

Representations of Region in *Child of God* and *The Coming of Winter*

Peter Thompson

Abstract

This paper investigates the way in which two 1970s-era novels, Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* and David Adams Richards's *The Coming of Winter*, contribute to regionalist movements in Appalachia and the Maritimes. These novels undermine conventional images of the two regions: both present dark and violent portraits of the two spaces that counteract received images of Appalachia and the Maritimes as pastoral, welcoming, and quaint. Although there are few comparative studies between Appalachia and the Maritimes, reading McCarthy and Richards together suggests that there may be connections between the two regions that the political boundary separating them obscures.

Résumé

Cet article explore la manière par laquelle deux romans des années 1970, *Child of God*, de Cormac McCarthy, et *The Coming of Winter*, de David Adams Richards, ont contribué aux mouvements régionalistes dans les Appalaches et dans les Maritimes. Ces romans contredisent les images traditionnelles des deux régions : les deux présentent des portraits actuels, sombres et violents des deux espaces, qui sont bien loin des idées reçues sur les Appalaches et les Maritimes pastorales, accueillantes et paisibles. Bien qu'il n'existe que peu d'études comparatives entre les Appalaches et les Maritimes, en lisant McCarthy et Richards, on se rend compte qu'il y a peut être un rapport entre les deux régions que masquent les frontières politiques qui les séparent.

One of the problems with assessing David Adams Richards's large body of work is that his relentless focus on rural working-class society over a nearly forty-year period is distinctive to the point of almost being anomalous within Canadian literature. In *David Adams Richards of the Miramichi*, Tony Tremblay suggests that the lukewarm critical reception of Richards's early work stems in part from his feeling "no obligation to adopt [the] imagined sense of the nation" held by urban critics who believed that the social function of literature should be in part to cultivate nationalist sentiment and keep the country together (166). Richards's unapologetic vision of central New Brunswick's economic and cultural marginalization set the tone for the current generation of writers from Atlantic Canada who both respond to and depart from his work, and also calls into question the coherent and bounded version of Canada that a nationalist approach to literary criticism assumes. This paper investigates the possibility of looking south instead of west for writers who share a sensibility with Richards.¹ At roughly the same time that Richards's first novels were challenging Canada's literary establishment and responding to the rest of the country's fetishization of the East Coast, Cormac McCarthy's early fiction explored violence, dispossession, and the impact of similar cultural stereotypes on Appalachia. I specifically examine the way in which McCarthy's *Child of God* and Richards's *The Coming of Winter* undermine conventional images of Appalachia and the Maritimes: both present dark and violent portraits of the two spaces that counteract received images of the regions as pastoral, welcoming, and quaint.

While literary critics have traditionally viewed regions such as the Maritimes and Appalachia as culturally or environmentally determined (Calder 59; Ayers and Onuf viii; New 116; Warley et al. 2), postmodern human geographers such as Doreen Massey, Tim Cresswell, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja argue that regions are fundamentally unstable social constructions produced through conflicting representations, social exclusion, and struggles over class, ethnicity, and gender. Postmodern human geography suggests that regions are imagined in multiple and competing ways, that borders between them often blur, and that such regions are more closely interconnected than their boundaries would seem to suggest.

The comparison between Appalachia and the Maritimes is particularly suited to capturing the insights of postmodern human geographers. Both occupy a complex ideological and physical space in their respective countries.

Since the Appalachian mountain range straddles the accepted borders between the eastern seaboard and the Midwest and, more importantly, between the northern and southern states, the region is a kind of liminal blank slate upon which cultural stereotypes are easily foisted (Cunningham 45; Clabough 68). The Maritime provinces have many of these contradictory characteristics: they share geographic features with the northeastern United States and Quebec, they constitute a site of uneasy interaction between French and English Canada, and they are home to communities which have long-standing ties to both sides of the border, including the Loyalists, the Acadians, and the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Passamaquoddy First Nations.

While many comparative studies focus on the relationship between Canada's East Coast and New England, fewer scholars have examined connections between the Maritimes and Appalachia (see note 1 for the few who do). The political, economic, and cultural histories of the Maritimes and Appalachia converge, however, in several important ways: both regions rely heavily on the mining and forestry industries, have a long history of underdevelopment and dependency, and were on the receiving end of transfer payments and federal programs throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Savoie 18–49).

Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this paper, folklorists and the tourism industry “discovered” both regions after World War II and positioned them as spaces where a simplified premodern way of life survived the technological and social changes of the twentieth century (Easton 158; Whisnant 103; Shapiro 3; McKay 31). In *The Invention of Appalachia*, Allen Batteau argues that in the middle of the twentieth century, North American society developed a fascination with folk culture and traditional ways of life. Batteau suggests that North Americans responded to widespread industrialization and urbanization by constructing in spaces such as Appalachia and the Maritimes a kind of idealized rural society governed by tradition, home to a rich and enduring culture, and backdropped by an unspoiled natural environment.

Writing shortly after the period that McKay, Batteau, and Shapiro isolate, Richards and McCarthy construct societies in eastern Tennessee and central New Brunswick that are in the midst of upheaval and transformation. While the Maritimes and Appalachia are commonly depicted by the tourism industry and earlier generations of writers as charming, backwards, and innocent, Richards and McCarthy depict the disintegration of “traditional” ways of life and shift the focus away from idealized portraits of life in the regions towards more unpleasant images such as substance abuse, violence, and underemployment. In *Child of God* and *The Coming of Winter*, both writers provide hints of the future impact of mass consumption and mass culture that inform their later work: in New Brunswick, the fishery has been destroyed by chemical pollution from the mills, and, in Appalachia, family farms have been taken over by large conglomerates and developers interested in acquiring property as an investment. Richards and McCarthy reject the nostalgic impulse that Batteau and others identify and undermine stereotyped readings of the regions that see them as quaint and traditional.

The Coming of Winter, Richards's first novel, was published in 1974. Set in the Miramichi region of New Brunswick, the story unfolds over a two-week period and features a young man, Kevin Dulse, who is preparing to marry his fiancée, Pamela. The major plotlines include Kevin accidentally shooting a cow while hunting and negotiating a settlement with the animal's owner, one of his friends dying in a car accident, and his best man, John, trying to convince him not to get married. Published in 1973, McCarthy's *Child of God* takes place in Sevier County in eastern Tennessee. The novel tells the story of Lester Ballard, who loses possession of his family home, moves to an abandoned shack, is falsely accused of rape, and then goes on a crime spree that involves murder, arson, and necrophilia.

Both novels are somewhat controversial and appeared to mixed reviews. While many critics praised the incisive language and formal achievement of *Child of God*, several also criticized the novel for its exaggerated portrayal of the almost cartoonishly violent world that Lester inhabits. *The Coming of Winter* was largely dismissed by early critics who complained about its poor editing, confusing structure, casual mentions of domestic abuse, and its focus on working-class characters they deemed inarticulate, uninteresting, and generally inappropriate subjects for a serious writer (Tremblay 159–65).

While the novels differ in the sense that *Child of God* features sensational violence and *The Coming of Winter* focuses on the mundane (but also sometimes violent) actions of Kevin and his family, there are many similarities between the two: both are character studies of twenty-something men who are alienated and isolated from their communities; the two main characters are happiest when hunting and tracking in the woods with their rifles (in a bizarre parallel, Kevin and

Lester both shoot cows); and the men have an equally crippling reluctance to speak, using grunts and deliberate pauses to avoid answering questions and contributing to conversations.

Richards and McCarthy both employ external focalization, giving the novels the spare, stripped-down language characteristic of their early work. Their narrators reveal information by focusing on sounds and smells and avoid non-concrete description, providing only the most essential and readily apparent information (Milner, "Structure" 208). In this way, the narrators ask the reader to put the pieces of the stories together and to come to their own conclusions about the actions and morals of their characters. The narrative style of *Child of God* has a particularly profound impact on our reading of Lester: the horrific story unfolds without any kind of judgment on behalf of the narrator, who describes Lester burning down a house with a young boy inside in exactly the same tone he uses to talk about him walking or eating.

McCarthy and Richards also present the narratives largely in a fragmented form. In the case of *The Coming of Winter*, the narrator switches focus abruptly from Kevin (who gets by far the most attention) to Rubena, Clinton, and Reginald. Critics have pointed out that Richards makes these switches difficult on the audience, often leaving pronouns ambiguous and compelling the reader to figure out who the narrator is talking about at certain points in the text. While the narrator of *Child of God* concentrates almost exclusively on Lester, much of the first half of the novel features interview-like snippets in which residents of Sevier County recall their interactions with Lester and speculate on the causes of his present behavior.

