This all happens where? Regional representation within JJ Steinfeld’s ‘Anton Chekhov Was Never In Charlottetown’ and Michael Winter’s This All Happened.

This paper will compare the representation of place in two texts from Atlantic Canada; a short story from Prince Edward Island and a novel from Newfoundland. In comparing these texts I will show how Newfoundland literature is relevant to an understanding of Atlantic Canadian literature. Recent literary studies, such as David Creelman’s Setting in the East, which see Newfoundland as separate from the region, indeed as ‘a regional literature distinct in itself’,¹ risk relying on past conventions at the expense of a contemporary writing community. I will also look to question assumptions of reading for place in literature. Both texts carry strong representations of place by referring to lived experience and everyday practices. Reading these particular practices can be seen as a departure from the tendency to read for mimetic details of setting.

Calling Michael Winter’s novel This All Happened and JJ Steinfeld’s short story ‘Anton Chekhov Was Never In Charlottetown’ regional representations requires some theoretical attention. For many outsiders to the region there are few known ‘presentations’ of the region, and so the assumptions that Winter and Steinfeld are consciously writing back to may not seem apparent. Therefore I’m going to briefly sketch the key issues which surround Atlantic Canada as a literary field. Firstly, the terms Atlantic Canada and Maritimes, both often employed, are not synonymous. Atlantic Canada comprises of four provinces: Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador, whereas the term ‘Maritimes’ excludes Newfoundland and Labrador. Many existent studies of the region’s literature are studies of solely the Maritimes.² Conventionally Atlantic Canada has been a contested term because it is accused of ignoring what Creelman, and Janice Kulyk Keefer before him, have seen as its separate forces of historical formation. However, Creelman has acknowledged that all four provinces have shared a ‘common struggle against the

² This, with the exception of Danielle Fuller’s recent text and the 2006 special issue of the journal, Canadian Literature.
economic hardships of underdevelopment and underemployment. It is my contention that this very statement should serve as a basis for a wider study of Atlantic Canada, remembering of course that any region is a continuous engagement with difference.

Secondly, ignoring Newfoundland literature would dismiss many strategies of writing place which have been developed under exactly the same traditions, academic assumptions and cultural conditions as the rest of the Maritime Provinces. These assumptions stem from, what Keefer and Creelman trace as, the regional dominance of realist narratives. A realist regional text poses several problems. The academic and literary worlds see realism as dated. Literary taste sees the very mode of realism as undeveloped in the sceptical post-modern world. Regional realism has often dealt with regional employment, and has therefore focused on primary industries such as mining, fishing and logging. These industries, again, appear dated in the context of a post-industrial world. Whether these portrayals have been romantic or realist, or revisionary, their concentration has led Ian McKay to suggest a trope of the ‘folk’, which can be seen to have formed within Atlantic Canadian narratives. This trope has created assumptions of nostalgia, or pastness alongside conventions of subjects as rural rustic workers. Seldom have Atlantic Canadian narratives dealt with distinctly Atlantic cities until recent work. Contemporary writers are challenging these conventions, employing differing forms as direct strategies of representing place. Winter and Steinfeld defy convention in form and setting, in order to rewrite ideas of regional identity.

Steinfeld’s short story, ‘Anton Chekhov Was Never In Charlottetown,’ is the first person narrative of a colourful character whose relationship with a girlfriend has just ended. That relationship broke down in a dispute over two differing Chekhovs, the first being a Star Trek character and the second being a Russian playwright: ‘I told my woman friend she could have her Ensign Pavel Andreivich Chekov, and I’ll have my Anton Pavlovich Chekhov… He’s my friend, I shouted…she shouts back that my friend never came to Charlottetown.’ Desperate to retaliate in this argument, the nameless protagonist is writing a play where Anton Chekhov moves to Charlottetown, Prince

