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## **Rethinking the Region in Canadian Postcolonial Studies**

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### **Zusammenfassung**

*Die maritimen Provinzen werden oftmals als marginale Region innerhalb Kanadas wahrgenommen. Vor dem Hintergrund von postkolonialen Theorien versucht dieser Artikel, diese Marginalisierung neu zu denken und gleichzeitig die Region in den Fokus von postkolonialen Studien zu rücken. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt wird dabei auf die regionale Literatur von Frauen aus ethnischen Minderheiten gelegt. Die Werke von Antonine Maillet, Maxine Tynes und Rita Joe schreiben gegen den sogenannten Unschuldsmuthos in den Maritimen Provinzen an und rücken diejenigen Geschichten und Stimmen ins Zentrum, die lange im Verborgenen blieben. Sie zeigen, dass die Region trotz vergangener Gewalttaten und Suppressionen eine zentrale Funktion in der literarischen und kulturellen Identitätskonstruktion einnimmt. Somit wird die Region zu einer veritablen Alternative zu hierarchisch besetzten Konzepten wie der Nation in postkolonialen Theorien. Bei gleichzeitiger Einbeziehung von über- und subregionalen Gruppenzugehörigkeiten, insbesondere der Kategorien Geschlecht und Ethnizität, erlaubt der Fokus auf die Region eine Brechung mit hegemonialen Nationalstrukturen in den postkolonialen Studien und somit eine Weiterentwicklung der postkolonialen Theorie im Allgemeinen.*

### **Résumé**

*Les provinces maritimes du Canada sont très souvent considérées comme marginalisées du reste du territoire. Dans le contexte des théories post-coloniales, cet article tente de repenser ce marginalisme et en même temps de considérer ces régions dans le cadre des études post-coloniales. Un accent particulier sera mis sur la littérature régionale féminine des minorités. Les œuvres d'Antonine Maillet, Maxime Tynes et Rita Joe abondent dans un sens opposé à celui du présumé «mythe d'innocence» dans les provinces maritimes et accordent de la valeur aux histoires et voix de l'intérieur qui sont longtemps restées oubliées. Elles montrent que la région, en dépit des actes de violence passés et de la répression, joue un rôle central dans la construction de l'identité culturelle littéraire. Ainsi cette région devient une véritable alternative à des concepts tels que la hiérarchie de la nation dans les théories post-coloniales. En prenant en compte de nouveaux critères d'appartenance à un groupe, à savoir le sexe et l'origine ethnique, le regard sur la*

*région a permis de rompre avec une structure nationale hégémonique dans les études post-coloniales, et donc d'amorcer un développement de la théorie postcoloniale en général.*

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### **1. The Maritimes: Old stereotypes and new literatures**

There is a curious paradox underlying postcolonial criticism – the paradox of nationalism. While the concept of the nation is usually held responsible for the emergence of imperialist politics as well as for the ongoing practices of neocolonialism, postcolonial theory still tends to adhere to nationalist patterns and to think in terms of federal power politics that it otherwise tries to overcome.<sup>1</sup> The concept of the nation still looms large in the ongoing theorization of postcolonial literatures, as can be seen in the numerous publications concerning the nation in/and postcolonialism.<sup>2</sup> While it is true that the nation has played a particularly powerful role in the colonization of foreign cultures, and while national literature has frequently contributed – willingly or not – to the development of imperial paradigms, it is equally true that an ongoing preoccupation with the nation state binds postcolonial studies to the same power structures it seeks to undermine. As Robert J. C. Young states with regard to current postcolonial criticism:

Here, a certain – allegedly nonhegemonic – nationalism continues to play a positive anticolonial role in the era of neocolonialism, usually directed against the economic imperialism of the US or Europe or the cultural imperialism of Western postmodernism. The tradition of colonial nationalism that was first established in the late nineteenth century continues without interruption. (Young 1998, 4)

This paradox of postcolonial criticism is particularly strong in Canadian studies, where questions of nationalism and national identity have long dominated critical debates about Canada's (post)colonial identity. It almost seems as if the definition of Canada as an independent nation is a necessary precept to the inclusion of Canada into the field of postcolonial studies. Writes Laura Moss: "The question of *Canada's* postcoloniality, I realize, relies rather heavily on the concept of the nation-state and the almost inevitable generalizations that must be made to answer such a broadly conceived question" (2003, 4).