The matter-of-fact and almost documentary-like style of both narratives speaks to the similarities between the two authors and the cultural traditions of their respective regions. In *Child of God*, the interviews function as a kind of satirical take on the region's oral tradition and emphasize the degree to which Lester is alienated from a community that watches and dissects his every move. Perhaps more explicitly, the novels' unemotional tone allows McCarthy and Richards to explore changes in Appalachian and Maritime society in a way that does not romanticize them or idealize a particular way of life. Both novels include sections in which characters undermine some version of the oral tradition: in *Child of God*, people try to tell Lester stories and find that he never understands them, and, in *The Coming of Winter*, the narrator mentions that Kevin and his fellow workers merely tolerate the tedious stories of older men who seem compelled to tell jokes and spin tales at the mill. Choosing this narrative style allows Richards and McCarthy to explore common subject matter for Atlantic Canadian and Appalachian writers without resorting to the nostalgic and romanticized version of the regions' family life and landscape characteristic of earlier writers.

Dispossession and Transformation in *Child of God*

Given *Child of God*'s controversial subject matter, it is unsurprising that critical responses to the novel are mixed. The biggest point of contention seems to be disagreement over whether *Child of God* represents an articulate and sharp investigation of dispossession in one of America's most marginalized regions, or an attempt to shock audiences by exploiting preconceived assumptions about Appalachia. Duane Carr argues, for example, that in *Child of God* McCarthy "draws on some of the most blatant stereotypes of Southern rednecks in contemporary American fiction" (11) and constructs Ballard as the ultimate outsider, someone whose actions are completely outside of the bounds of the community that he establishes. Ashley Lancaster, on the other hand, reads Lester's "descent into madness as a gradual process of social disenfranchisement" and argues that McCarthy "implicates society as a main contributor to this social deviance from which it yearns to separate itself" (132). Multiple critics suggest that the novel's emotional force derives mainly from its insistence that Lester Ballard is not an aberration, a reading that stems from the oft-cited early line in which the narrator describes Ballard as "a *Child of God* much like yourself perhaps" (4). Vereen Bell argues that, like *The Coming of Winter*, *Child of God* features a society that normalizes and ritualizes violence through hunting, fighting, and constant talk of death; for Bell, while the novel seems on its surface to be a meditation on the depths of individual deviance, the displaced narrative and focus on the community of Sevier County make the novel as much about the society Lester inhabits as it is about him (51).

In his 1991 article "From Voyeurism to Archaeology: Cormac McCarthy's '*Child of God*,'" Andrew Bartlett suggests that McCarthy's focus on different forms of vision allows him to comment on changes taking place in Appalachian society. Much of the novel features conflicting fields of vision: Lester watches over members of the community without their knowledge, waiting for opportune times to carry out his crimes, and members of Sevier County

also keep close tabs on his comings and goings. Bartlett argues that at its core, *Child of God* dramatizes the breakdown of a unified social structure: the community rejects Lester, is unable to either assimilate him or hold him up as evidence of “superlative meanness” (7), and lacks any kind of safety net that would allow him a place to live after he is driven from his home. Lester is completely alone from the beginning of the novel to the end, undermining the idea of a gentle and welcoming society, and his actions threaten any kind of logic or sense of decency that would keep the community together. In what follows, I argue that instead of contrasting the fallen world that Lester inhabits with a unified and traditional social structure, *Child of God* focuses on the decay of Appalachian society and problems with the oral tradition. Rather than juxtaposing Ballard’s marginalization with an otherwise organic and bounded community, McCarthy depicts Appalachia as experiencing deterioration that pre-dates Lester and seems poised to continue long after the close of the action.

Child of God’s Appalachia is undergoing a period of postindustrial decline: the abandoned house where Lester stays after he is driven out of his home is overrun with vermin, filled with garbage, and has been stripped of its wood and siding by looters. The narrator mentions that the woods and sides of roads are covered with trash, “flattened beer cans and rotting condoms” (20), that in the air there wafts a “ropy column of foul black smoke...from a burning slagheap of rubber” (30), and Lester seems to constantly encounter the ruins of discarded buildings, such as factories and stores.

