the prairie, this prairie with its tinge of west, its male visage? This plundered prairie, compliant archetype for the erotics of male space, a seized place" (" Appropriations" 85). She argues that the prairie landscape and prairie writing have been hijacked by male writers and critics, who attempt to fit both into narrow paradigms without understanding either. The resulting criticism and literature is, in her view, distorted:

The fabric of this living breathing landscape has been masculinized in art, descriptive passages of a land instinctively female perceived by a jaundiced male eye. Description, description, and more description, an overlooking. Prudence, caution. [Male writers
and critics) are afraid to enter the landscape. They describe it instead. ("Women" 140)

Van Herk links the silencing of women and region. As we have seen, the most common model of regional writing makes description paramount: the role of the regional writer is to provide an accurate description of a homogenized region so that its peculiarities can be explained to an audience based elsewhere. The effect of description of this sort is to efface all difference within the region. Instead of this effacement, van Herk calls for a recognition of intersectionality: it is possible to be from the prairies and be a woman—the two are not mutually exclusive; the writer does not have to choose between affiliations. 78 She takes issue with the division Kroetsch establishes between woman and prairie in his essay "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction," writing that the opposition he sets up between feminine/silence/book/house and masculine/voice/tale/horse entirely disempowers women, allowing them space only as inspirations rather than artists. She suggests an alternative:
muses are static, make nothing. The landscape and its rendering shapes the eye of the viewer. How can we enter fiction if we are fixed as mother/saints/whores, muses all? Through that indifferent landscape. It is, after all, a

78 I would expand van Herk's remarks to other types of intersectionality (race, class, religion, education, etc) as well.
curve; despite those black steel lines, an undulation. We can get into, enter this world, because it belongs to us. ("Women" 143)

Van Herk's redefinition of the prairie as undulating rather than flat allows her to grant women privileged access to the landscape, as she argues that "man and his straight line--steel, yet--horizontal world cannot contain or even predicate the female curve of the prairie" (142). The steel lines to which she alludes come from Rudy Wiebe's well-known statement in "Passage By Land" (1972) that the only way to write the prairie is to "lay great black steel lines of fiction, break up that space with huge design and . . . build a giant artifact" (259). Wiebe's remark is similar to Kroetsch's comment in "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" that the prairie writer's task is to bridge distance. While van Herk endorses Wiebe's view elsewhere ("Space and Landscape: A Personal Mapping" (1984)), she here suggests that it is an inadequate model for the female writer. She urges her female reader/writer to adopt a more subversive approach, calling for her metaphorically to enter the landscape:

Nobody knows we're here; we have entered the landscape of the prairies. We don't stick out. Our subterfuge is complicated, unfixable, we snigger in our sleeves while we mouth the old banalities, while we flap our aprons at runaway steers. We have found our own geography of love
and fear, and live now within it, burrowed like insistent gophers, no masculine gun can dislodge us now. ("Women" 145)

Unlike Kreis's giant on the earth, the vertical man in a horizontal world, van Herk's writers "don't stick out." Instead, she calls for a more complicated literary model which recognizes difference and allows women to participate in the "true prairie." Her poetics are oppositional: she writes not only against obsolete prairie realist models but also against critics like Kroetsch and Wiebe whose revisionist theories do not adequately address feminist concerns. But I am concerned that in her identification of woman with landscape she is embracing the essentialism that continues to plague both prairie and women. In seeking to rescue prairie writing from critical models which end up depicting prairie dwellers as an anachronistic and tribal population tied to landscape, van Herk ends up casting women in that role. Rather than being an effective strategy for literary or political change, van Herk's metaphorical equation of woman and prairie ultimately suggests a rhetorical discourse based on geographic essentialism.

Dennis Cooley's The Vernacular Muse (1987) can also be read as a response to Kroetsch, though his theories could

79In this she is related, strangely enough, to Sharon Butala's assertion of privileged female access to landscape in The Perfection of the Morning.
hardly be more different from van Herk's. Cooley argues that there are two streams of poetry currently being written on the prairie, "eye" poetry and "ear" poetry. Eye poetry is studied and lyrical, and features a solitary, romantic poetic persona. It may be highly formal, and may allude to European literary tradition. Cooley describes it in terms of "high" culture. Ear poetry, on the other hand, is popular, vernacular, and vigorous, the product of Kroetsch's beer-hall orality. Its purpose is communication rather than reflection, and its language is the product of the community rather than the solitary poet. It is also in some senses performative: Cooley writes that "it addresses someone and seeks to act on an audience" (7). This communal quality is the most significant difference between eye poetry and ear poetry. Cooley compares the two, explaining that "the one poet, in soliloquy, unengaged in a dialogic way, sings her sensitive impressions to herself—monologic; the other poet enters dialogue, acknowledges a social setting, toward which he is responsive or solicitous—dialogic" (11). Kroetsch's influence is obvious in the assertion of a vernacular regional culture, and in Cooley's assertion that the vernacular "participates in the still larger category of postmodernism which profoundly alters the most basic beliefs and values that for centuries have informed the Western mind and therefore its art" (172)


graduates, themselves imperious, impervious, in controlling literary accreditation, once and for all: if a work is good it will be received elsewhere, the measure always located 'elsewhere,' anywhere but here; there is universal (telling cognates: university and universal) and significant, here by definition is 'provincial' and inconsequential. (210)

Against what he constructs as a homogeneous, dogmatic, and completely closed canon, Cooley urges a freer and more authentic poetry. He compares the status of the regional dweller with that of other oppressed peoples, arguing that in the vernacular is a tool for their political empowerment:

literature becomes vigorously rooted— in our time and in our places, subject to our values, our sense of what is real. It also becomes, for many, vernacularly based in the 'low' and the local, speaking from or for minority groups who have become marginalized (women, the Third World, the poor, the 'undereducated,' natives, working people, ethnics, those in 'the hinterland'), in short, central to my argument, the disenfranchised. (182)