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1 For an excellent critique of nationalist paradigms in postcolonial theory, see Neil Lazarus 1999, 68-143.

2 See, amongst others, Partha Chatterjee 1993; Pheng Cheah 2003; Ashley Dawson 2007; John Hawley 1996; Harish Trivedi, ed. 2007.

This essay seeks to counteract the ontological priority that is usually given to Canadian nationalism in postcolonial theory. Instead, I will focus on the region, which has long been recognized as a key concept in Canadian studies, as a veritable alternative to the ongoing compliance with federal state structures in postcolonial criticism.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I take up the argument of Herb Wyile,<sup>4</sup> who maintains that

regionalism can play an important role if it is denaturalised and recognized as a critical construct, and if it is used in a provisional, nuanced, modulated fashion in conjunction with other terms – for instance, place, locality, anti-centrism, topography, province, etc. – rather than in an essentialized fashion to assert autonomous, integrated discursive formations. (2000, 274)

In line with Wyile, I argue that the region enables us to rethink postcolonial literatures and cultures from a decentralized perspective and that this decentralization is necessary in order to overcome the underlying power structures of nationalist conceptions. This argument will be illustrated by a study of gender and race in current Maritime literature.

Three female authors from the Maritime Provinces will be introduced in whose works we can see how the region offers alternative ways of thinking about postcolonial identities and the emancipation of minority groups. These authors are Antonine Maillet, Rita Joe and Maxine Tynes, all of whom write about the very experiences of oppression and domination that are central to postcolonial literature, including questions of “hierarchies of power, violence, and oppression; censorship; race and ethnicity; multiculturalism; appropriation of voice; revising the canon and ‘writing back’ to colonial education” (Moss 2003, 4). The works that will be analyzed were first published in the period from 1979 to 1991, that is, at a time when questions of gender and race started to become central to the re-imagination of Canadian identity and, hence, of regional identity. In line with the spirit of that age, all three of the analyzed authors seek to re-imagine the Maritimes by rewriting the region from alternative ethics and aesthetics of gender and race. Yet, they do so in a manner that challenges not only the underlying ethics of nationalism and patriarchy, but also the underlying ethics of ‘writing back’ and decolonization that were of particular importance in the critical analyses of postcolonial and gender studies of the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to these dominant patterns, the works by Maillet, Joe and Tynes induce us to rethink the principles of postcolonial and gender studies in a manner that is still relevant today, as they focus on the region of the Maritimes

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3 For the central status of the region in Canadian studies, see Lisa Chalykoff 1998, 160-177; Douglas R. Francis 2001, 569-588; Gerald Friesen 2002, 27-41; Martin Kuester 2002, 34-45; Ian McKay 2000, 89-102; Kirsten Sandrock 2009, 175-193; William Westfall 1980, 3-15; Herb Wyile 2000, 439-446.

4 See Herb Wyile 1998, 267-276 and Wyile 1996, 10-18.

as both a microcosm of global paradigms and as a particularized space of gender and postcolonial relations.

What is important about the processes of decolonization in the works of Maillet, Tynes and Joe is that they operate within the region rather than the nation. The three authors write within the frameworks of their village, their community and sometimes even their family rather than in federal frameworks. In so doing, they challenge our understanding of postcolonial criticism as a nationalist practice and force us to focus on the individual and the community rather than on the state. This also means that the concept of the region must no longer be seen as binary opposition to the concept of the state. Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin note that in postcolonial criticism regions are typically seen as being marginalized vis-à-vis the nation. The nation displays an "impetus towards national self-realization" and holds "claims of the centre for exclusivity" (2002, 16) in a manner that devalues local experiences along the lines of colonialist practices. This marginalization of the region not only functions as another form of colonialism with the national centre exerting power over the peripheral nation. It also reinforces the hegemonic power politics of imperialism, in which the affairs of the state were given priority over the affairs of the individual or the affairs of the community. Hence, to focus on the region as opposed to the nation in postcolonial criticism means to endorse a shift in thinking from the hegemonic centre to the counter-hegemonic periphery.

