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LOBSTER IS KING: INFANTILIZING MARITIME CULTURE

"The Maritimes and the US South share one thing—they're both lands of defeat."

— David Adams Richards

Atlantic Canadians are surrounded by decline. All of our symbols and systems of self-reference point us to a pre-Confederation era, to a time in our history we are told we have escaped from and yet by which we are still defined. This double bind is archetypally colonial—a paralyzing system of reference that disallows forward movement. We are effectively severed from the strengths of our past at just the same moment as we are asked to celebrate our heritage. Like many occupied peoples, we are no longer able to judge what is a true representation of ourselves.

(1) To understand regional differences in Canada it is essential to understand that Canada is a failed experiment—a "last days" excess of two colonial powers gone to seed.

Canada attempts to unite a continent's worth of diverse people under a flawed (and half-hearted) liberal agenda of false pluralism and deceptive commonality. British Columbia is not Ontario, Québec is not Newfoundland, and none of the south will ever be part of the north. Nevertheless, the illusionary politics of "from sea to shining sea" (from the national anthem) is not only indulged, but is often enforced to the detriment of the "regions" that do not comply with centralized policy.

Thus, to grow up in Atlantic Canada is to grow up in opposition to the federalist agenda. The very presence of the Atlantic provinces speaks the lie of federalism. A thousand miles and a linguistic bloc away from the capital and its old dreams, the Maritimes further exaggerate the impossibility of uniting a diverse continent.

The Atlantic provinces are a geographical hyperbole in the national text, and the people who live here have provided the centre with a key mythology in the narrative of nation building—the mystery of the folk, the feudal drama of an early "homeland" people who mark the beginning of the time line of progress.

In the Canadian federalist myth system, Atlantic Canadians are the equivalent of the Japanese rice paddy workers who always seem to be photographed stooped beneath futuristic monorail systems, or the peasants bringing up the rear in Soviet constructivist panoramas. We are a national image bank for an insecure country trying to sell itself on the global market. The stereotype of the lumpen "Maritimer" reaffirms the schema and morality of centralist "world class" progress.

Throughout my life in New Brunswick, I have been inundated with centrally-generated images of my provincial self that have never accurately spoken of or for me. I was told by a centralized media that I was part of a community of people who were primarily supported by primitive resource industries and who abided by simpler (and slower) philosophies of life—philosophies that stemmed from a magical past long since discarded by the newly urban and aspiringly urbane of the nation's centre. To grow up in Atlantic Canada is to grow up the poor cousin of arriviste relations.

(2) Four symbols dominate popular representations of Atlantic culture: the aging, gnarled seaman, or "Salty Dog"; the common gray seagull; the lobster; and the wooden lighthouse. These figures are constants in the barrage of mass media images of Maritime life, and are used as marketing reference points in all federal economic and political strategies. They are the visual canon of a systemic prejudice that reads Atlantic Canadian life and people as parochial, technologically outmoded, and, ultimately, powerless.

Upon closer inspection, the seemingly harmless, if not whimsical "trade-marks" of Maritime culture are actually indexes of the attrition of the very culture they ostensibly herald.

Although my background is typically middle class and suburban, I cannot remember a time when I, as a "Maritimer," was not represented in the national media as a caricatured fisherman—preferably old, preferably toothless. This "Salty Dog" character appears in almost every representation of the Maritime population and is mass produced as a tourist curio throughout the area.

Dressed in a yellow slicker, stoop shouldered and narrow-eyed, the "Salty Dog" projects an image of wily (but uneducated) harmlessness and whimsical (but uninformed) folk wisdom. He is the Canadian equivalent of Aunt Jemima or the locals from *Deliverance*, and he is used to sell everything from fish sticks to Maritime vacations.

Very few Atlantic Canadians work exclusively in the harvesting of natural resources. However, we are frequently described as having a "resource dependent" economy by the national media. The subtexts of "resource-based" are "antiquated" and "outmoded" (and thus burdensome).