The opening scene of *Child of God* brings this sense of transformation into sharp focus. In it, the bank holds an auction for Lester’s family home, which it has seized from him. The auctioneer touts Lester’s land as a sound real estate investment. He tells the crowd that although Lester was unable to adapt to changing economic circumstances and find a way to profit from the property, new owners could divide the land into plots or harvest the timber behind the house that Lester left untouched. The sale of the house unfolds in a celebratory atmosphere in which prospective buyers arrive “like a caravan of carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun” to “a lemonade stand [and] musicians striking up a country reel” (3, 5). The narrator describes the auctioneer’s voice echoing in the trees on the property as “a ghost chorus among old ruins” (5) and the musicians who come to the auction as resembling “compositions in porcelain from an old county fair shooting gallery” (8).

Child of God constructs a conflicted relationship between residents of Appalachia and the tourism and leisure industry. In addition to the comparison McCarthy draws between county fairs and the spectacle of Lester losing his house (in this case, the community holds him up as an example of what will happen to people who are unable to manage their finances and turn a profit from their land), much of the novel’s action takes place in tourist destinations and exhibition grounds. Lester commits several of his crimes on lookouts that offer tourists a view of Frog Mountain. In the same section in which the narrator describes fairs where workers scam locals by blowing up pigeons with firecrackers and challenging people to boxing matches with apes, he recounts the story of a teenaged Lester, who is a crack shot with his rifle, winning three large stuffed animals in a carnival target game. Lester cherishes these animals, bringing them with him when he moves from place to place. He risks his life to save the two bears and tiger when he loses them in the stream during his relocation to the caves. Misplacing even these meagre possessions underlines the level of dispossession that Lester experiences. Writing during a time when Appalachians were mobilizing against the “freak” carnival culture in the region and the crass tourism ventures designed to bring people to see bizarre bluegrass characters, McCarthy depicts the carnival as a financially exploitative and violent space.

There is a great deal of abandoned space in *Child of God*’s Sevier County. Lester spends much of his time in these places, particularly a deserted quarry on the outskirts of town. Since people have taken to dumping unwanted items in the quarry, it provides a material record of previous generations of inhabitants of the region; on one occasion, he finds “enormous blocks and tablets of stone weathered gray and grown with deep green moss, toppled monoliths among the trees and vines of an older race of man” (25). The transformation that has taken place in this community is so dramatic that the narrator talks about the people who worked the quarry just a few decades earlier as an ancient vanished culture whose strange actions warrant investigation. The quarry is an effective example of abandoned space: in addition to housing these artifacts, it once provided work and the material that comprised the houses and buildings of Sevier County. The quarry has transitioned from serving as an integral element of the community to being a forgotten dump:

Ballard descended by giant stone stairs to the dry floor of the quarry. The great rock walls with their cannellured faces and featherdrill holes composed about him an enormous amphitheatre. The ruins of an old truck lay rusting in the honeysuckle. He crossed the corrugated stone floor among chips and spalls of stone. The truck looked like it

had been machine-gunned. At the end of the quarry was a rubble tip and Ballard stopped to search for artifacts, tilting old stoves and water heaters. Inspecting bicycle parts and corroded buckets. (37–38)

As is demonstrated by his struggle to protect the home he grew up in and his obsession with his rifle and other symbols of his childhood, Lester's search for a sense of place focuses squarely on material artifacts. This spills over into his relationship with the region in general: he travels to the quarry and other abandoned spaces to find these symbols of previous generations that inhabited eastern Tennessee.

Lester's relationship with the less tangible elements of Appalachian culture is equally complicated. In part, *Child of God* explores the effects of Lester living without the anchors of family, culture, religion, and community. One of the key tensions that emerges in the novels is between the kind of socialized silence that shapes the main characters and a strange version of the oral tradition that exists outside of the narrative proper and includes small-town gossip about both the actions of the characters and the history of the regions. In *Child of God*, language and speech establish and patrol a rigid social structure that places Lester at the bottom. Characters in the novel make fun of his inability to understand jokes and to follow stories, he feels embarrassed to ask store clerks for help finding items that he would like to purchase, and he seems unable to understand the circumstances surrounding his being falsely accused of rape. All of these are moments in which Lester clumsily tries to act like an upstanding member of Sevier County; in the most obvious example of his failure to achieve this, the community banishes him from Sunday service:

The congregation at Six-Mile Church would turn all together like a cast of puppets at the opening of the door, eying them any time after services had started. When Ballard came in with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench they turned back more slowly. A windy ruffle of whispers went among them. (31)

While Lester spends most of the novel retreating from the community or actively attacking it, the few instances in which he attempts to fit in result in Sevier County rejecting him. The novel contrasts Lester's physical violence with the symbolic violence enacted by the community. Lester's weapon is a rifle, but in moments such as the one above the community manages to set him off and ostracize him with whispers and pointed glances. For Richards and McCarthy, there is a kind of paradox inherent in this type of silence: on the one hand, both characters come from a working-class background that privileges the strong, silent, stoic male, but, on the other, both authors connect these gaps in speech to an uneven set of power relations that exists in these societies. Kevin and Lester are silenced in the presence of people they assume to be their social superiors, including the sheriff, the people who come to the church, the man whose cow Kevin shoots, and Kevin's boss at the mill. Richards and McCarthy make a connection between the way in which the community silences Kevin and Lester and the unequal place that their communities occupy in the political systems of Canada and the United States. *Child of God* responds to the nostalgic impulse Batteau and others identify by undermining the idea that Appalachia once existed as an impoverished but dignified community that is threatened by modernity and technology. The novel instead offers a dark portrait of the region's history. For example, when the deputy asks Sheriff Fate about a brave group of men called the White Caps who policed the community during the nineteenth century, the sheriff insists that he speak to an elderly member of the community, Mr. Wade, who debunks this glowing version of the story. Wade tells the deputy that the White Caps and their enemies, the Bluebills, both "prototypes of the KKK" (Giles 38), were "a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers. The only thing they ever done was to whip women and rob old people of their savins. Pensioners and widows. And murder people in their beds" (164). The story of these vigilantes anticipates the group of local men who eventually break Lester from the psychiatric ward and threaten to torture him unless he shows them where he hid the bodies of his victims. These men, who wish to continue the "tradition" of vigilante justice in the community, fail miserably in their quest to right Lester's wrongs, losing him in the caves and nearly allowing him to escape prosecution for his crimes.

Towards the end of the novel, when a flood overcomes Sevier County, Sheriff Fate enters a discussion about how viable it is to have a community in this location. The storekeeper tells him that he reckons that "there are just some places the good lord didn't intend folks to live in" (162), and then Mrs. Walker tells him that she has never seen a place where people were so mean and willing to take advantage of one another. Opting against the easy nostalgic response, Fate tells her that things "used to be worse" (164). Robert Jarrett notes that in novels such as *Child of God* and *Outer Dark*, McCarthy constructs an Appalachia that is almost completely devoid of the history of the southern United States: there are no references to the Confederacy, the Reconstruction, or any of the key moments that inspire so much of the cultural production that has emerged from the region (24–25). In the absence of a romantic reading of history, McCarthy

accentuates the complex and often unsavoury past of Sevier County, complicating the nostalgic impulse critics often read in Appalachian literature.

Dreams of the Past and Dreams of Escape in *The Coming of Winter*

Many critics talk about the degree to which Richards's Newcastle is alienated from central Canada and the economic centres of North America, but the insular community depicted in *The Coming of Winter* seems equally isolated from the rest of New Brunswick and the Maritimes. Richards's later work makes fleeting references to social forces such as the provincial government, the owners of mills, and university-educated social workers who exert control over his characters to varying degrees. The world of *The Coming of Winter*, however, begins and ends with Kevin's community, with the narrator mentioning only briefly that Pamela's family lives a two-day drive away from the Dulse house and providing no other details about her hometown. As critics such as Tony Tremblay have proposed, the Miramichi of Richards's early period is a world that the literary establishment of the time and contemporary readers would have trouble recognizing. In *The Coming of Winter*, Newcastle resembles a frontier town: the roads seem to be unfit for cars to drive on, Kevin and his friends constantly come into contact with rough workers from the woods and mills at bars, and it is commonplace to spend a Friday night negotiating the price of wine at a bootlegger's, go to a shed to drink the wine, and then walk around town in search of a fight.