To take the Maritimes as an example of the ways in which the region helps us to reconsider postcolonial paradigms is doubly appropriate. Not only is this particular region frequently seen as an economic and political backwater of Canada, defined "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). It is also one of the least discussed regions in Canadian criticism today, which may partly be due to the "Myth of Innocence" (McKay/Bates 2010, 8) that has dominated the Maritime imaginary ever since the general economic decline in the early twentieth century. In contrast to other regions, the Maritimes never recovered from the economic depressions that set in throughout the Western world before and especially after WWI. Their primary industries of fishing, lumbering and mining never regained their prominence, and the secondary industries did not expand quickly and widely enough in the Maritimes to make up for this loss of primary industries. As a consequence, the region developed what David Creelman calls a general "sense of loss" that also led to a sense of nostalgia for the "idyllic/lost" (2003, 11) community that the Maritimes had known before. The past is idealized and turned into a positive projection screen for all that is wrong with the world today. Creelman illustrates that this "sense of loss" and nostalgia is also prominently reflected in Maritime literature, starting from the early twentieth century and leading up to the 1960s and 1970s. Authors such as Ernest Buckler or Charles Bruce celebrate "the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled, [and] the picturesque" (McKay 1994, 30) in the region and thereby help to promote the "Myth of

Innocence" in the Maritimes. The myth constructs the Maritimes as a "pre-modern" (McKay/Bates 2010, 8) antidote to Canadian centres such as Toronto or Montreal. In the Maritimes, the pastoral ideal still seems to be intact and people seem to live in harmony with nature and with each other. This is the "Myth of Innocence" in the Maritimes, which feeds off a general nostalgia for the past and turns the region into an idealized fiction.

What is usually forgotten is that the Maritime past was never as ideal for everybody as it was for those who idealize it. There are numerous minority groups within the Maritimes whose experiences cannot be subsumed under the "Myth of Innocence" because they never shared in the rustic and bucolic lifestyles of the governing classes. These groups include especially the French Acadians, the black Africans, and the First Nations communities as well as the regional women's community and the underprivileged classes. Della Stanley notes in this respect that the "demands for equality of treatment and opportunity were voiced by Atlantic women and the francophone, aboriginal, and Black communities" (1993, 448) alike in the 1960s Maritimes. All of them have started to question the "Myth of Innocence" in the Maritimes and to diversify the image of the region at home and abroad. This process of diversification is also a process of decolonization, in which alternative forms of representation are used in order to voice non-traditional views of the Maritimes.

## **2. Rewriting gender in Acadia: Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette***

Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette* was first published in 1979. It was one of the first novels by a female author that was written in the region and it is still one of the most overtly political texts by a female Maritime author until this day. This might at least partly be due to the general atmosphere of French-Acadian activism in the 1960s and 1970s under the government of Louis Robichaud, the first French Acadian Premier of New Brunswick.<sup>5</sup> *Pélagie-la-Charrette* reflects upon issues of power and the cultural struggle for equality that has shaped Acadian history in the Maritime Provinces since the 1960s. It does so, amongst other things, by "writing back" to that piece of US American literature that has long dominated the international image of the Acadian people, namely Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's long poem "Evangeline".

Longfellow's "Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie" was first published in the USA in 1847. The long poem tells the story of the young Acadian girl Evangeline Bellefontaine during the time of *Le Grand Dérangement*, i.e., the Great Upheaval or the Great Expulsion. Between 1755 and 1763, up to 6000 Acadians were forcefully deported by the English during the French and Indian War and brought "to divers Anglo-American colonies" (McKay/Bates 2010, 32), mainly to the South of the US. Longfellow had heard of this history of ethnic cleansing in the Maritimes during a dinner party in Boston with his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. He was so intrigued by this episode of

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5 See Della Stanley 1984.

Canada's colonial past that he used it to write a romantic founding epos for the Acadian people – a founding epos that centres on the idealization and, essentially, the victimization of the Acadians and the poem's female heroine.