Cooley thus figures his vernacular as inclusive, accessible, and above all an authentic prairie voice.
But the values that Cooley's theory actually promotes are a far cry from the post-colonial ideal he claims for ear poetry. Instead of advancing an egalitarian and empowering poetics, Cooley's construction of the vernacular is both misogynistic and racist.\textsuperscript{80} "It seems to me," he writes, "that what I am calling 'eye' poetry tends to be written by women, and 'ear' poems tend to be written by men" (14). Correspondingly, eye poetry "trails" and "longs," while ear poetry is "boisterous" and "vehement"--it "muscles in . . . chews . . . knots . . . squeezes . . . shouts . . . nabs . . . zaps" (19). In its essence, Cooley remarks, ear poetry is "noisy, hyperbolic, additive. Male" (18). Furthermore, while ear poetry is written by young, prairie-born poets, eye poetry continues to be written primarily by the old, and by immigrants (14). The rhetorical strategy Cooley uses here is, of course, nothing new: its feminization of the "opposition" is exactly the same strategy that modernist critics had used to discredit popular traditions in the 1940s. In attempting to construct ear poetry as the only true prairie tradition, Cooley must also construct eye poetry as something which is entirely other to the prairie. The exclusion of the feminine, apparent in Kroetsch's criticism, here appears in an extreme form. Cooley mentions several women whom he considers ear poets, but since he never quotes from their

\textsuperscript{80}See Frank Davey's essay "A Young Boy's Eden: Notes on Recent Canadian 'Prairie' Poetry" (1988) for a discussion of the ways in which the Cooley's vernacular can be itself read as a strategy of colonization.
work or uses it to illustrate his points his invocation seems little more than lip service. The poetic tradition Cooley constructs is resolutely masculine: women, the eye poets, are not true prairie writers and are, in fact, complicitous with the imported academic culture against which Cooley argues. The gendering of the nature/culture conflict rears its tired head again. Cooley's anti-immigrant stance also reveals a strong strain of environmental determinism. It is the native-born writer who is most likely to produce what Cooley has determined is the authentic prairie voice. The effect of this view is shown in his introduction to *Inscriptions: A Prairie Poetry Anthology*, which he edited in 1992. He describes his selection criteria:

One consideration has been residency—imaginative residency. I didn't want to include those who had simply passed through, and I didn't want to feature those who had just arrived, nor did I want to bring in those who physically lived in the prairies but wrote as if they were somewhere else entirely. The writing in some way had to show signs it came out of the prairie or that it engaged with the place. (xv)

Cooley's insistence on writing that "comes out of the prairie" indicates a belief in the determinative power of place. This anthology legislates a poetry which not only reflects the environment, but reflects that environment in
a certain way. His introduction demonstrates the ways in which critical reliance on environmental determinism shapes how writing from the prairies is published, distributed, and evaluated. As Cooley makes clear, writing which does not conform to his definition of the vernacular is not "prairie" at all. Any poetry from the prairie that steps outside the vernacular is excluded.

Reading Cooley's essays is particularly frustrating because, while he performs all the critical manoeuvres necessary to make a strong case for prairie writing, he displays little critical self-awareness. Consequently, he argues against what he constructs as a foreign and rigid literary canon seemingly without noticing that he legislates a similar straitjacket. Arguing against the privileging of inherited literary models, he writes that "to take a certain activity for granted can be downright authoritarian: my poems are 'natural,' yours are 'artificial'; my language natural as grasshoppers, yours phony as a dictionary (or an academic's talk)" (3). But the strategy against which he writes is the one he uses himself. As we have seen, he continually constructs eye poetry as a foreign, artificial, and feminine art, while the vernacular is correspondingly masculine, indigenous, and natural, the authentic prairie voice coming directly from engagement with the environment. George Amabile responds to the insistence on one Prairie Voice (his
capitals) in "Clearing the Field: Some Notes on Recent Poetic Theory" (1986):

