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Regional (Be)Longing in Canada – Newfoundland's Unrequited Dream? Identity Politics in the Writing of Wayne Johnston

Zusammenfassung

*Neufundlands Beitritt zur kanadischen Konföderation im Jahr 1949 wurde von Politikern oftmals als endgültiges Symbol nationaler Einheit gefeiert, wenngleich damals beinahe die Hälfte der Inselbewohner gegen den föderalistischen Zutritt stimmte. Die Ironie dieser Darstellung wird in diesem Aufsatz anhand der Analyse von Wayne Johnstons literarischen Werken über Neufundlands Transformation von einer britischen Kolonie zur kanadischen Provinz aufgedeckt und als subversives Element in Kanadas notorischem Streben nach nationaler Identität gedeutet. Vor dem Hintergrund der fortwährenden Regionalismusdebatte werden Johnstons Texte *A Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1999) und *Baltimore's Mansion* (2000) als Demontage eindimensionaler Identitätskonstrukte gelesen, die sich vor allem durch den stilistischen Duktus der Ironie offenbart und das Wesen Neufundlands in den heterogenen Zwischenraum des Paradoxen positioniert. So wird im Endeffekt nicht Neufundlands föderalistischer Anschluss an Kanada per se zum Symbol nationaler Einheit erklärt; wohl aber wird Johnstons literarische Darstellung der Region in seiner geographischen, politischen und kulturellen Vielfalt als Bekenntnis zum nationalen Duktus der Heterogenität und multikulturellen Verschiedenartigkeit gelesen.*

Résumé

*L'adhésion de Terre-Neuve à la confédération canadienne en 1949 a souvent été célébrée par des hommes (et femmes) politiques comme le symbole définitif de l'unité nationale, quoique près de la moitié des insulaires ait voté contre l'entrée dans la confédération. L'ironie de cette représentation est mise en évidence dans cette thèse au moyen de l'analyse des œuvres littéraires de Wayne Johnston portant sur la transformation de la Terre-Neuve d'une colonie britannique en une province canadienne et interprétée comme un élément subversif dans l'aspiration notoire du Canada à l'identité nationale. Au vu des débats sur le régionalisme, les textes de Johnston *A Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1999) et *Baltimore's Mansion* (2000) sont lus comme un démontage des mo-*

dèles d’identité unidimensionnels, révélé par le trait stylistique de l’ironie, et positionnant l’essence de Terre-Neuve dans l’espace hétérogène du paradoxal. Ainsi, en fin de compte, ce n’est pas en soi le rattachement de Terre-Neuve au Canada qui est considéré comme symbole d’unité nationale ; mais la présentation littéraire que fait Johnston de la région dans sa diversité géographique, politique et culturelle est lue comme une profession de foi en faveur du trait national de l’hétérogénéité et de la diversité multiculturelle.

1. Introduction

“We are all Canadians now,” Newfoundland’s Secretary of State Gordon Bradley announced on April 1st 1949, one day after the former British colony officially became the tenth and last province of Canada (qtd. in Hiller 1993, 349). In the ears of the forty-eight per cent of islanders who voted against Confederation, this statement must have seemed like an April Fool’s joke; in fact, the nationalistic overtone of the celebratory remark seems to ridicule the very notion of Canada, whose identity, it has often been said, can only be perceived through its regional roots.

The following paper explores this theme of Canada’s national and regional identity by analyzing the writings of Newfoundland author Wayne Johnston, in whose work the search for selfhood emerges far less ambiguously than Bradley’s proclamation would suggest. Johnston’s bestselling novel *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1999) as well as its autobiographical counterpart *Baltimore’s Mansion* (2000) tell of the promises and disappointments involved in the island’s entry into Confederation, thereby painting a picture of paradoxes that reconfigure Newfoundland’s – and therewith Canada’s – identity as a space of internal incongruity and irony.

2. The (Im-)Possibility of Defining the Region

“The region seems destined to rival, if not replace, the nation-state as the central construction in Canadian studies,” William Westfall writes in his 1980 article “On the Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature,” in which regionalist theories are shown to be a possible solution for Canada’s notorious quest for identity (Westfall 1980, 3). The idea that the national self can best be defined over its local territories has become prominent ever since Northrop Frye argued in 1971 that “the question of Canadian identity [...] is not a ‘Canadian’ question at all, but a regional question” (Frye 1971, 413). Yet despite the concord among Canadianists about the centrality of regionalist approaches, it is far from settled how to understand the concept of region that is supposed to be the basis for national identity. Four major approaches are usually discussed in the ongoing regionalist debate.