Evangeline is portrayed as a young, beautiful and innocent Acadian woman. She is engaged to Gabriel Lajeunesse, but the two are separated during the Great Deportation. The poem then follows Evangeline as she spends numerous years searching for her lost lover, whom she finally finds again towards the end of the narrative in Philadelphia. The moment of reunification is, however, transient. Gabriel dies in Evangeline's arms shortly after they have met again, so that the poem ends on a note of tragic romanticism. The lovers are reunited in death only. It seems as if their happiness was not made for this world, just as the Acadians themselves seem not to be made for the power politics of the colonial world. Longfellow's poem romanticizes the Acadians as the noble savages of the Maritimes. They are idealized as innocent and pure in a manner that is akin to forms of 'Othering' in postcolonial theory.<sup>6</sup> In the poem's opening lines, the "Acadian farmers" are described as "Men whose lives glided on like rivers that water the woodlands" (2004, 1). Similarly, their homeland Grand Pré is depicted as the romantic "forest primeval," where trees "Stand like Druids of eld" (2004, 1).<sup>7</sup> The Acadians in Longfellow's poem are so peaceful and pure that they are incapable of withstanding the British forces. Instead of fighting back, they are shown to be steeped in a morality of forgiveness (Longfellow 2004, 17). This morality of forgiveness may seem superior from a Christian standpoint. But in the context of colonial Canada, it facilitates the deportation of the Acadian community by the British and thrusts the Acadians into the role of victims.

This questionable glorification of the Acadians as forgiving victims of the British atrocities is further mirrored in the gender politics of Longfellow's poem. Evangeline is represented as an Acadian Angel in the House. She is the archetypal woman, whose kindness, purity and forgiveness work as an inner foil for her "ethereal beauty" (2004, 4). This adulation of Evangeline seems to be embedded in the European colonial mentality. As Barbara Le Blanc puts it, Evangeline is "all that is loyal, demure, selfless, kind, patient, and religious" (qtd. in McKay/Bates 2010, 81). She is, therefore, the ideal victim, who is doubly marked by gender and race. Gender theory has coined the term "benevolent sexism" (Glick/Fiske 1996) for this idealization of the victim. In a similar manner, Longfellow's poem romanticizes Evangeline and the

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6 It is interesting to compare this idealization of the Acadians in the Maritimes with the idealization of the Scottish Highlanders in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In both cases, the idealizations of the victim as noble savages only occurred once the victim cultures were no longer seen as a threat to the dominant imperial culture.

7 Christopher Irmischer reads these lines as indicative for the medieval outlook on Acadians in Longfellow's poem, where they are "closer in spirit to the Middle Ages" than to 18<sup>th</sup>-century Nova Scotia (qtd. in McKay/Bates 2010, 73). This medieval connotation is intensified through Longfellow's use of hexameters throughout the poem, which reminds readers of founding epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid* or Homer's *Iliad*.

Acadian people in a form of benevolent racism. Acadians are represented as kind-hearted and innocent, but in the end, these very characteristics seem to predetermine their victimhood. This can best be seen when Evangeline re-encounters her lover Gabriel after numerous years of searching for him. Instead of bewailing her sufferings or blaming the British for the loss of her love, Evangeline merely cries out to God in a gesture of demure thankfulness:

All was ended now, the hope, and the fear, and the sorrow,  
 All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing,  
 All the dull, deep pain, and constant anguish of patience!  
 And, as she pressed once more the lifeless head to her bosom,  
 Meekly she bowed her own, and murmured, "Father, I thank thee!"  
 (Longfellow 2004, 49)

In this passage, Evangeline epitomizes what must have seemed as the perfect victim mentality for the British. She not only forgives her perpetrators, but she is thankful for the mercy of seeing her lover die. There is no word about the fierce patterns of British colonialism or about the anger of the expelled Acadians in Longfellow's poem. Instead, the story of Evangeline is turned into a romantic dream that allows Anglophone readers to feel pity for Acadians rather than forcing them to take blame for the Great Expulsion.