Richards's Miramichi, like McCarthy's Sevier County, is in the midst of a dramatic transformation. Kevin's parents, Clinton and Rubena, notice this when they visit the local gunshop, "a wooden two-storey place showing signs of decay, the lower floor the shop itself, with its broad front window displaying heads and hides of animals....The trophies were ancient ones of a bygone era that gave a particular closeness to the air as they entered, intermingling with the smells of gun cleaners and guns and steel" (139). The narrator repeatedly refers to "the rotted smell" (130) of burnt sulphur and documents changes to Newcastle's main street: new-smelling drugmarts have pushed out local businesses, leaving only the dated general store, which the narrator says has "become a monument to the town itself" (110). Kevin's father, Clinton, complains that a biologist has taken over the fishing industry and does not adequately know the river (67), and he blames the collapse of the local fishery on the mills that pollute the river. Elsewhere, Reginald, Clinton's brother, tells Kevin that the government is planning to knock down his house to make way for a bridge across the river.

While Kevin certainly gets off easier than later Richards characters in the sense that the mill offers him steady, if dangerous, work, the novel provides subtle clues about the impact of these changes; for example, Kevin seems terrified to rock the boat at his job, choosing not to report chemical burns to his superiors for fear that he will be replaced. Kevin and his friends internalize this sense of foreboding and seem convinced that the community offers no opportunities to them aside from a difficult life of manual labour and regret. For example, the narrator "faces that smiled with young strong discoloured teeth, faces that were knotted by that peculiar expression, the expression of young men who held conference with the old, that gained before their years a hollow look of cynicism and regret" (178). Elsewhere, the narrator calls attention to the physical effects of working with the mill's chemicals: they give Kevin burns on his hands and feet, make young men look old, and give men faces that are "dull and eaten by the vapours of the mill" (78). The transition into a nasty version of the postindustrial economy in central New Brunswick impacts every facet of life: tradition, material symbols of previous generations, and even peoples' bodies are falling apart and deteriorating.

As mentioned above, one of the key features of both novels is Lester and Kevin's debilitating reluctance to speak. William French famously noted that Richards's characters lead "ungrammatical lives" (C17) and in no place is this more apparent than in *The Coming of Winter*. The novel's action hinges on moments of silence: Kevin refuses or is unable to speak out against marrying Pamela; he refuses or is unable to apologize to Houlden Bellia after shooting his cow, setting off the legal conflict that hangs over the plot; and Kevin and Clinton often substitute grunts for answers to simple questions from Pamela and Rubena. Even when Kevin does tell his parents about the drunken car accident that takes place at his bachelor party (unlike his choice to keep them in the dark about the hunting accident), the narrator simply talks about their conversation after the fact, and the text of the words he uses does not appear in the novel.

The effects of this silence come into clear focus during the scene where Kevin and Clinton travel downriver to meet with Houlden Bellia to negotiate a price for the cow Kevin killed. The two sit uncomfortably in Bellia's living room, embarrassed for putting him out, for talking about money, and for accepting blame. Clinton is uncharacteristically jittery and stutters through the conversation awkwardly. He repeats things "as though it was difficult for him to speak," says "Yes, yes" after laughing "as if to reassure himself that he could chuckle when he wished" (66), and jumps when Bellia

addresses him, even though his host speaks calmly and does not challenge or threaten him in any way. Kevin is at once unable to speak up for himself and frustrated with his father's willingness to defer to Bellia. Kevin seems to believe that he and his family should stay away from financial and legal matters; later in the novel, for example, he becomes embarrassed during his and Pamela's visit to Reginald's house when his uncle speaks about politics and the workings of government "as if he knew anything *at all*" (215).

As is characteristic of Richards's work (See Davey 67–80, for example), discourse and such moments of silence function to construct and maintain a rigid social order in *The Coming of Winter*. The Dulses feel inherently inferior to Pamela's family, Kevin falls in line with the older men who work at the mill, and Clinton convinces himself that Bellia is more important, more articulate, and more powerful than he is:

Or perhaps it was because they were the same type of men, believing in much the same things, and when he stepped into the room he realized that this man had prospered and he hadn't after all, and that this Houlden Bellia was a man younger than he. If he had been put on trial, he wouldn't have felt more conscious of where he was at that instant nor could he have felt more guilty if he had been convicted of some crime. And yet he knew the man to be no better than he.