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3 Creelman, op. cit.
4 J.J. Steinfeld, ‘Anton Chekhov Was Never In Charlottetown’ in Anton Chekhov Was Never In Charlottetown (Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2000), pp. 13-40 (p.31) Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, referred to as [JS].
Edward Island (PEI). [JS 31] However, subsequent desires to transpose Oscar Wilde, alongside a local poet from the mid 20th century, Milton Acorn, prove to complicate the play. This venture, whilst described as ‘cluttering things up with too many celebrities,’ [JS31] reflects the fragmented structure of the narrator’s own confessional monologue. The timeline of narration is sporadic, skipping from darkly comic anecdotes of the air force, before he lost one of his arms, to modern day tales of visiting downtown coffee shops and ‘overlooking Charlottetown Harbour [which] calms me better than lithium.’ [JS 32] Each anecdote then links to a cultural text, high or low brow, to Chekhov, or to a contemporary experience of PEI, drawing a wide web of reference. As the rambling confession continues, it creates an accretion of many times, places, people and stories. The effect is something of a post-modern clutter. Generic PEI icons like Anne of Green Gables collide with the poetic identity of Milton Acorn embodying the mosaic of place and time that is locally lived experience. PEI is connected not just to its past literary tradition but to transnational culture, through military conflict, American TV, and Russian literature. The mixing of these varied influences even conjures an anxiety of purpose to the nameless narrator, who himself questions ‘what am I rambling on about?’ [JS 29] Steinfield foregrounds here how the form of the conversational monologue can reveal the myriad influences on situated living.

Michael Winter’s novel This All Happened is a journal-à-cléf, written with an entry for every day of the year. The first person diarist is Gabriel English, a writer living in St. John’s, Newfoundland. However, the reader is encouraged throughout the book to identify Gabriel literally as Winter, stemming from the preface’s remark that ‘any resemblance to people living or dead is intentional.’5 Indeed, the perceived accuracy of representation in the text has been widely noted. Winter himself notes ‘my brother told me he was kind of hurt by what I wrote […] you never know what kind of exposure will hurt someone you love.’6 Winter’s girlfriend at the time, filmmaker Mary Lewis, has also commented on the striking parallel she bears to Gabriel’s filmmaker girlfriend Lydia

5 Michael Winter, This All Happened (Toronto: Anansi, 2000), p. i. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, referred to as [MW].
Murphy. Therefore, the narrative carries both an internal and external plea for extreme realism, encouraging the reader to believe the closest relationship between reality and text. This relationship challenges critics such as Terry Eagleton who suggest that there is ‘no representation… without separation.’ Instead the text suggests, what John Mullan, in his analysis of the roman-a-cléf, terms ‘a sense of revealing what has been secret, of broaching the forbidden.’ This is realism without Atlantic Canadian literary tropes as templates. Here, the form’s acute attention to the everyday is the basis of the real, suggesting a potential exposure of usually unscripted performances and practices.

The diary, more so than a conventional novel, validates a consistent return to the mundane or the ordinary, giving narrative license to the conventionally transitory. This steady account of everyday practices has the potential to be revolutionary, displacing assumed tropes as regional narratives. Michel de Certeau affirms this in his view that ‘one can analyse the microbe-like, singular and plural practises which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress […] revealing surreptitious creativities that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organisation.’ One example of this transitory particularity is the preparation and consumption of food, described frequently over the course of the year. Gabriel notes one picnic to be, rather as an excited child would, ‘thick sandwiches and expensive leaf lettuce and a bottle of French red and crunchy pickles and ice cream.’ Later entries focus on food preparation, with one overtly expressing seduction within a traditional St. John’s kitchen party:

I sever the muscle, wring a lemon. The lemon spurts over my hand. I lick the crevices of my hand. I hand Alex the opened oyster. She lays its ceramic mouth on her bottom lip. She leans back. I watch her throat swallow. Her nipples, in the periphery, just show through her top. Then she stares straight into my eye. She says, they’re delicious. [MW 44]

Food also proves to be expressive of local and transnational relationships, as when Gabriel buys a mangosteen at an outpost shop ‘I’ve never eaten a mangosteen. But I want to support the idea that a little place in Trinity Bay will import them.’ Food from other places exists here, asserting whole identities in contrast to the local, such as

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when Gabriel is ‘making lamb as the Moroccans might cook it.’ [MW 147] It is in the mundane that Winter’s text truly attempts mimesis, and proves that this form is tailor-made for accreting observations of the particular.