It is this romantic image of the Acadian victim mentality that Antonine Maillet writes against in her novel *Pélagie-la-Charrette*. The novel was translated into English as *Pélagie: The Return to Acadie*, which already marks the celebration of the winner-mentality of those Acadians who returned to the Maritime Provinces after their deportation by the British. Moreover, Maillet's novel particularly focuses on the representation of Acadian women and disturbs the conflation of colonial and gender paradigms in Longfellow's poem. The female protagonist Pélagie LeBlanc is not a beautiful, young girl. She is a grouchy, elderly woman who embodies the anti-romantic opposite of Longfellow's Evangeline. She is even nicknamed "Pélagie-the-Grouch" (Maillet 2004, 7), and it soon becomes clear that her vision to walk back the entire way from the American South to Grand Pré in Nova Scotia requires as much determination as stubbornness on her side in order to put her plan into action.

In line with the reversal of British colonial gender roles, *Pélagie-la-Charrette* unsettles the image of the peaceful, forgiving Acadian people. The characters in the novel repeatedly recall the crimes of the British against the Acadians. Moreover, they share their recollections with each other in line with Jan Assmann's concept of the "communicative memory" (2007, 20). The recurring phrase "And shit to His British Majesty!" (Maillet 2004, 224) is a key component in this creation of a "communicative memory." It functions both as a recollection of the past and as a battle cry for the future, thus becoming a catchphrase for the Acadian survivor mentality. There are numerous passages in Maillet's novel that mark this survivor mentality of the Acadi-

ans while simultaneously remembering the afflictions they had to endure under the British:

But before their homecoming, Acadie's poor people had a high price to pay for their resistance to the Georges of England and the reversals of history. [...] In their thirst during those years of drought and famine, they would have drunk anything, for that matter, and they'd have eaten their boot soles if they hadn't long ago fallen from their shoes. [...] They would have eaten the straw of their hats or the wool of their socks; they would have eaten... / The oxen! (Maillet 2004, 156)

"[R]esistance" and "reversals of history" are key terms in this passage, which pertains not only to the political history of the French and Indian War but also to the cultural history of the Acadian population. *Pélagie-la-Charrette* undermines Longfellow's romantic ideal of the Acadians as innocent victims. It rewrites the history of the Acadian deportation through the figure of an anti-romantic, anti-idealized female heroine. In so doing, *Pélagie-la-Charrette* is one of the most overtly political novels of Maritime literature by women concerned with questions of gender and ethnicity from the late 1970s to the 1990s. It rewrites Acadian history from the perspective of those who had long remained voiceless, and thereby sheds new light on a people whose story has long been occluded by the "Myth of Innocence."

### **3. Gender and race in Africadian literature: The poetry of Maxine Tynes**

Another story of gender and race that simultaneously reconfigures the Maritimes region is told in the poetry of Maxine Tynes. She is one of the few female Africadian authors whose works have emerged from the Maritimes over the past decades. The majority of Africadian people descend from the Black Loyalists who emigrated from the United States to the Maritime Provinces during and after the American War of Independence. George Elliott Clarke has coined the term Africadians for these black Canadians, whose background can best be described as an "ethnocultural archipelago" (2002, 107). In addition to this ethnic hybridity of Africadians, it is necessary to bring in the category of gender in order to understand the fullness of Africadian history in the Maritimes. Sylvia Hamilton critically remarks in this respect how important this gendering of Africadian literature is: "While race has been a major determinant of the Black woman's status, gender has also sharply delineated" the experiences of Africadian women. Hamilton continues:

From her first arrival in Nova Scotia, the Black woman has struggled for survival. She has had to battle slavery, servitude, sexual and racial discrimination, and ridicule. Her tenacious spirit has been her strongest and most constant ally; she survives with strong dignity and an admirable lack of self-pity and bitterness. She survives, but not without struggle.



This work is a first reading of a multi-layered story of struggle and survival. It offers a historical context that underscores the continuum of Black women's struggle for equality and dignity. (1994, 13)

It is this interface of gender and race in Africadian experiences of the Maritimes that comes to the fore in the poetry of Maxine Tynes. Tynes is best known for her poetry collections *Borrowed Beauty* (1987) and *Woman Talking Woman* (1990). The very titles of these collections emphasize the role of women in her poetry and, with it, the focus on alternative forms of regional perception. This is particularly true for the perception of Maritime history. Tynes has written a series of poems on Africville, the former black community in Halifax that was forcefully relocated in 1962 because the Halifax government wanted to use the site for industrial development.