we are deceived here, by a very attractive metaphor which takes the intensely regional nature of Canadian writing as an absolute. Without question, regionalism is a source of literary vitality and has produced truly distinguished work. But, in its passion for isolation and self-definition, it can become, like Nationalism, vehemently conformist and prescriptive, assuming, as it often does, that there is already a fixed Prairie (or Canadian) style, and that the writer's primary responsibility is to stray as little as possible from its imperatives. It is also inaccurate to assume, as we sometimes do, that literature is determined by landscape, as though we were all sedentary, 19th-century agrarians who rarely travelled further than the nearest town. Most of us are very mobile, and many of our best writers have lived elsewhere . . . for years or decades. A purist definition of what does and does not constitute Prairie Literature or the Prairie Voice could easily, as it hardens in the minds of readers, writers and critics, destroy what it hopes to encourage. (94)
Amabile's complaint that proponents of the One Prairie Voice are prematurely defining a tradition sounds very much like John Sutherland's critique of A.J.M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). His assessment of arguments like Cooley's points to the ways those arguments in fact reproduce the conditions they explicitly battle. Cooley's challenge to a rigid definition of poetry institutes a new but equally rigid definition; instead of promoting a more sophisticated understanding of writing from the prairies, *The Vernacular Muse* once again locks writers into the strangely primitive condition of environmental dependency. The contradictions in Cooley's argument lead him to statements that are more and more extreme: he constructs his critics, for example, as "literary Mounties who think their practice, recognizable as 'poetry,' needs no defence, that others must face the hard-headedness of their questions, their unblinking capacity to search out fraud and incompetence and other criminal acts (theorizing, for example)" (3). Such an assertion recalls Janice Kulyk Keefer's similarly extreme claim in *Under Eastern Eyes* that literary theory "encroaches on our freedom and rights as readers" (9). Cooley's description of the literary Mounties also points to his own unease with his role as critic and academic. In his construction of the true prairie spirit as anti-intellectual, anti-academic, he has caught himself in a Catch-22 situation: can one be a university professor of English and a good ol' boy at the same time?
In order for his argument that vernacular poetry is the true prairie voice to be valid, Cooley must construct his critics as entirely other to the prairie which, as we have seen, he has done through a vilification of women, immigrants, universities, and "high" culture. But in so doing, he reifies the redneck stereotype the prairies have been fighting for years. While Cooley's aim in *The Vernacular Muse* is to redefine prairie poetry and open up a new cultural space for it, his strategies of exclusion serve only to alienate readers. It is interesting that his arguments have not provoked more response. Mark Abley and Susan Gingell have each challenged the aesthetic underlying Cooley's theories, asserting that, as Gingell writes, poetry "must do more than appropriate the local idiom. There must be something arresting about the way writers handle language or form, something that reaches beyond place while acknowledging the ground it stands on, for me to feel their work is as valuable as those which have these qualities" (129). Cooley dismisses this critique as coming "from certain assumptions--very standard and unacknowledged assumptions--about poetry, apparently still current in some circles" (170). His remark that Abley's critique is particularly invalid because Abley is "a facsimile Englishman" (169) shows the xenophobia lurking behind his construction of the prairie voice. Anne Szumigalski has challenged Cooley's theories with a declaration of the eclecticism of prairie writing:
I would like to state that I am very much in agreement with Mark Abley. For me there is no such thing as "prairie poetry." There is the prairie, and there is the poetry being written by people living in the region. Inevitably the poetry is influenced by landscape, but I believe we must give up this silly notion that only one kind of poetry should be written in this place. The prairie is big, but poetry is bigger. There is room for all kinds of work here. 

For some of us the prairie is a chosen landscape, one we expect to spend the rest of our lives admiring. Whether we choose to be blunt and spare with our words or allusive and ambiguous, whether we write about the outer or the inner landscape, let's not debase our region by offering or accepting mediocre work with the excuse that it is "prairie literature." (qtd. in Vernacular Muse 169)

Szumigalski's critique touches on a number of hot issues: style, form, environmental influence, questions of value, and even the definition of the prairie writer. But, as with Abley, Cooley dismisses these questions because Szumigalski's statement has no value: she is "a transplanted Englishwoman" (169). Cooley's rhetoric then turns on the idea of the authority of the native speaker—only someone from the prairies is qualified to speak for
the prairies. But as we have seen in Cooley's criticism and anthology selection, he reserves the right to decide who is truly "from the prairies."

Similar assertions of the "authenticity" of prairie writing are found in Sharon Butala's article "The Reality of the Flesh" (1987). Butala deals with fiction, not poetry, but like Cooley she divides writers into two camps: there are those novelists who, when the impulse to write comes upon them, turn to look out the window, or go outside for a long walk across the prairie, or drive out to Fort Walsh, or go to have a talk with an old man; and there are those novelists who go to a literary café, to their bookshelves, to their memories of the great works of other novelists, and to long, learned conversations with scholars whose ideas are built and honed. I am one of the former and I view the latter with respect and not a little envy mixed with a dash of perplexity. (98)

Butala makes a clear distinction between the writers she sees as working from real life, and those she believes dwell largely in the academic world of capital-L Literature. In her description, the "real life" writer has privileged access to prairie landscape, history, and people, while the "literary" writer, insulated from prairie reality, works from a generalized and imported literary culture. Butala herself appears as a "real" writer,
suspicious of the book-learnin' evident in some prairie writing. The true prairie writer, in Butala's construction, is a naive artist whose ideas are not "built and honed": his or her writing comes directly from the environment, unmediated by any theoretical agenda or aesthetic theory. Butala explains her position more clearly in her response to Aritha van Herk's paper "Invented History: False Document, or Waiting for Saskatchewan," in which van Herk had stressed the conceits inherent in any attempt at representation, and emphasized the ultimate disjunction between literature and life. Butala answers:

It is hard to know how to respond to Aritha van Herk's playful, good-humored paper, but when she speaks of an "invented space" and a novel as a "false document," even though I realize that she speaks poetically, . . . I have to say that when I go out to the corral and watch my husband breaking a horse, or when I am down at the PFRA corrals helping him eartag and earnotch steers and then sit in the truck, the windows rolled up against the bawling of the cattle and the heat and the dust, to write it all down exactly as it was, this place I write about does not feel

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81 Her recent memoir, *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), narrates her rejection of what she depicts as an unhealthy and meaningless urban academic experience.
invented to me, and the resulting document is not a false one. (98)

Butala's insistence on the unmediated depiction of reality recalls the insistence on realism voiced by critics like Ed McCourt and E.K. Brown. In Butala's argument, for prairie writing to be valuable, it must be true—the writer appears in this description as reporter rather than inventor, broadcasting a play-by-play of prairie life. Butala's "real," rural prairie occupies a privileged position of honesty, in contrast to a tainted urban environment.