One thing that both texts do is follow the life of a writer. This in itself has no successful precedents in Atlantic literary tradition, with most protagonists being based on the core industries of fishing, mining or farming. Only in Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and The Valley* (1952), a text conventionally seen as being both national and regional, is the protagonist a writer, though crucially one who never succeeds. This scarcity of writers in fiction reflects the real life plight of ‘regional’ writers who had to move to big centres such as Montreal or Toronto in order that their work see print. Today writing the region and living the region is still a narrow career path.

Within Steinfeld’s text the writer figure allows self-reflexivity, commenting on regional writing whilst conducting it. Just as in Winter, Steinfeld’s protagonist is writing historical fiction, a prominent part of the contemporary regional literary market. The nameless writer in Steinfeld’s text is fascinated by *The Seagull* and the effect of writing, in his historical novel, recurrent performances of *The Seagull* set in Charlottetown, PEI across the 20th century. The mirror of Steinfeld and his writer-narrator gains another reflection when the writer asks that we believe the fourth act of his play will be about a distant relative of Chekhov, ‘a playwright living in Charlottetown, who coincidentally happens to have only one arm.’ [JS 35] The subsequent retort that ‘it would make a good episode of *Star Trek,*’ [JS 35] comments on how revisionist historical fiction, as an alternative history, can appear close to science fiction. This challenges the stability of regional tropes and the traditional authority of historical fiction as a bounded, accurate device for regional representation.

Winter’s writer from St. John’s gives us much insight into his writing experience, and about how to write place. Employing Gabriel as ventriloquist’s dummy, Winter critiques Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News,* claiming to have ‘found the voice false’ [MW 253] and expanding on this by claiming to have heard Proulx say ‘she heightened

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11 As Lisa Salem-Wiseman comments “Although the novel and the author are unnamed, the reference is to E. Annie Proulx and her novel *The Shipping News.* Proulx spoke at the annual Learned Societies Congress in 1997, which was held at Memorial University, St. John’s.” Lisa Salem-Wiseman ‘Portraits of the Artist as Ambivalent Urban Hipster’ in *Downtown Canada,* ed. by Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p.165.
or torqued, the language in order to best capture the place and the people… I don’t agree that caricature is the essence of novels.’ [MW 253] Here Winter’s views on the benefits of mimesis become apparent. However, as Phil Hubbard and Lewis Holloway suggest, an ‘Authentic sense of place implies that a fundamental, lasting truth about a place is known, going beyond the ephemerality of the constantly changing modern world, and tapping into an unchanging genius loci.’

If such a spirit of place does exist, the politics of who can achieve some connection to it would seem to be an open debate. Steinfeld’s text seems to convey a more open sense of place, believing his protagonist to have found home after moving to Prince Edward Island. This stance at least allows authentic expression of place to be detached from time spent in that place. Winter’s stance is more defensive, attempting to protect place from misrepresentation and exploitation. This of course misses how everyone’s representation is to some extent an appropriation, and that there will always be some who see certain representations as inaccurate or unreal. Nevertheless, in displaying the writer writing about place as part of the narrative, each text foregrounds the critical and literary dilemmas of writing contemporary place.