A number of Africadian authors have used the story of Africville as a touchstone for their works, including Charles Saunders, Joey Sealy, and George Elliott Clarke (Moynagh 1998, 14-34). Yet, Tynes's poems are singular in so far as they challenge not only the historical episode as such but also the larger hegemonic power structures that underlie the event. In her poem "Africville is My Name," she explicitly negates the power of nationalism and state politics while heightening the importance of the regional community:

Personhood; Nationhood, Statehood; Community; Family  
 Personhood  
 To own one's community.  
 To voice its name with history and with pride.  
 To map that community with a litany of community names.  
 To raise the profile of that community,  
 again and again.  
 To etch Africville into the Past, the Present, and relentlessly into the  
 Future.  
 To sing, to say, to shout the names of Africville like a map,  
 like a litany, like a hymn and a battle-cry,  
 like a flag and a constitution,  
 like a banner of the Africville that was, that is,  
 that always will be;

First Black Settlers: William Brown, John Brown, Thomas Brown

Alcock	Alexander	Anderson
Berryman	Bowels	Brown
Byers	Carter	Carvery
Cassidy	Desmond	Dixon
Downey	Emmerson	Farrell

Ferguson	Fletcher	Flint
Gannon	Grant	Hamilton
Howe	Izzard	Johnson
Jones	Kane	Keelor
Kellom	Lawrence	MacDonald
Mantley	Maree	Marsman
Medley	Mewman	Nichols
Pannell	Parris	Perry
Roan	Skinner	Sparks
Steed	Stewart	Thomas
Tollivar	Warham	Wearry
Wilcox	West	Williams
Vemb		

Personhood. Community. Family. Africville. (Tynes 1990, 61)

The long list of individual names is central to the poem's emphasis on personal politics over national politics. Names matter, and individual names are what turns the community into the community of Africville. The same is true for the circular narrative of the poem. The final line is a reiteration of the opening line, which names a list of concepts that have long served as sources of identity in Western societies. Yet, the final reiteration of the opening line omits the concepts of "nationhood" and "statehood". Thus, the closing line underscores the centrality of community- and person-oriented concepts for the commemoration of Africville. Tynes's poem drafts an alternative way of imagining cultural identity not as government-driven but as individual- and family-driven. "Africville is My Name" conceives of a depoliticized version of what Benedict Anderson has called *Imagined Communities*. In Tynes's text, priority is given to the personal sphere over the political sphere in a manner that corresponds with gender theories of the 1970s and 1980s. In this manner, the poem takes on a specifically gendered perspective on the region. It counteracts the prominence of nationalist attitudes and stresses instead the importance of personal politics in the imaginative reconstruction of Africville.

#### **4. A non-violent revolution: The poetry of Rita Joe**

The personal sphere as a means to question existing political hierarchies also plays a central role in the poetry of the late Mi'kmaq author Rita Joe. Joe is probably the best known female writer of First Nations descent in the Maritimes. She was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 1989, and she is widely known as the Poet Laureate of the Mi'kmaq people. Joe started writing poetry as a means to change existing images of the First Nations people in the Maritime region. She states that "our history would be different if it had been expressed by us" (1996, 14).

In her writing, Joe illustrates that the postcolonial debate around the appropriation of voice plays a central role in First Nations literature by women writers. Yet, in contrast to much postcolonial and gender literature and criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, Joe's poetry enters this debate from the perspective of the gentle, peace-loving woman. Her narrators are not the active and assertive rebels that voice their anger over imperialist and neo-imperialist crimes. Joe's poetry is more akin to Mahatma Gandhi's maxims of nonviolent resistance than it is to the dictums of postcolonial resistance.<sup>8</sup> Graciousness, kindness, and consideration are the leitmotifs of her writing. In her autobiography *Song of Rita Joe*, Joe states: "My message is gentle: If one wishes to be healed, one must dwell on the positive" (1996, 14). This belief in the positive even extends to those who mistreated Joe in her life, including her foster parents, the nuns in the orphanage that she came to and even her husband Frank Joe, who started to abuse her both physically and emotionally shortly after their marriage. Rita Joe excuses his abuse as well as "his drinking and womanizing" with the words: "Frank was a good, good man, but for a long time he was torn. He wanted to have his own life – a better life" (1996, 84). It is important to note that this dictum of kindness seems to be rooted in Joe's gender identity. She recalls how she learned from early childhood on how "to be a good girl, to always help" (1996, 29).<sup>9</sup>