The most traditional and frequently used concept of regionalism takes its origin in geographical understandings of local territories, which are delineated and set apart

from each other according to topographical features. Because it focuses on exterior characteristics, this model has also become known as formal or “environmental approach” (Westfall 1980, 6). Pertaining to Canada, geography is seen as having significant influence over regional identities that commonly denote terrains such as the North, the Prairies, the Pacific Provinces or the Maritimes as being first and foremost marked by topographical determinants. Considering the vast dimensions of the country and its diverse nature, formal approaches are also frequently used to delineate environmental regions on a smaller scale, the mountains of British Columbia or the peninsula of Cape Breton being perfect examples. William Wonders hence argues that “[t]he most fundamental fact of Canadian regions and regionalism is the geological and physiographic pattern of the nation” (Wonders 1983, 18). Despite this prominence of geographical regionalism, however, the approach has come under considerable attack for positing seeming absolutes in its definition of the local. The reduction of the region to its topography, critics claim, results in essentialist perceptions that reduce local identities to their apparently predetermined nature. In the case of the Atlantic Provinces, formal definitions have condensed the region to its “intrinsic essence: the sea,” as Ian McKay criticizes one-dimensional geographical models that “define ‘region’ in natural essentialist terms” (McKay 2000, 95). Similar to the static pieces within a mosaic, then, formal regions lack the possibility of transformation and lead to a stagnant rather than dynamic conception of local identities.

As an alternative to the predetermination of formal regionalism, a so-called functional approach has been proposed that seeks a more flexible image of local territories by taking into consideration its social and governmental structures. Political and administrative relations as well as economic, linguistic or financial aspects are considered so as to allow for an ongoing modification of the region according to its current position within the national whole. Québec, for instance, is often seen as an example of a territory that is better characterized by its functional than topographical characteristics, since its political and sociological structures differ significantly from the rest of the country’s provinces (Westfall 1980, 4). Herb Wyile therefore highlights the particular importance of the “region-nation dynamics” that have shaped the Canadian mosaic and must be taken into account for a viable conception of both local and national identities (Wyile 2000, 439).

But while structural approaches offer a more dynamic conception of local identities, they seem to essentialize the region on different grounds, namely according to its socio-economic position within a hierarchically organized nation. The focus on structural relations is said to enforce prevailing paradigms of power, which diminish regions to inferior parts of the national superstructure. Local literature as a case in point has traditionally been marginalized as provincial in the sense of being primitive and unrefined when situated within a dichotomy with allegedly cultured and urbane national writings. Herb Wyile pinpoints this reductive view on local literature that is engendered by functional definitions of the region:

Expressive of the centre-periphery relationships which have dominated modern Canadian history, the term regionalism in literature has largely been used as shorthand for the writing of the periphery, of those areas outside the heartland of central Canada (Wyile 1996, 11).

This denigration of the local periphery can also be seen in stereotypical conceptions of the Atlantic region, which is often blamed on its fiscal dependency on national subsidies. W.H. New critiques the essentialist clichés that arise from this purely socio-economic view, labelling Canada’s Eastern Provinces as “dour, demanding, rural without being pastoral, industrious without being profitable, the exporter of brains and the importer of money, everyone’s half-forgotten past and no-one’s future” (New 1976, 3). Similarly, McKay exposes the reductionism involved in functional approaches when stating that the “Atlantic Region comes to be defined largely in terms of its structuring absences: its lack of a metropolis, its lack of domestic pools of capital, its lack of a well-developed industrial base, its lack of a ‘developed class structure’” (McKay 2000, 96). Rather than “liberating” the region from its geographical remoteness, then, functional approaches enforce the image of the marginal and degrade rather than value regional identities.