So far, what has been said about people and writing place could be seen as abstract. Where is the discussion of tangible description? Where are the bricks and trees, and what colour are they here? This tendency to see representation as solely exterior mimesis prevents a total engagement with contemporary writing on place. This desire also masks a few of our own pre judgements. Both Charlottetown and St. John’s are part of a stereotypically rural region but crucially both are urban centres. The contemporary urban life is a major part of the lived world of Atlantic Canada, but not a major part of its literary tradition, and certainly only a small part of academic writing on place in literature. Despite both places having harbours and primary sector employment, neither place can be discussed solely in relation to its landscape. Winter and Steinfeld are both mimetic, in the sense that both use real life reference points, but neither author is a substitute for a travel writer. Steinfeld describes how, in the summer, you can see ‘Anne of Green Gables cavorting on the main stage of the Confederation Centre,’ [JS 34] but then ties the reference to lived experience, noting that his protagonist uses the event to

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pickpocket: ‘having one arm gives me the advantage of being an unlikely and unsuspected Artful Dodger.’ [JS 34] Winter also focuses on the real, including much conversation from The Ship Inn, which exists in both the text and in reality just off Duckworth Street in St. John’s. Despite the pub being place-specific, its function as a space rather than a place tends to dominate. The pub encourages adversaries to talk and perform the role of amiable drinkers. However, conversations between Gabriel and his love rival, ‘Craig regular’, do turn to the locally referential, as when Craig says ‘his house in the Battery has had plumbing for only twenty years. In the seventies there was a honey bucket.’ [MW 176] Place in literature is a much wider concern than simple architectural or environmental description. It is, as evidenced in Winter and Steinfeld, a representation of particular practices, mundane or carnivalesque, a linguistic community, and a network of spatial and cultural intertexts.

Steinfeld’s text reminds us that local identity in Charlottetown is powerfully affiliated to national identity, and canonical moments of cultural nationalism. The cultural assumption of Gord Downey in The Tragically Hip’s ‘Fireworks’ that ‘if there’s a goal that everyone remembers, it was back in old 72’ is borne out by Steinfeld’s coffee shop customer who ‘hadn’t had any big health problems since 1972. He knew it was September 1972 because he was in hospital then […] when he watched the Canada-USSR hockey series, flat on his back, and Paul Henderson scored his famous goal.’ [JS 16] Local narratives and national narratives will always be in dialogue. Winter’s St. John’s cannot avoid symbols of a ‘lost nation of Newfoundland.’ For those who rue the narrow defeat in the referendum over joining Confederation in 1949, the ultimate symbol of difference is not the provincial flag of Newfoundland and Labrador, as with other provinces, but instead is the ‘pink, white and green national flag of Newfoundland’ [MW 43] that Winter describes as flying from the LSPU Hall.14

Literature and place continually renegotiate their relation to each other as writers appropriate and re-imagine place. Situated, lived experience will always provide boundaries to the identities that can exist there, for as Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts ‘a

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13 ‘Fireworks’ from The Tragically Hip’s album Phantom Power. The Canadian band is part of a larger network of federal protectionist policy to the Canadian arts.

14 A building in St. John’s now used as theatre but named the LSPU Hall since 1912 when it was sold to the Longshoremen’s Protective Union.
tree, whatever the circumstances, does not become a legume, a vine or a cow […] for [an identity] to make sense, it must be an identity constructed in response to facts outside oneself, things that are beyond one’s own choices.\textsuperscript{15} Place will always be a formative part of the individual’s actions, of lived experience. Literary place has the luxury of being able to adapt and refract lived experience. Winter and Steinfeld deal directly with the process of writing lived experience by making their protagonists regional writers. Steinfeld’s caricature of an eccentric writer responds to a global and national pressure on local identity, whilst Winter is concerned with the mimetic boundaries of realistic representation. Both writers write over the tropes of regional writers of the past, as you would expect from contemporary writers, and comment on the trend of historiographic metafiction through their protagonists’ novels. Winter has indeed gone on to write the book that Gabriel was writing in \textit{This All Happened}, perhaps in response to the transgression his journal-à-cléf was thought to have conducted. Although no form is inherently repetitive or transgressive, but the employment of the journal form by Winter, and the conversational monologue by Steinfeld, set the conditions for frequent repetition of local practices and observations. This accretion of detail enables a distinct idea of place to be conveyed, and shows that choice of form is essential to creating an individual situated voice.

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Primary Texts


Secondary Reading


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