The patterns of "being a good girl" also run through Joe's poetry. Although Joe frequently addresses the disadvantages of the Mi'kmaq population in the Maritimes, she always turns away from negative experiences in order to lay emphasis on the positive. Kindness and benevolence are shown to be the keys towards a better society, in which the patterns of colonialism are no longer existent. The following poem exemplifies this belief in a literally post-colonial world, meaning a world in which all cultural and linguistic hierarchies will finally be overcome:

I lost my talk  
 The talk you took away  
 When I was a little girl  
 At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away;  
 I speak like you  
 I think like you  
 I create like you  
 The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk  
 Both ways I say,

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8 For a discussion of Mahatma Gandhi and postcolonial studies, see Robert Young 1998, 337.

9 See also Joe/Lutz 1991, 243.

Your way is more powerful.  
 So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
 Let me find my talk  
 So I can teach you about me. (Joe 1996, 55)

The poem is illustrative of the ways in which Joe laments the losses of the past, in this case the loss of her native Algonquian language, at the same time as she envisions a future without such personal and cultural losses. She turns the broken dreams of the colonial past into a dream for a genuinely post-colonial future. What Joe does, then, is not simply to reverse existing hierarchies. Rather, she tries to counteract the very existence of cultural and linguistic hierarchies and to illustrate that the region belongs to everybody equally. This latter aspect also becomes apparent when Joe challenges the traditional dominance of Anglo-Scottish culture in the Maritimes. She does not criticize the presence of the English-speaking settlers in the region as such, but she does criticize the unequal representation of cultural communities in her native Maritimes:

Today you greet me with bagpipes  
 Today you sing your song to me  
 Today we shake hands and see  
 How we keep good company.  
 Today I will tell stories  
 Today I will play the drum and dance  
 Today I will say what is on my mind  
 For being friends is our goal.  
 Today I will show you I am just like you  
 Today I will show what is true  
 Today I will show we can be friends  
 Together we agree.  
 Today I will tell you about my race  
 Today I will share what is mine  
 Today I will give you my heart  
 This is all we own  
 Today I show.  
 Hello everybody, my name is Rita Joe. (Joe 1996, 170f.)

Joe's insistence on kindness and compassion may seem somewhat surprising for a reader familiar with postcolonial and gender theory of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the prominence given to peacefulness and gentleness is an important pointer to the possibilities Joe's poetry opens up for the ethics of postcolonial literature and criticism even today. It almost seems as if her gentleness and forgiveness set her free from the negative experiences of the past and allow her to dwell on the prospects

of a better future. It is important to note that Joe chooses this ethos of kindness and compassion of her own free will and that it is not imposed on her by others, as it was the case in Longfellow's representation of the Acadian people.

For Joe, empathy and compassion seem to have a liberating effect. This leaves us with the question why such positive mindsets as Joe's do not play a more prominent role in gender and postcolonial criticism. The answer may partly lie in the ongoing, though usually inadvertent adherence to hierarchical power structures in some branches of postcolonial and gender theory. To voice anger may seem a 'stronger' form of resistance than to voice understanding, and to blame the colonizers for their crimes may seem more compelling than to express understanding for their actions. Joe challenges us to rethink these continuing paradigms of power in postcolonial and gender criticism by pointing the way towards a nonviolent revolution. It is important to take this vision seriously, as it opens up new perspectives not only for the conception of gender and race in the Maritimes but also for the still common formulas of gender criticism and postcolonial studies in general. The region is a powerful sub-national narrative that helps us to decentralize the nation as a key concept in colonial and postcolonial literature. In the same manner, gender and race function as sub-national or even as sub-regional narratives and help us to reconceptualize Western sources of personal and political identity.

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