The third, so-called mythological form of regionalism challenges this reductionism of geographical and economic definitions by taking into account the variety of imaginative spaces that shape a region. Emphasis is put on the multiplicity of cultural traditions, including local literatures and oral narratives as well as music, folklore, and, *nomen est omen*, common mythologies. Douglas Francis hence refers to these territories as “landscapes of the mind” or “mindscapes,” in which the internal and external complexities of a region are conveyed through the emphasis on imaginative, symbolic, and folkloristic spaces (Francis 2001, 572). Seeing that the transmission of these cultural traditions is a *conditio sine qua non* for the existence of mythological regions, writers as well as historians, musicians, or folkloristic storytellers are considered to be of central importance in this approach. William Westfall stresses this vital function of literature and other forms of ‘professional’ narration when he states:

Writers no longer simply reflect the region they describe; now they help to create the region itself. Art and identity are linked closely together. Regional writers take the cultural material of a place and transform it into a mythology that the people of the region can identify as their own. Without this mythology the cultural region would not exist (Westfall 1980, 11).

Through this emphasis on the communal construction of regions and their cultural multiplicity, mythological approaches seem to transcend geographical limits while simultaneously destabilizing the hierarchical system of functional methodologies.

Nevertheless, the theoretical advantage of the concept turns into a critical impasse when considering its concrete workability. "How to find a common perspective in the diversity and multiplicity of stories, songs, poems, novels, and art of a region is challenging to say the least," Francis critiques the mythological model, which he believes to engender reductive readings as soon as it is put into practice: "It looks for unity where it does not exist, and imposes uniformity of thought and outlook where it should be valuing diversity" (Francis 2001, 573). In the Atlantic region, this homogenizing effect of mythological regionalism can, for instance, be seen in the common conception of the region as a pastoral place of pre-modern innocence that has effectively led to the Othering of its inhabitants as "quaint, patronage-ridden, backward obstacles or simply [...] as a 'problem of regional disparity'" (McKay 2000, 99). Mythological forms of regionalism hence equally stereotype the region and amount to yet another essentialist approach, as postmodern critics have pointed out.

The apparent impossibility of defining local identities without essentializing them has led postmodern critics to challenge not only certain approaches but the very concept of region for presupposing a unity that does not exist. Regionalist models are seen as yet another facade of what Lyotard calls in his study on *The Postmodern Condition* the "grand narrative," which he believes to have "lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses" (Lyotard 1984, 37). As a consequence of this complete disintegration of overarching narratives, postmodern critics deny that regional bodies can be defined in any way, as even the smallest structure is considered to be fragmented in itself. With regard to Canadian literature, critic Linda Hutcheon has particularly promoted the deconstruction of regionalist concepts for their apparent misrepresentation of reality. The "Canadian emphasis on regionalism" must be translated into a postmodern "concern for the different, the local, the particular," Hutcheon argues in *The Canadian Postmodern* and celebrates such trends in contemporary literature: "Canadian novelists have refigured the *realist regional* into the *postmodern different*" (Hutcheon 1988, 19; italics in original). Following this viewpoint, neither geographical nor structural nor cultural characteristics can be seen as common denominator of a territory, no matter how heterogeneous or differentiated the resulting regional fraction would be. "The concept of region is, thus, in danger of losing any meaning at all," Francis consequently states in the face of a postmodern form of regionalism that really seems to be an anti-approach more than anything else (Francis 2001, 574).

In the face of this critical cul-de-sac, McKay proposes a "fifth and final meaning of 'region' in Canadian history" that seeks the simultaneous subversion of essentialist definitions without losing the concept of region *per se* in postmodern nihilism (McKay 2000, 101). McKay's initiative seems to be a typical Canadian model in so far as it draws on the power of parody to conceptualize "a space of irony and the possibility of resistance" against reductive forms of regionalism (McKay 2000, 101). Seeing that irony offers a means to simultaneously affirm and subvert certain dis-

courses, McKay’s concept of ironic territories can be conceived as a workable paradigm to retain the region as a non-essentialist construct of identity. After all, Hutcheon herself sees irony and parody as a means to simultaneously confirm the existence of something while keeping a distance from it: “Parody both asserts and undercuts that which it contests” (Hutcheon 1988, 7).¹ With regard to the region, then, ironic spaces can be read as maintaining distinctive characteristics while concurrently undermining a tendency towards false generalizations. The local thus turns into an internally differentiated body, which can only be conceived in the paradoxical interplay of essentialist and non-essentialist voices.