Like Cooley, Butala uses a rhetoric of authenticity to promote her views: realist writing is the natural way to demonstrate the true prairie environment. Also like Cooley, she constructs those who criticise her position as entirely foreign to the prairie:

it is easier, too, to speak of invented history and false documents when you are zapping across continents and time zones at five hundred miles an hour, thirty-five thousand feet above the earth, than when you are walking through your wheatfield, seeing your crop cooking in the heat before it has even headed out and you can hear the whole field singing with the steady hum and whirr of grasshoppers, as some of us have done. (98)

Theorization appears here as a luxury which real prairie dwellers are unable to afford. True prairie residency is
based on connection to landscape, related to class identification, and grounded in the experience of suffering. This definition of the prairie environment and its appropriate style of representation is not, of course, new, as it leads us back towards the prairie realist aesthetic.\(^{62}\) This definition also asserts the utter alienation of the prairie region from the rest of the world: there can be no connection whatsoever between the farmer and the airplane far above. The same gulf lies between the prairie writer and the larger literary community—to admit outside influence is to step away from the prairie environment and betray the region. Butala's repeated insistence that she is a "real" prairie writer indicates her reliance on the role of authoritative native speaker, and suggests the rudimentary environmental determinism underlying her objections to van Herk's remarks.\(^{63}\) Cooley's and Butala's insistence that only one way of writing is natural to the prairie, and that there can be only one kind of true prairie writer, points back to

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\(^{62}\)See David Carpenter's article "Sinclair Ross's Horsey Comedy" (1990) for a discussion of the critical aestheticization of suffering and its implications for readings of Ross.

\(^{63}\)It is possible to read Butala's continued assertion of her own authority as indicative of an anxiety about her role. In her model, based as it is on hard work and tilling the land, there appears no place for the artist, just as there is no place for leisure. This anxiety may also be reflected in her increasing mystification of the prairie, a transformation documented in *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994) and further demonstrated in her recent *Coyote's Morning Cry: Reflections of a Life in Nature* (1995). Since Butala is neither a rancher nor a farmer, the two occupations that most closely fit her "real prairie" model, she asserts her connection to the land through the invocation of an ecofeminism that allows her access to the "primitive" natural forces she sees informing the lives of "real" prairie people.
Ed McCourt's 1949 assertion that landscape determines writing, and that the principle task facing the regional artist is the articulation of that landscape and its effects on the individual.

* * *

Out of the Prairie West and the emotions evoked by its infinity of earth and sky, by its solitude and separateness and harsh climate, has come a book of writing that is different in theme, subject, and tone from that of the rest of Canada. . . .

The central image of Prairie writing . . . found in early descriptive accounts and continuing to the present, is the land itself—a symbol of hope, fulfillment, or despair for those who came to conquer it and make it fruitful; an imaginative landscape for the creative writer who responds to it with emotion and memory. (x-xi)


The landscape of Western Canada, in its incredible diversity and its often awesome presence, has been a powerful and dominant
feature of fiction from this part of the country. Whether it is an obvious physical presence . . . it seems that the landscape, and particularly the rural landscape, still does much to shape the interior motivations of characters in the fiction of the West.

Landscape in contemporary Western fiction is more often internalized and much less obtrusive . . . but the presence of the landscape is still felt. (9-10)


Anthologies can be said to be literary theory put into practice. The two passages quoted above, from anthologies of prairie writing published 12 years apart, show the persistence of environmental determinism in their use of landscape treatment as a criteria for anthologization. Each constructs the prairie environment as particularly extreme and so particularly influential. Mitchell's anthology includes only the prairie provinces, which he constructs as self-contained and entirely unique: it is "the influence of the Prairie experience, which is built of extremes and set against infinity" (xi) that is responsible

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84Daniel Lenoski's introduction to Along prairie lines: An Anthology of Long Prairie Poems (1989) is another example of such persistence.
for a distinct regional literature. *The Last Map Is the Heart*, on the other hand, includes writing from British Columbia as well as the three prairie provinces. Within this grouping, the editors feel compelled to make some distinctions, remarking that "writers from British Columbia have . . . been less influenced by the physical geography of mountains and sea than prairie writers have by their landscape, though certainly landscape is a presence in the fiction of many West Coast writers" (10). These are, by now, familiar statements. This evaluative process is self-replicating: as readers learn from these introductions that environmental influence and the human relation to landscape is of paramount importance to prairie writing, so that knowledge will colour their own reading experiences and their own assessment of that writing. It is significant, I think, that both of these anthologies are historical surveys of prairie writing. The implicit purpose of such a project becomes the demonstration of a literary tradition: we can see prairie writing developing through time but still maintaining some continuity. As discussed in earlier chapters, the coherence of prairie writing is most often located in the prairie itself.

While both *Horizon* and *The Last Map Is the Heart* set out to celebrate and promote writing from the Canadian west, the terms through which they define that writing compromise their intent and, as with the nationalist discourse I discussed in Chapter Two, permit only a narrow
"regional" category. The same limitation appears in Daniel Lenoski's introduction to *a/long prairie lines: An Anthology of Long Prairie Poems* (1989). Lenoski relates what is seen as a typical Western Canadian literary project--turning to the past, as with Kroetsch--to both the west's colonial status and to a more generalized condition:

All of the writers in this collection . . . are wrestling with the skeletal remains of a fading past, fading not merely because formal historians are ignoring it, not merely because Canada has been a colonized country, not merely because the west is viewed as politically, socially and fiscally less significant than central Canada with its meccas . . . but also because that is the way of the world. (xvi)

Lenoski's comment is interesting in that it simultaneously invokes the prairie's marginal status--the west is seen as inferior to Ontario and Quebec--and invalidates that claim—it is a universal condition. Such a comment is indicative of the tension that may exist in regional anthologies between the particular and the universal. Lenoski characterizes the poems he anthologizes as coming out of a particular social and political nexus (prairie writers write as they do because their past has so often been effaced or devalued), but he also must assert that the poems participate in a larger, non-political literary world in order for them to have value. The universalization of
difference works to invalidate specific regional claims. I am additionally intrigued by Lenoski's defense of the footnotes he attaches to the poems. He writes:

Despite the fact that much of the poetry in *a/long prairie lines* is "writerly" and travels along postmodern frontiers, the notes are designed to provide some hospitality and direction for a voyage through the physical, psychic and verbal geography of Western Canada—even as one does when an outsider or a relative visits one's home. (xvii)

The poems themselves may travel along postmodern frontiers, but Lenoski's description of them recalls the insistence of E.K. Brown, Ed McCourt, and Northrop Frye that good regional writing exists to explain the region to an audience from elsewhere.\(^5\) Compare this description of *a/long prairie lines* to van Herk's description of *Boundless Alberta*. While van Herk characterizes her collection as "a window on the world, a literary telescope" (viii), Lenoski's collection is a window to "the physical, psychic and verbal geography" of the West. His introduction prepares his reader for a glimpse of a generalized regional ethos, and in so doing replicates the assumptions of regional homogeneity and stability we have seen in other, much earlier, critics. Lenoski appears trapped in

\(^{5}\)Lenoski seems to be gearing his collection towards an extra-regional audience—after all, readers from within the region do not need to have their own psyches explained.
paradoxical assertions of similarity and difference, which are perhaps most graphically illustrated in his description of the extra-regional audience as both "outsiders" and "relatives," two terms with very different implications.

Against these assertions of land-based literary coherence and safe, non-politicized regionalism, other anthologies from the prairies argue for a body of work united by nothing so much as its eclecticism. These anthologies anticipate my arguments in their refusal of narrow regional definitions, and underscore the ways in which writers from within the region work inside and against preexisting regional and prairie discourses. Some editors position themselves self-consciously against what they perceive as condescending central-Canadian assumptions of regional inferiority and homogeneity. Mark Duncan's introduction to *Section Lines: A Manitoba Anthology* (1988) is typical in its rejection of literary stereotypes:

What is [Manitoba's] story and how is it to be told? A complete answer to that question is beyond the scope of this introduction, but the variety of themes and forms collected here will

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86 This characterization is not limited to anthologies recently published: Carlyle King, the editor of *Saskatchewan Harvest* (1955), the first anthology of writing from Saskatchewan, wrote that it "is a book of writing about Saskatchewan; it is not a collection of 'Saskatchewan writing,' for there are not 'Saskatchewan' writers; there are only writers" (5). Like the contemporary anthologies I am about to discuss, King's collection is not a historical one. And while he does use environment as a criteria for admission, in that all writings must be about Saskatchewan, he does not assert that all writings from the prairie must be either about the prairie itself, or its influence on people.
doubtless come as a surprise to those accustomed
to thinking of prairie literature as one-
dimensional, the last bastion of gritty
naturalism. (xxiv-xxv)

Similarly, Aritha van Herk writes in her introduction to
Alberta Rebound (1990) that the stories she has selected
"explode the general notion that Alberta stories are about
cowboys and gophers and the depression, about grain fields
and prairie childhoods and disgruntled oil barons" (1). In
Boundless Alberta (1993), the sequel to Alberta Rebound
(itsel itself a sequel to the 1986 anthology Alberta Bound), she
rejects not only stereotypes about Alberta writing, but
about regional writing generally:

The traditional expectation of the regional
story collection is that it will magnify a small
and rather limited place, reveal the seams and
fissures in an inevitably parochial world. But
the thirty-six short fictions gathered here
configure Alberta quite differently from its
ubiquitously ascribed gophers and grain
elevators, prairie and sky, oil wells and
Rockies. Once again, Alberta becomes an exotic
location, a window on the world, a literary
telescope. (viii)

The production of these regional anthologies then seems
motivated to an extent by a rejection of literary
sterotypes and a desire to demonstrate that stereotype's
obsolescence. Lorna Crozier explicitly rejects environmental determinism, writing in her introduction to A Sudden Radiance: Saskatchewan Poetry (1987), which she co-edited with Gary Hyland, that such a model is inaccurate and reductive. This determinism, related to and coupled with the continued critical emphasis on realism, distorts perceptions of the literature:

One reflection of this emphasis [on Kreisel's essay "The Prairie: A State of Mind"] is the recurrence of words like historical, realistic, and documentary in discussions of prairie literature. In spite of such publications as Ed Dyck's Odpoems and Anne Szumigalski's Doctrine of Signatures, our poetry, as well as our fiction, continues to carry these labels. (xvi).

Crozier writes against the negative characterizations of the prairie that permit critical interpretations like Ricou's. Indeed, Crozier specifically criticizes Ricou's analysis, pointing to his dependency on Peter Stevens's poetry to back up his thesis. From Stevens's poem "Prairie Negative," she writes, Ricou builds a theory of literature and landscape and then attempts to force prairie writing into that paradigm (xxi). She describes the effect of such criticism:

To anyone who knows this place . . . the all-too-common statements about the poetry and the
landscape don't ring true. This, we have been
told, is a region of emptiness, flatness, the
bare bones of land and sky. It is a landscape
that evokes terror and a feeling of isolation,
an externalization of the angst inside every
human being. It is a place without a mythology,
a new land without history, without human
association. Such descriptions have created a
prairie of the mind which bears little
resemblance to the one perceived, recorded, and
shaped by contemporary poets. (xvi)