But the man knew him also and that was the point. The man, staring at him, knew his history of drinking and whoring, of dropping nets out of season—of where he lived and what he did, of his wife and dead son and that was the point. So that it became not Kevin that butchered the cow but Clinton—it became Clinton that must explain himself to the man. (87)

Kevin and Clinton constantly find themselves in situations where they fail to be able to explain themselves: Kevin feels "stupid" and inadequate during his marriage preparations with the priest, Clinton gets embarrassed to the point of running out of the store when a salesclerk simply asks him what kind of suit he is looking for, and in this telling moment, Clinton is intimidated by Houlden in spite of the latter's deliberately gentle approach to the dispute.

William Connor suggests that Kevin has trouble dealing with the tension between "escape and entrapment," a key feature of all of Richards's fiction. He argues that Kevin "is trapped in a decaying culture where childhood's end means submission to life in economically and culturally limiting circumstances" ("Escape and Entrapment" 270; see also Milner, "Structure" 204). Kevin is very different from his father and best friend, both of whom dreamed about leaving the Miramichi all their lives and do not in any way romanticize the past. Clinton wished to escape so badly that he envied people he knew who died in the Korean War. The narrator notes that Clinton's anger came from "an acute understanding at that boyhood age that everything was so hopelessly lost—that he would die never leaving the river to which he had been born" (49). John rejects his community by drinking excessively, refusing to go to work, starting fights, and doing everything in his power to prevent Kevin from getting married. Kevin, on the other hand, accepts the life that Pamela offers to him, works diligently at the mill, and generally follows orders from his parents, his boss, and anyone in a position of authority. Critics and even the author himself chide Kevin for what Richards calls his "lack of backbone" (quoted in Milner, "Yoknapatawpha" 6) as he simply gives in to Pamela and even defers to Houlden Bellia's demands for reparations for the dead cow without any kind of struggle. Kevin mentions that he and Pamela plan to leave the Miramichi to find work, seemingly because he thinks that's what people such as his father-in-law expect him to say, but we learn in subsequent texts that this does not happen.

Kevin often looks backwards and constructs an idealized version of the Miramichi that pre-dates his birth. For example, when he travels to the area in which he grew up to see the bootlegger, the narrator talks about his experience of nostalgia for a period of his life that has passed:

Kevin had hunted squirrels here when he was younger, armed with a pellet gun that the police had one day took from him. That was before his family had moved downriver. Now the place had changed, old things had died and new things been born, and it wasn't the same coming here for wine. No matter how many times he came here for wine he couldn't help feeling that it was not his place anymore. (30)

The novels also offer a gentle critique of the assumed influence of the oral tradition in Appalachia and rural Atlantic Canada. In spite of his own silence, Kevin enjoys hearing stories from older members of the community, particularly the men he works with, even Baps, "a careful monotonous talker, a dull story-teller that thrived on telling stories, sometimes with that occasional tinge of humour that made listening worthwhile" (163). However, whenever

Kevin idealizes his hometown or becomes nostalgic for times past, the narrator immediately counters with descriptions of rotting symbols of the society he dreams about. For example, when Kevin and John visit the bootlegger, the narrator highlights this tension:

Waterfront, the black rotting timbers of the wharf. And there in the shacks the old men hard on the rubby, telling stories of the war. Kevin loved the stories of the war....

In front of them was the rotting skeleton of a car defaced in the muddy dooryard, its hood toppled back in undergrowth a few yards away, large cement blocks here and there on the short brown grass. The door to the shack being slightly ajar, they ventured up to it, John knocking.

“Nice smell,” he said under his breath. (29–30)

Rubena, like Kevin, is sentimental about the changes that have taken place in her community. When Kevin and his family go into town, for instance, they come across the park in which Kevin’s friends drink and John got severely ill from swimming in the fountain. Rubena notices that the park is full of broken wine bottles and children who are “drinking and cursing” (154). When she tells her daughter that the park was different when she and her brothers were young, that it was a place for families and elderly couples to spend time together, her daughter refuses this kind of nostalgia, telling her that the park is the same as it has always been. Much like in *Child of God*, characters in *The Coming of Winter* who look back to any version of an idealized past are immediately shut down.