It is this understanding of the region as an internally incongruous self that will be used in the following textual analysis in order to elicit how Johnston’s writings defy, through ironically exposing its ambiguities and paradoxes, the reduction of Newfoundland’s identity to one-dimensional taxonomies. First, the analysis investigates the representation of the island’s geography in the texts, which will be shown to challenge the common practice of condensing the region to its marine status. Afterward, the portrayal of Newfoundland’s history in *Colony* and *Baltimore’s Mansion* will be taken into consideration so as to show how essentialist approaches towards cultural and political identities are reconfigured into a paradoxical space of irony. In the end, Johnston’s texts will be read as paragons for reconstructing regional identities in a post-postmodern age.

3. Johnston’s Literary Newfoundland: A Parody of Region

Wayne Johnston’s works have often been interpreted as realist representations of Newfoundland’s geography. Physical features are commonly seen as decisive influence on the island, where the majority of the author’s fiction is set, as they seem to predetermine not only its exterior scenery but also its regional identity.² Critic Alexander MacLeod writes in this respect: “With remarkable consistency, the national and international press interpreted *Colony* as a text in which the brutal topography of Newfoundland holds a deterministic power over its inhabitants” (MacLeod 2006, 70). The inevitability of geography in Johnston’s novel occurs, for instance, in the episode that recounts the tragic death of a group of fisherman killed on the open water when an unexpected storm sets in. During this scene, the text evokes the overpowering dominance of the region’s climate, which turns into an annihilating force. “During the day, there was a whiteness as absolute, as obliterative, as pitch-black darkness;” recounts the narrator of *Colony*, who is working in his first season as a correspondent on a seal hunting ship (Johnston 1999, 105-106). With almost naturalistic detail, the text furthermore relates through the eyes of the novice reporter

1 For further details on Hutcheon’s concept of ironic and parodic discourses, see her studies *A Theory of Parody* (1985) and *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994).

2 Apart from *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1999) and *Baltimore’s Mansion* (2000) Johnston’s works *The Story of Bobby O’Malley* (1985), *The Time of Their Lives* (1987) and *The Divine Ryans* (1990) as well as his latest novel *The Custodian of Paradise* (2006) are set in Newfoundland.

how the perished fishermen are found and turn into lifeless symbols of the sea's supreme force:

They were all there, the boys too young and the men too old [...]; boys younger than me and older than my father. [...] They had been transformed by their passion on the ice. Each had assumed in death some posture emblematic of his life. Or else they were refined to men that no one knew, as if in each face and posture was inscrutably depicted the essence of the person they had been. (Johnston 1999, 108)

The text here uses the figure of the outsider to suggest the all-subsuming power of Newfoundland's nature and give access to a world that seems unfathomable to those who have never had a comparable experience. Nature is shown to constitute an inevitable force of the region, whose population turns into "a victim of geography, an insignificant human presence standing against an unstoppable natural force" (MacLeod 2006, 78).

This sense of predetermination is furthermore endorsed when the novel's first-person narrator Joseph Smallwood, short Joey, goes to New York in an attempt to escape the geographical isolation of his native island. Yet even in the melting pot metropolis the young politician seems unable to break away from the imperious power of his homeland, which continues to hold sway over his life in an unwanted way. A complete stranger identifies the protagonist as a fellow-islander in the middle of New York City and pronounces over him in the prophetic tone of the Pentecostal preacher: "thou art a Newfoundlander and unto Newfoundland thou shalt return" (Johnston 1999, 186). Though Joey detests the preacher as much as the thought that his life may be fated by anything other than his own free will, he eventually *does* return to the Atlantic isle, though his relationship with its geography remains an ambivalent one. "I had never liked to think of myself as living on an island," he states upon returning, "for though I had an islander's scorn of the mainland, I could not stand the sea" (Johnston 1999, 131). This ambiguity in Joey's relationship towards Newfoundland's topography is furthermore emphasized when he is surprised by a severe snowstorm in mid-October while walking in the country with no shelter in sight. In the face of being almost killed in the freezing air, the narrator starts singing "The Ode to Newfoundland," including "the winter stanza, which had always been my favourite," as he informs the reader "without ironic intent" – a remark that only highlights the paradoxical nature of the region's environment that makes people both love and hate it (Johnston 1999, 225). The island's physical features are therefore illustrated as being omnipotent without reducing them to one-dimensional conceptions. Instead, the land is shown to generate ambiguities within the regional consciousness that cannot be essentialized in geographical terms.