Crozier's rejection of the literary stereotype is clear.
So too is her rejection of the prairies as a closed and
claustrophobic space, entirely cut off from the outside
world. The anthology includes poetry in diverse styles,
and contains work by poets from Saskatchewan as well as by
those who were just passing through, but had a significant
effect on the literary community through their teaching,
reviewing, and/or residency at writers' programs like the
Saskatchewan School of the Arts. This anthology then
appears at the opposite end of the regional spectrum from
Cooley's Inscriptions, which includes only those poets who
are from the prairies and whose work displays marks of what
Cooley defines as "imaginative residency." Crozier and
Hyland do not disregard the influence of place entirely:
Crozier quotes Eudora Welty's statement that "Every story
would be another story . . . if it happened somewhere else"
(xv). But here place does not determine literary citizenship; it is just one more dimension to the poems. A sophisticated model of regionalism like that found in A Sudden Radiance, which admits the possibility of "foreign" literary influence and which stresses regional change as much as stability, allows the development of a regional literature which is based in a specific place, but which is neither necessarily nostalgic nor inherently obsolete. The difference between A Sudden Radiance and Inscriptions seems to lie in the differing conceptions of "place" displayed by each editor. While Cooley defines place exclusively in geographic terms—the poetry he selects must "show signs it came out of the prairie"—Crozier and Hyland's willingness to include works by writers whose "imaginative residency" extends beyond Saskatchewan's borders indicates a regional definition closer to Mandel's assertion that "prairie" means "a sort of complex conceptual framework with which various social inter-relationships can be viewed and understood" ("Images" 541). Such an assertion, I argue, is important in its recognition that when we say "prairie", as in "prairie writing," what we are talking about is not the actual prairie, but the prairie as it has been socially constructed through history. As Rob Shields points out in Places on the Margin, this social spatialization is not stable, but constantly changes, as place-images are neither "objects to be described...[nor] a unified corpus of symbols and meaning that can be definitively interpreted
once and for all for every person" (18) I do not think, however, that this social spatialization means, as Mandel says, that the prairie is then "nothing more than this...a mental construct, a region of the human mind, a myth," because such a mythologization is inadequate to the very real economic and political disadvantages experienced by artists in what are called "the regions." Mythologization of the sort Mandel proposes can be effected only by separating literature from its production. In locating "place" within culture, a conceptual framework which includes geography but does not insist on its deterministic effects, Crozier and Hyland are able to produce a regional anthology that avoids the narrowly-limited "prairie writing" seen in Cooley's introduction, and instead substitutes a more flexible and ultimately, I suggest, more valuable category of "writing from the prairies."

In this chapter I have emphasized that regional writers do not passively absorb the cultural constructions imposed on them by the dominant national culture, but instead participate in their own self-definition. Such participation makes obvious the interrelationships that exist between centre and region; the two are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually dependent. The differing definitions of "prairie writing" that have emerged within the region challenge any notions of regional homogeneity or critical concensus, and point to the impossibility of
satisfactorily determining what, in fact, is "prairie" about writing from the prairies. Attempts to impose a hegemonic definition on writing from the prairies has led, as in Cooley's theorization, to a critical framework that replicates the artistic straitjacket it seeks to loosen. Conceptualizations of region that define place in strictly geographic terms tend to reproduce the environmental determinism that has turned the label "prairie writing" into a cliché. Similarly, critical models that insist on realism as a means of "authentic" prairie expression further legislate a narrow regional definition which expends a great deal of energy in trying to determine who qualifies as a "real" prairie writer. However, more open-ended definitions of regional writing, as seen in A Sudden Radiance, allow critics and readers to release the idea of an essential, environmentally determined prairie ethos and to admit geography as one facet of shifting and multiple identities. Definitions of the regional must shift to allow intersectionality, hybridity, and common interest, while at the same time recognizing difference and inequality within the region. The result will be not a xenophobic and obsolete "blind" regionalism, but an intelligent regionalism that retains artistic and political meaning.
CONCLUSION: WHO'S AFRAID OF REGIONALISM?

The creative instinct has a great deal to do with territorial rights.

- Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden

The belief in environmental determinism has informed much of Canada's literary criticism, from early attempts to build a national literature to contemporary attempts to dissect it. A geographically-centred genius loci, or spirit of place, has been held responsible to varying degrees for shaping a distinct national consciousness and a unique Canadian identity. Such essentialist determinism, legitimated and reinforced by nationalist discourse, underlies most definitions of region and regionalism and, because of its wide currency in both popular and academic media, is rarely questioned. But the emphasis on place in nationalist discourse has not translated into a celebration of the local. As Alan Lawson points out in "Countries of the Mind: Place as Value in Canadian and Australian Discourse" (1985):

National identity has given the idea of place a cachet it did not formerly have. But national identity has also come to be a device for avoiding the local. Like the discredited concept of universality it is a generalizing tool; in thematic terms it tends to obscure the importance of the particular and the detailed and, like universality, appeals to something
beyond the immediate. It is a concession to the value of "elsewhere" rather than "here." (579).