I've never met an actual fisherman, let alone a toothless one. I've never been on a trawler. I don't particularly like lobster. Yet, this character represents me and is inscribed in my psyche. Psychologically colonized, I find the "Salty Dog" as difficult to give up as it is to accept, largely because the alternative is assimilation into the global facelessness cultivated by the centre.

Other images work similar tricks. In any proper folk mythos there are accompanying animals that act as symbolic complements to, if not extensions of, the falsified character of the people.

The seagull, although found in equal numbers throughout Canada, is never far from sight in mass media depictions of the Maritimes. A scavenger bird liv-

ing off carrion and garbage, the seagull is without majesty (and thus ideologically impotent) or particular interest as a bird. They are as common as mice, and a convenient, subconscious reminder of the national perception of Atlantic Canadians as the bottom feeders in the economic food chain. The bird makes an annoying squawk, typical of the griping poor. The seagull is a beggar.

Equally prevalent is the image of the lobster: a hapless, prehistoric creature that willingly wanders into the most obvious of traps in order to later be boiled alive. It is said to let out a pitiful whine as its exoskeleton contracts in the scalding water.



Gerry Gilbert

Outside of the context of Maritime life, the lobster is a food signifying wealth and middle class achievement. It is a luxury, or "gourmet" dish. However, depictions of lobster in images of the east coast refer exclusively, and deceptively, to the mode of harvesting—the antiquated wooden traps.

Atlantic Canadians are not often imagined eating the expensive seafood they catch. Instead, the lobster signifies our supposed economic dependence on dwindling natural resources, and reinforces the folk stereotype of a semi-magical (and primitive) "connectedness" to the ecology of the sea. It would be disruptive to depict Atlantic Canadians partaking of a commodity the rest of the country considers glamorous.

Finally, the lighthouse is possibly the strongest and most frequently invoked symbol of the declining fortunes of the east coast. All but useless since the arrival of sonar technology, and no longer operated by hand, lighthouses continue to be maintained both as navigational beacons and, more prominently, as graphic icons that foster an orchestrated nostalgia for the "golden era" of Atlantic Canada's now moribund seaport economy.

Replicas of clapboard lighthouses are erected in land locked communities to attract tourists. Thousands of businesses adopt the symbol as an "inside" reference to Maritime ownership. Even the federal government's Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) uses a lighthouse image in its official letterhead: a surprising choice considering ACOS's mandate—to revitalize Maritime industries by providing aid for technological upgrading. Ironically, the lighthouse logo

is more potent as yet another sign of the fatalism with which the central government approaches Atlantic Canada.

- (3) The stereotypes used to market "life in the Maritimes" constitute an act of cultural impeachment; a replacing of the diversity of the east coast with a culturally resonant, supposedly benign, one-note ideal.

In order to build a strong economic engine, a new nation needs a labour class. By presenting Atlantic Canadians as uneducated, fearful, and empowered only within a very specific set of working and lifestyle conditions, the centre of Canada has discovered a semiotic basis for the creation of an abundant source of cheap, moveable labour.

If Atlantic Canadians are read as a population in need, the federal government can subsequently exploit east coast people without guilt or hesitancy—the dominant stereotypes are read as actual, and the slow erosion of Maritime culture via a population exodus becomes not only excusable, but is considered a generous response. Canada's own little Third World.

It is not coincidental that Canada's foreign policy and "developing world" aid strategies (moving capital from North to South) parallel the welfare state "transfer payment" model of domestic economic aid (moving capital from West to East).

The end result of Canada's regionalistic stereotypes is the infantilization of the Maritime people. Conversely, decades worth of federal paternalism have generated a predictable resentment among central Canadians towards their supposedly ever-needy and plodding east coast neighbours. The final irony of years of systematic misrepresentation of Atlantic Canada is that it may ultimately hasten the collapse of the federal agenda.