That the region's landscape really is a site of multiple meanings is furthermore elucidated in *Baltimore's Mansion*. The author's childhood memoirs concurrently

emphasize the reality of Newfoundland’s nature while challenging simplistic representations of it. Above all, the text refutes common clichés that diminish the region to the seemingly ubiquitous presence of sea or stereotype it as the great “Rock” by portraying the remarkable diversity of the island’s interior. “Every so often, a new, entirely different, geography would assert itself,” the reminiscing narrator relates on his train ride across his native isle, which fascinates him with its geographical heterogeneity: “Each part made you forget the others existed” (Johnston 2000, 87). The text here purges conceptions of Newfoundland as essentially sea-bound and asserts that this “Terra Incognita” is more than simply an “unknown land” in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean (Johnston 2000, 84). Rather, it is depicted as a territory of manifold faces that contradict each other and turn the region into a paradoxical space.

Finally, essentialist readings of the insular setting are undercut through intentional misrepresentations of geographical features. Though the topographical depictions always appear realistic, they are not necessarily faithful to the physical features of modern-day Newfoundland, so that the portrayed landscape emerges as a place that is as subjectively constructed as it is real in the imaginative space of the narrative. Objective geographies are confronted in the text, which is chiefly evident in the fictional portrayal of St. John’s. Notwithstanding the apparent accuracy with which the provincial capital is described, the novel includes sections that are deliberately fictitious in their descriptions of non-existent streets and corners, leading Danielle Fuller to state that the author “pulls off a reality trick in his portrayal of St. John’s that is most detectable to those with local, ‘insider’ knowledge” (Fuller 2004, 42). Though it would have been easy for the Memorial graduate Johnston to render a completely accurate account of the city, he seems to purposely rope these discrepancies into the text so as to allow the region to be simultaneously real and fictional. Therefore, the Newfoundland of the texts can and must not be essentialized according to its geographical nature since the space of imagination invariably shapes the perceptions of a place.

How crucially physical place and emotional space are intertwined is further stressed in Johnston’s depiction of Newfoundland’s history and cultural identity. Here, too, the texts bring out the ironic nature of the island that has been significantly shaped by its three-part loss of autonomy within the first half of the twentieth century, when it turned from an independent dominion to a territory ruled again by Great Britain’s interim governance to the tenth province of Canada’s Confederation eventually.³ Both *Colony* and *Baltimore’s Mansion* draw on this back-

3 After its discovery by John Cabot in 1497, Newfoundland remained under British rule once the French agreed to relinquish their control of the southern and northern shores in the 1763 Treaty of Paris. When Canada was founded under the Constitution Act of 1867, the inhabitants of Newfoundland were presented with the option of joining Confederation but, in the persistent hope of becoming an independent nation one day, the majority of Newfoundlanders decided against it in a public referendum. In 1907, the colony’s dream of autonomy was partly fulfilled when it attained the status “Dominion of Newfoundland” – a status that the islanders voluntarily sur-

ground of the state-turning-into-province and elicit the paradoxes evolved in this part of Newfoundland's history. By bringing out the great division among the island population regarding the question of Confederation and the determinism on both sides of the political spectrum, Johnston's works illustrate that regional identity can only be understood through the parodic undermining of all essentialist viewpoints involved.

In *Colony*, essentialist views on Newfoundland's history are first and foremost embodied by the protagonist himself. Fact and fiction intertwine in the novel's portrayal of the man who led the former colony into Canadian Confederation through a fierce and determined political campaign.⁴ "Much of the Liberal success can be attributed to the dynamic, charismatic, and capable leadership of Smallwood," historian Raymond Blake writes in his study on Newfoundland's unification with Canada and characterizes the future premier as a person of great "determination, courage, intelligence, and unparalleled political astuteness" (Blake 1994, 52 and 15). In Johnston's novel, the resolute and indomitable Joseph of the historians turns into a fictive Joey who is as passionate and zealous as he is stubborn and domineering in his resolution to become a legendary figure in Newfoundland's history. As ambiguous as Joey's relationship with the island's geography may be, his varying conceptions of its cultural and political identity are characterized by a fervent idealism that amounts to crude one-dimensionality. He is, in short, both the hero and anti-hero of the story that presents the man as well as the island to be full of internal incongruities.⁵