This emphasis on the value of elsewhere—the nation—rather than here—the region—has created a climate in which the regional is seen as inherently subordinate to and dependent on national concerns, be they political or literary. Regional writing has been consistently cast as non-literary, as a form of expression which doesn't quite make it in the real, non-regional world. This construction of regional inferiority is supported in the structure of literature courses which teach writings that come from places considered regions only in units on "regionalism," and in the continuing insistence in the national publishing industry that writings from the regions are somehow "special interest" publications that properly belong with small regional presses.87

As my discussion of definitions of the regional has shown, literary regionalism is thought of in terms of accuracy and authenticity; its role is to communicate what real life is like in a specific and narrowly defined environment. This insistence on authenticity and the authoritative native speaker is found both in critics who insist on realism, like E.K. Brown and Sharon Butala, and in those who prefer a postmodern or non-realist model, as in David Jordan's insistence on postmodernism as the proper

87See Ursula Kelly's chapter "Publishing 'Regionalism'" in Marketing Place for an extended look at what books get published where.
means to convey "the regional experience" (NWR 8). Such insistence on the native speaker may give rise, as it does in Dennis Cooley's The Vernacular Muse and Janice Kulyk Keefer's Under Eastern Eyes, to a critical model based on exclusion, on weeding out writers who are not "true" regional writers. The effect of such exclusion is to develop a regional paradigm in which, as Roberto Maria Dainotto cautions, "regionalism is merely taking the place and the role that once was given to nationalism: they speak the same language; they foster the same desires, menacing and childish, of purity and authenticity" (505). Edward Said writes in Culture and Imperialism (1994) that "trying to say that this or that book is (or is not) part of 'our' tradition is one of the most debilitating exercises imaginable" (xxv). This debilitation is clearly seen in the model of nostalgic and unengaged regionalism such a xenophobic approach promotes.

My thesis has shown that writings from the prairie provinces are particularly subject to the restrictions placed on literature considered "regional" because the prairies are considered to be a particularly extreme environment which is especially difficult to represent. At the same time, the prairie landscape is seen as the overriding factor shaping regional identity. Robert Thacker's comment that "the feelings engendered by prairie space are . . . ingrown and inescapable" (216) demonstrates this determinism. But such beliefs are possible only when
one ignores the fact that people alter the environment even as it affects them. Leonard Lutwack writes in The Role of Place in Literature (1984) that
the relation of people to land is finally a product of the interaction of three factors: the basic physical nature of the environment, the preconceptions with which it is approached by its inhabitants, and the changes man makes in it . . . . The physical nature of the environment is perhaps the least important of the three.
(142)
Likewise, William Cronon insists that "environment may initially shape the range of choices available to a people at a given moment, but then culture reshapes environment in responding to these choices . . . .thus setting up a new cycle of mutual determination" (13). Recognition of this mutual effect makes clear the inadequacy of the essentialist determinism suggested by Thacker.

Prairie landscape and prairie literature have frequently been seen in a cause-and-effect relation as, in Henry Kreisel's words, "the impact of the landscape upon the human mind" is seen as the generative force underlying writing from the region. Such a concentration on landscape, combined with the "accuracy" demanded of writings considered regional, has led to the continued privileging of a prairie realist aesthetic which supports ideas of regional sterility and dependency. This is what
is meant by the term "prairie writing": a series of books where gophers and grain elevators erect themselves against an endless sky, where dust and blizzards beat down the already-defeated farmer. Books which do not fit this narrow definition, like Tim Lilburn's allusive and playful *Names of God*, Kristjana Gunnars's self-consciously post-structural *The Prowler*, Guy Vanderhaeghe's exploration of the non-agricultural prairie in *Man Descending*, Robert Kroetsch's *Alibi*, with its international setting, or Gail Bowen's genre fiction *Murder at the Mendel* are not considered "regional," because the definition of regionalism is too limited to accommodate them. I have discussed, for example, how Robert Kroetsch has been appropriated to a nationalist discourse of postmodernism. Such limited definitions permit the construction of the region as a homogenous and stable self-contained entity, which has little contact with a more diverse and cosmopolitan centre. As I explained in Chapter 3, the critical insistence on reading literature from the prairies in terms of what it might reveal about human alienation from the land, coupled with the subordination of regional concerns within a nationalist discourse, contributes to popular and academic climates in which people from the prairies are perceived either as hot-headed rednecks or as laconic and defeated farmers tied to a dying land. Similarly, the prairies themselves have been constructed as a frontier wasteland which is inherently doomed. Such
constructions, of land and people, are complicit with a literary and political discourse that asserts a central-Canadian hegemony and reinforces centre-region inequalities by normalizing them and presenting them as natural. As Ursula Kelly writes, "as a referent...regionalism acknowledges and regulates inconsistencies within a nation while at the same time suggesting that where these inconsistencies exist, they are largely the fault of the regions involved" (43-44). Definitions of prairie writing which rely on environmental determinism and a native genius loci are complicit with such a statement.

One may ask why, given the insistence on accuracy in regional writing, the "prairie" definition has not changed to accommodate cultural and technological change within the region. The answer, I suggest, is that the construction of the prairie region as powerless and dependent is perceived as important to the stability of the nation-state and to central-Canadian perceptions of national control. Rob Shields explains:

Even when the characteristics of a place change so radically that one would expect a change in the place-myth, this does not always take place. The explanation for this has been argued to be that changes necessitate not just an adjustment of the myth ... but a restructuring of the entire mythology and the development of new metaphors by which ideology is presented.
Changing the relative position of one place-myth vis-a-vis other place-myths affects all of their meanings. "Once the conservative robustness of
textual place-images. (256)

As I have emphasized throughout my thesis, the regions must be viewed relationally, not in isolation; the textual prairie, and its implications, cannot be separated from the textual Canada.