Richards and McCarthy strip away the romance of the oral tradition by stressing that the allure of these stories fails to match up with their characters’ lived experience. They pair any sense of nostalgia with images of squalor and references to the degree to which discourse functions as a weapon of social control. Lester and Kevin are placed under constant surveillance by the community, Lester in particular is the subject of gossip, and both find that discourse functions to put them in their place and set them off from the rest of the community.

Conclusion

In *Child of God* and *The Coming of Winter*, Sevier County and the Miramichi are marginalized in two ways: Appalachia and the Maritimes are marginal regions relative to more centralized urban environments in the United States and Canada, but even within these two regions, the communities that McCarthy and Richards construct are isolated or anomalous. Their vision of a culture in the midst of decay sets up a particular tension that informs regional novels that have emerged from the Maritimes and Appalachia in the last thirty years. While earlier regional writers constructed an idyllic home place or at least a memory of an idealized rural society that they contrasted with the inauthentic way of life in urban North America, characters in Richards’s and McCarthy’s work find no easy solutions to the societal changes their communities are experiencing. For all intents and purposes, the rest of the continent does not exist for Kevin and Lester, and it certainly seems unavailable to them as an escape from their present circumstances. Both Sevier County and the Miramichi are in the midst of a painful transition into a postindustrial era that offers Lester and Kevin neither the pride of the resource economy nor the financial prospects of urban North America.

Although there are very few regional studies that compare Appalachia and the Maritimes, reading Richards and McCarthy together suggests that there may be more connections between the two regions than the political boundary that separates them suggests. Richards’s early fiction closely resembles McCarthy’s Appalachian period in its focus on the disintegration of the home place, dispossession, marginalized communities that survive on resource extraction, young men who suffer from a kind of socialized silence, and most importantly the construction of a society that is on the verge of radical change, and its push to undermine the cultural movement that rejects this change and idealizes the past.

At a time when regionalist literary criticism struggles to reconcile postmodern readings of space and suspicion towards the idea that places such as Appalachia and Atlantic Canada can be home to uniform cultures, looking back on McCarthy and Richards’s reaction to regional transformations and the still-emerging desire to romanticize the remote and exotic cultures of Appalachia and the Maritimes is instructive. McCarthy’s Appalachian period and Richards’s 1970s-era novels identified a particular reading of Tennessee and New Brunswick by the national media and cultural establishment that marginalized these regions, passed their social conditions off as unworthy of serious literary attention, and linked economic disparity to a stereotyped understanding of regional culture that saw residents of Appalachia and the Maritimes

as inherently backwards, unsophisticated, innocent, and quaint. McCarthy and Richards engaged these questions at the same time as scholars in Appalachian studies and Atlantic Canada studies challenged such stereotypes and began to draw links between the uneven federations of Canada and the United States and economic and political structures that historically favoured centralized regions over those on the periphery. The work of McCarthy and Richards reminds us that the logic of nationalism in the United States and the Canada positions Appalachia and the Maritimes as resource bases or tourist destinations that exist for the benefit of more important urban areas. At the same time, their work complicates these readings of their respective regions and resists the idealized version of Appalachia and the Maritimes that exists in the national consciousness. While these stereotypes lead us to the conclusion that these regions are inherently dysfunctional and backwards, McCarthy and Richards contextualize and historicize the causes and impacts of economic change in these regions, and insist that this idealized conception of the regions marginalizes them, depoliticizes culture, and attributes imbalanced development to overstated cultural differences instead of tangible historical and social forces—many of which, including the rise of consumer culture, overexploitation of natural resources, and the fall of the industrial economy, play key roles in these novels. Writing at roughly the same time, Richards and McCarthy contribute to regionalist movements in Atlantic Canada and Appalachia that push the economic conditions of both spaces into the national consciousness and undermine stereotyped readings of central New Brunswick and eastern Tennessee.

Peter Thompson is Assistant Professor in the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University.

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Endnotes

¹ This attempt to contextualize Richards by situating his work in cultural trends taking place in Canada and the United States and interrogating his place in the “borderland” of the Atlantic seaboard is fuelled in part by recent developments in hemispheric studies or studies of the North Atlantic World taking place in geography, history, and other disciplines. See, among others, Reid, *Essays on Northeastern North America: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (2008), Hornsby and Reid, *New England and the Maritime Provinces* (2005), Appelbaum and Sweet, *Envisioning an English Empire: Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World* (2005), and Mancke and Shamma, *The Creation of the British Atlantic World* (2005).