rendered to Great Britain again in 1934 because of governmental corruptness. The following interim period, in which the island was ruled by a British-led Commission of Government, engendered renewed interests in Newfoundland's alliance with Canada, whose Confederation it eventually joined in 1949 after a heavily fought campaign that saw Joey Smallwood emerge as the first premier of Canada's tenth and last province. For further information on Newfoundland's history and its joining of Confederation, see: Conrad/Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Concise History* as well as Blake, *Canadians at Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as Province* and Hiller, "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1876-1949."

- 4 The fictional portrayal of a historical figure in *Colony* has led to a critical debate in which Johnston was accused of falsifying the region's past in addition to the figure of Joseph Smallwood. The author responded in an open letter to *The Globe and Mail* that his "intention in writing *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* was to fashion, out of the formless infinitude of 'facts' about Smallwood and Newfoundland, a story. A novel. A work of art that would express a felt, emotional truth that adherence to an often untrustworthy and inevitably incomplete historical record would have made impossible." (*Globe and Mail*, November 23, 1998; quoted in Mathews 2004, 5)
- 5 The idea of the anti-hero goes back to Stan Dragland's article, in which the narrator of *Colony* is described as a "pretender and quite a limited human being. In some ways, he's an antihero. He may be more sensitive than the real Smallwood, but Johnston makes much of his failure to understand many things" (200). Similarly, the term has been used by Mathews who describes Joey as "an unusually reflective antihero whose career provides the prism that the novelist needs to explore the ironies that, in his view, characterize Newfoundland's national identity" (6).

The protagonist is still at school in St. John’s when he starts to mentally construct an analogy between his fate and the one of Newfoundland. In the British-founded boarding school, Joey comes to realize that both he and his native island are deemed mediocre, the latter primarily on grounds of its colonial status and the former because of his working-class background that makes him an outsider in the upper-class institution. One of his British-born teachers uses these stereotypes to belittle Joey in relation to what he calls “the Elba of the North Atlantic” when stating: “The worst of our lot comes over here, inbreeds for several hundred years and the end-product is a hundred thousand Newfoundlanders with Smallwood at the bottom of the barrel” (Johnston 2000, 34 and 36). But if the teacher here demotes the protagonist and his home region to their allegedly marginal, colonized status in the face of a pivotal, colonizing centre, Joey reconfigures this defamation and starts to believe with equal determinism that he is fated to free himself and Newfoundland from the sense of inferiority looming over them.

Once the island has turned into his primary source of identification, Joey becomes obsessed with Newfoundland’s history. He is gripped by the idea that he can encourage the region’s cultural progress, which is symbolized to him by the *History of Newfoundland*, written by Judge D.W. Prowse in 1895. For the protagonist, this book denotes the quintessence of the island’s historical evolution and therefore contains “not a record of the past, but the past itself, distilled, compacted to such density that I could barely lift it” (Johnston 2000, 46). To be written into this book of regional progress and therewith immortalize himself turns into the ultimate aim in the narrator’s life:

It seemed to me that unless I did something that historians thought was worth recording, it would be as if I had never lived, that all the histories in the world together formed one book, not to warrant inclusion in which was to have wasted one’s life. It terrified me that if it were possible to extrapolate the judge’s book past 1895 to the present, I would not be in it (Johnston 2000, 454).

With an almost fatalistic sense of determination Joey believes in the intertwining of his and Newfoundland’s history and seeks to liberate both of them from the label of inferiority. After several failed attempts to achieve this goal via a socialist transformation of the country – in his younger years he longs to free the region from capitalist forces while simultaneously seeing socialism as the best means “to rise not from rags to riches, but from obscurity to world renown” (Johnston 2000, 122) – the protagonist devotes himself to the Liberalist cause of promoting Confederation, which seems to be the perfect solution for both bettering the island’s economic and social situation and becoming a regional “champion [...] because it was the one cause that, far-fetched and unlikely to succeed, had no champion” other than himself (Johnston 2000, 433).