As my last chapter demonstrates, writers and critics from within the prairie provinces participate in their own definition as regional writers. But that participation is limited. Northrop Frye wrote in his 1965 Conclusion to the Literary History of Canada that "there are no provinces in the empire of aeroplane and television, and no physical separation from the centres of culture, such as they are" (848). Frank Davey said in a 1975 interview that "microtechnology makes it possible for every place to be the centre. . . . the chief characteristic of the present arts scene is that the centres are multiple and are in unexpected places . . . " (183). And in 1995 David Staines described Canadian literary history as "the movement from colony to nation to global village, a global village being a nation beyond nationalism, where the nation's voices are so multifaceted that the distinction between international and national is no longer valid" (24). But these predictions are not accurate, as ideas from the regions do not carry the same cultural weight as those legitimated by
centralist institutions. As a brief scan of my Works Cited list shows, most of the creative and academic books published about regionalism are written by people from places considered regions and published by presses considered regional. All except one of the anthologies of Canadian prairie writing that I discuss in Chapter 4, for example, are published within the region. Most of the critics I mention who concentrate on prairie writing are from the prairies, including Laurie Ricou and Dick Harrison. While this situation indicates vigorous and dynamic critical and artistic communities within the region, it also means that their arguments are unlikely to achieve national prominence; these critics end up preaching to the already converted.\textsuperscript{88} Lorna Crozier's insistence in \textit{A Sudden Radiance} that "to the contemporary poet whose sense of home begins in Saskatchewan, the vastness isn't monotonous or frightening, it isn't 'the lowest common denominator,' it isn't overwhelming, it simply \textit{is}" (xvii) is likely to have little effect on national perceptions of the prairie as both hostile and alien. Ursula Kelly writes that "to insist on the validity of the periphery, the margins, is one thing; whether or not voices from and of the periphery are heard is entirely a choice of the

\textsuperscript{88} I would argue that the exceptions to this rule would be those writers whose ideas can be appropriated to a nationalist ideology, either because they reinforce existing popular ideas of what the prairie is (as seen recently in the success of Sharon Butala's \textit{The Perfection of the Morning}), or because their ideas can be redefined to promote a national idea, as in Linda Hutcheon's redefinition of Kroetsch as Mr. Canadian Postmodern.
powerful, the voices of the centre" (32). Kelly may slightly overstate the case, but she points to the impossibility of separating literature from politics, as many of the nationalist critics I have discussed have attempted. Recognizing that writers in the regions are disadvantaged in terms of distribution goes a long way towards debunking the myth of a prairie has, in David Bentley's words, "a low density of . . . literary and linguistic activity" (39).

Definitions of the regional which conceive of place only in geographic terms reinforce regional isolation and powerlessness. The emphasis on landscape is, as I have demonstrated, particularly acute in the criticism of writing from the prairie provinces: F.P. Grove's 1931 remark that "differences in national character are most pronounced in those who are in immediate contact with the soil they sprang from; for they rest in geographic, topographic, and climatic conditions" (qtd Ricou 40) could easily be transported into many recent analyses. Furthermore, the continued linkage of prairie literature to the environment supports the popular perception that the prairie population is almost entirely rural, in contrast to the perceived urban cosmopolitanism of the centre. As Grove's comment suggests, such environmental determinism contributes to the assumed "difference" of the regions:

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89Likewise, Rob Shields suggests that one reason for what he terms "the vocousta revival" is that it "originated from Toronto-area intellectuals with peerless access" to the national media (192).
the population there is, naturally, a different breed than that in the more sophisticated areas. The naturalization of such assumptions lends support to the unhelpful idea of regional isolation, where the regions are distinct units entirely separate from each other and from the centre. It is not surprising to see essentialism and xenophobia arising from such a view.

The construction of regions as hermetically sealed areas is supported by the binary oppositions promoted in structuralist discourse, in which civilization and nature, baseland and hinterland, are rigid and mutually exclusive categories. Such rigidity appears in the anachronistic constructions of "prairie" that I discussed in Chapter 3, in which region and regression are inextricably linked. But the nostalgic definition enforced by such criticism is untenable, as shown in Henry Kreisel's conclusion to "The Prairie: A State of Mind." He writes:

on a winter day one can turn off the great super-highways that now cross the prairies and drive along narrow, snow-covered roads, and there it still lies, the great, vast land-sea, and it is not difficult to imagine Philip Grove in his fragile cutter, speaking softly to Dan and Peter, his gentle, faithful horses, and preparing them to hurl themselves once more against that barren sea, those drifts of snow.

(17)
But the timeless prairie that critics like Kreisel, Ricou, Marison, and Bentley construct can exist only in the imagination, only if one ignores the technological and cultural changes taking place at an ever-increasing rate. Reading literature through landscape, as Kreisel suggests, only works to freeze a regional identity that no longer exists, if, in fact, it ever did.

Against these restrictive definitions, I argue that regions, literary and political, must be seen relationally, in ways that acknowledge the connections between regions. As Janine Brodie explains:

regions are shaped and reshaped by dynamic political, social, and economic linkages that connect geographic space in relationships and interdependencies. . . . What sets a relational region apart is the nature of its relationships with other regions: its boundaries are relative. (17)

Such a framework allows recognition that regions are not necessarily natural but are constructed, that they are "shaped and reshaped" continually, and so should be positioned in cultural discourse rather than in some abstract and essentializing spirit of place. Rob Shields emphasizes that regions are not static but participate in systems of signification, writing that "places or regions mean something only in relation to other places as a constellation of meaning" (199). Such emphasis allows a
far more complex understanding of literary regionalism, in which regions appear not as, in Hugh MacLennan's words, isolated "backwaters," but as active participants in a national cultural discourse. In my introduction to this thesis I quoted Ursula Kelly's remark that "the problem with 'regional' writing is not that it concentrates on a particular place, but that the place on which it concentrates is seen to lack social, cultural, and economic significance" (22). Acknowledging the interconnectivity of regions compels recognition of the relevance of the regions to the centre, unsettles any easy assumptions about a centre-region hierarchy, and promotes recognition of central contribution to regional poverty. Acknowledging the significance and eclecticism of writings from the prairie provinces produces a model of regional writing which is not nostalgic, obsolete and comfortable, but unsettling, present, and meaningful.
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