Whatever his current political stance may be, Joey pursues his mission to rectify his and Newfoundland's identity from images of inferiority with unwavering determinism; he longs to set the region and himself 'right' in the face of a misapprehending world. The protagonist's self-assigned mission to refute personal and collective stereotypes leads him to develop a kind of counter-essentialism, which Johnston's text undermines by way of ironical discourse. When working together with a group of New Yorkers, for example, the narrator's militancy is emasculated through the preposterous way in which he does not even allow for a varying pronunciation of its homeland, as he recounts in retrospection:

They would mispronounce Newfoundland on purpose just to get me to pronounce it properly, which they for some reason found hilarious and would repeat to one another, mimicking my hyper-earnest expression as they put the stress on *land*. "NewfoundLAND, [...]. Not *NewFOUNDland*, not *NEWfoundland*, but *NewfoundLAND*, like *understand*, understand?" (Johnston 2000, 164; italics in original).

Joey's fundamentalist conception of his native island is hence disrupted by the very people whose supposedly wrong images of Newfoundland he seeks to expunge. In his stubbornness the protagonist epitomizes essentialist approaches to the region's personal and cultural identities, which the text then subverts through his anti-essentialist counterpart Sheilagh Fielding. The female figure, whose friends even call her by her last name, ironically undermines every voice in her surroundings that claims absolute authority, especially the voice of Joey Smallwood. Composed as a completely fictive character, Fielding epitomizes the direct antithesis to the protagonist, whose determinism to define Newfoundland in unambiguous terms she cunningly counteracts by "always one-upping him in witty exchanges," as critic Stan Dragland writes in his article on Johnston's novel (Dragland 2004, 199). It is through her that the text unfolds much of its biting wit and opens the space of irony in which Newfoundland's cultural and political identity can be situated.

Much like Joey, Fielding is a jack-of-all-trades who tries out different personal and professional lifestyles before she settles as a journalist in her hometown St. John's. In contrast to the protagonist, however, the sharp-witted woman does not try to hide the ambiguities and paradoxes arising from her own or anybody else's biography; quite the opposite, she exposes the incongruities of people's lives and accepts them as an essential part of their identities. In the case of Joey, for example, Fielding functions as an uncovering force for his internal contradictoriness that he usually tries to repress through vociferous determinism. From the time they get to know each other at school, the protagonist enters a love-hate relationship with the lifelong spinster, who at once attracts and repels him with her personal and professional acuity. "What a nuisance her existence was to me," Joey states with regard to Fielding's open opposition to his political agenda before confessing how passionate he still is

about her, even after he has long been married to another woman: "And yet it seemed the woman had fated me to a life of furtively and shamefully attending to myself like a schoolboy in the dark" (Johnston 1999, 358). Fielding thus compels Joey to confront his own contradictoriness, just as she forces her fellow-islanders to acknowledge the conflicting status of Newfoundland's socio-cultural identity.

Fielding's ironical stance towards common conceptions of her native isle emerges above all in her newspaper columns that are interspersed throughout the novel, as well as parts of her condensed rewriting of the official *History of Newfoundland*. Her greatly selective and subjective pieces function as a counter-perspective to the classic regional chronology by Judge Prowse that has endeavoured to define the region in linear and allegedly objective terms. Through Fielding's accounts, the novel undercuts these kinds of one-dimensional images, thereby rendering a sense of parody that establishes regional identities without essentializing them. With regard to the island's colonial identity, for instance, her commentary transcends both the Anglo-centric sense of superiority embodied by Joey's teachers and the protagonist's position of radical resistance by pointing to Newfoundland's history as a concurrently colonized and colonizing society:

Our history would not be complete did we not denounce the pagan practices to which people in this country have for so long clung and which some seek to preserve in the name of "culture," "folklore," "custom," or "tradition." No good can come of such things (Johnston 1999, 375).

The striking irony of passages such as these indicates the incongruities of Newfoundland's identity and negates the either-or approaches taken by those who claim authority over regionalist conceptions.

The perspective of paradoxical simultaneity suggested by Fielding also surfaces in her commentaries on the question of Confederation. When she relates how a commission of Newfoundland politicians travels to Canada to discuss the terms of union, she both asserts and subverts essentialist conceptions on either side by parodying stereotypes of her own countrymen:

Concession-happy, compassion-prone, suckers for a sob story, call them what you will, one cannot help pitying the Canadians when one imagines how they must have felt when they heard that a delegation of grovelling indigents was on its way to Ottawa from Newfoundland (Johnston 1999, 392).

With biting wit, Fielding paints a picture of regional and national identities that may be more 'true' in its ironic subjectivity than seemingly objective depictions can ever be. She locates the concept of political and cultural selfhood in a space of irony

that remains ultimately paradoxical, which may be the only way of preserving a sense of self after post-modernism.

Johnston uses the same form of paradoxical writing in his autobiographical memoir. As in the case of *Colony, Baltimore's Mansion* tells the story of a human life while paying homage to a quirky and quite impossible Newfoundland. In particular, the text brings out the internal contradictions surrounding the union with Canada in 1949 and the contradictory ways in which this part of the island's history has entered the regional consciousness. The voice of essentialism is represented by the older generations of the Johnston family itself. They are shown to belong to the forty-eight per cent of patriotic Newfoundlanders who voted against Confederation and pilloried Canada as a public fiend ever since. "My poor little country, gone," Johnston's father cries out in view of the referendum results while Wayne's aunt and uncle are even more radical and become "famous among the family for walking out whenever 'O Canada' was played" (Johnston 2000, 247 and 53). Throughout the text, this staunch anti-Confederation belief of the family is at once accredited and challenged through the ironic perspective of the narrator.

Johnston recounts in retrospect how the radical patriotism turns into a kind of fake religion for his family. They perceive Joey Smallwood not simply as a political enemy, but also as the archetypal anti-Christ. "Confederation had entered the world with Joey," writes the author as he recounts the typical view of anti-Confederate islanders, "he had led Newfoundlanders to it and tempted them to partake of it as surely as the serpent had led Eve to the apple. And we had thereby fallen from the state of grace that could never be recovered, been banished forever from the paradise of independence" (Johnston 2000, 183). The ironic tone of a forged creed in this excerpt is furthermore asserted when the author relates the family ritual casually called "the catechism" (Johnston 2000, 179). When Johnston is still a young boy his father teaches him to respond to a set of questions that brings out the stubbornness of patriotic Newfoundlanders while simultaneously undermining the sense of religious truth behind their beliefs:

Q: [...] Is there a form of bliss that you will never know? [...]

A: Ignorance of him who, toad-like, croaks and dwells among the undergrowth.

Q: Name him.

A: Joey Smallwood.

Q: Does he leave behind him as he goes a trail of slime?

A: He does.

Q: Do we fear him?

A: We do not.

Q: Scorn him?

A: Yes. With all our hearts we do (Johnston 2000, 180).

The subversive repercussions of this passage achieved through its hyperbolic demonization of Joey Smallwood are further enforced when the author elucidates the ritual’s mocking pretentiousness: “the catechism’ was a routine that we performed for visitors,” Johnston relates before stating: “what tickled people most [was] me answering my father like some prodigy of irony when in fact I understood almost nothing I was saying” (Johnston 2000, 179). The sense of patriotic fundamentalism represented by the Johnston family is hence undermined by their own parodying use of it. In fact, it seems that this ironic interplay is the only means to go on living in the political reality so opposed to their personal idea of Newfoundland and reconcile the two in a workable way.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Johnston’s writings can be read as representations of a Newfoundland that is as geographically diverse as it is culturally and politically differentiated. The region, it seems, can only be located within the dialogue of internal difference and ambiguity, as the texts indicate by means of ironic discourses. In the end, even the fictional Smallwood in *Colony* admits the futility of trying to define his homeland in essentialist terms. “I did not solve the paradox of Newfoundland or fathom the effect on me of its peculiar beauty,” the protagonist concedes before granting that the island’s “demon of identity” might be best resolved in the imaginative space of playful parody: “Perhaps only an artist can measure up to such a place or come to terms with the impossibility of doing so” (Johnston 1999, 552 and 477). At least in this one case Johnston’s Joey seems to have been correct in his assumptions, as the above analysis hopes to have demonstrated. *Colony* and *Baltimore’s Mansion* overcome reductive as much as deconstructionist readings of the region by uncovering Newfoundland’s internal incongruities and opening a space of irony that allows for the construction of identities in a post-postmodern age.

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