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‘WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE, IT’S AN ISLAND, AIN’T IT?’: REGIONALISM IN ANN-MARIE MACDONALD’S *FALL ON YOUR KNEES*

Her mixed Celtic-Arab blood and her origins on a scraggly island off the east coast of a country popularly supposed to consist of a polar ice-cap are enough, by American ice standards, both to cloak her in sufficient diva mystery and to temper the exotic with a dash of windswept North American charm. She’ll refer to pickled moose meat and kippered cod tongues and occasionally swear in Arabic just to get the leg-end rolling, but she is of the New World, the golden West.¹

IT IS 1918 AND KATHLEEN PIPER has recently left the “scraggly island” of Cape Breton for New York City, where she plans to embark on a singing career. Despite having a strong sense of her own originality, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s young would-be diva fits comfortably within a long and still healthy tradition of cultural producers who have highlighted those facets of Nova Scotian culture that they recognize to be distinct and quaint enough to be popular in the global marketplace.² Given the international success of *Fall On Your Knees*—the apogee of which might be marked by MacDonald’s appearance on *Oprah* in April 2002—it is fair to ask if the same can be said of MacDonald. Stephen Henighan certainly thinks so. In *When Words Deny the World*, a collection of essays that laments the homogenizing impact of globalization on contemporary Canadian literature, Henighan argues that “*Fall On Your Knees* is a tale of traditional Atlantic Canada written from

¹ Ann-Marie MacDonald, *Fall On Your Knees* (Toronto: Vintage, 1997) 123. Further references will appear in parentheses within the text.

² Ian McKay provides an excellent summary of this tradition in “Helen Creighton and the Politics of Antimodernism,” in *Myth and Milieu: Atlantic Literature and Culture, 1918–39*, ed. Gwendolyn Davies (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1993) 1–16.

the heart of Toronto, a nostalgic glimpse back at the disappearing heritage of eccentric, marginalized Canadianism elaborated in the context of a global market.”³ Henighan is right, to an extent. Kathleen’s self-conscious invocation of cod tongues indicates that MacDonald’s characters do employ images of “eccentric, marginalized Canadianism” to titillate American audiences. And perhaps the eccentricity of those images also makes them appealing to MacDonald’s American readership. But that’s not the point. What matters is that cod tongues are invoked strategically by a character who is very aware of the cultural meanings with which they have been invested. And if some of MacDonald’s other characters are not as overtly ironic as Kathleen, the text holds up their representations of regional and national identity for close and sustained scrutiny. To return to cod tongues, we might say that Henighan’s suggestion that the book is designed to appeal to an American audience overlooks the fact that it is the familiarity and not the eccentricity of these images that is the likely appeal for a Canadian readership, and more particularly for Atlantic Canadians, who are invited to laugh at the tired stereotypes employed to simulate the local for global consumption. Equally important, because MacDonald insists on the global influences upon and the internal differences within the Cape Breton community that she portrays, the local reader who also takes some solace in MacDonald’s deployment of what Ian McKay calls “the consoling myths of Maritime essence,” does not do so blindly,⁴ but is asked to consider their status and their appeal as myths.

In Canada, regionalism has tended to be associated with parochialism, stylistic conservatism, and environmental determinism. However, widespread interest in the effects of an increasingly globalized economy has created a resurgence of interest in regional identities and, more specifically, in the hope that re-articulating the uniqueness of local cultures might go some ways toward safeguarding them against the perceived threat of an homogenizing mass culture. So the end of regionalism has been forestalled. But, as Frank Davey suggests, the “ends of regionalism” continue to deserve our attention. Because regionalism has tended to operate as “a transformation of geography into a sign that can conceal the presence of ideology,”⁵ those

³ Stephen Henighan, *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*. (Toronto: Porcupine’s Quill, 2002) 188. Further references will appear in parentheses within the text.

⁴ Ian McKay, “Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy’s Cove,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23.1–2 (Spring 1988): 41.

⁵ Frank Davey, “Toward the Ends of Regionalism,” in *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*, ed. Christian Riegel and Herb Wyile, *Textual Studies in Canada* 9 (Spring 1997): 2. Further references will appear in parentheses within the text.

of us interested in the literary representation of regional identities need “to consider both region and regionalism not as locations but as ideologies” (2).⁶ *Fall On Your Knees* does more than invite such a consideration; it produces one. Among so many other things, MacDonald’s novel is a tremendously astute and compelling exploration of the production and consumption of regional identities in Cape Breton. In the process of tracing the various sites from which and the ends to which discourses of regional identity are produced in the novel, I mean to demonstrate the value of its self-conscious and denaturalized regionalism.

Whether or not Macdonald fashions an eccentric Maritime identity for a primarily American audience, she certainly addresses readers who are “from away.” This is made clear in the first pages of the book: “So,” says the narrator, “that’s the house at 191 Water Street, New Waterford, Cape Breton Island, in the far eastern province of Nova Scotia, Canada” (2). Henighan cites the same quote as an example of MacDonald’s capitulation to an American audience: arguing that “William Faulkner never felt he had to explain where Mississippi was” (2), Henighan criticizes the impulse to “nervously explain the location of Nova Scotia” (188). But I suggest that we see this not as a timid recognition of the geographic and cultural marginality of Cape Breton or Nova Scotia, but as the confident introductory gesture in a sustained critical reflection about the perception of Cape Breton as an isolated anti-modern idyll populated by simple “folk.” To cite Davey again, the narrator’s attempt to locate her subjects’ Cape Breton home is a “strategically resistant mapping of geography” that begs a critical scrutiny of the “meanings generated by others in a nation-state, particularly those generated in geographic areas which can be constructed by the regionalism as central or powerful” (5, 6).

That said, MacDonald’s “strategically resistant mapping of geography” is pervasive and multi-faceted. A few pages after this attempt to locate Cape Breton, the narrator locates and introduces one of her key protagonists, James Piper, rather differently:

⁶ See, for example, Herb Wyile, *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011) and Susanne Marshall, “‘As if There Were Just the Two Choices’: Region and Cosmopolis in Lisa Moore’s Short Fiction,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33.2 (2008): 80–95.

James's mother came from Wreck Cove, the daughter of a prosperous boat builder. James's father was a penniless shoemaker from Port Hood. James's father fell in love with James's mother while measuring her feet. He promised her father he wouldn't take her far from home. He married her and took her to Egypt and that's where James was born. Egypt was a lonely place way on the other side of the island, in Inverness County. (7)

Local readers will immediately recognize Egypt as the community of Egypt Road in Inverness County, but MacDonald's juxtaposition of "he wouldn't take her far from home" with "he married her and took her to Egypt" evokes an Egypt that is not on the other side of the island, but the other side of the world. Although the subsequent sentence stands as a corrective that locates Egypt within Cape Breton, the text in its entirety affirms that both Egypts exist on the island. By that I do not mean merely that MacDonald's Cape Breton is a worldly, ethnically diverse place that includes immigrants of Egyptian and Middle-Eastern descent, though it is that. Rather, her simultaneous location of Egypt in Cape Breton and of Cape Breton in relation to Egypt establishes that local identities cannot be constituted outside of the global networks. Put differently, it affirms what Herb Wylie calls a relational regionalism that explores the extent to which regional identity is constructed in opposition to and in tandem with the world at large.⁷ MacDonald's description of the Cape Breton Highlanders 85th Overseas Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force is a case in point. While she emphasizes that the contingent is identified with the bagpipes played by its members (84–85), she later suggests that the bagpipe, that most iconic signifier of Scottishness, is born of the *deerbeki*, a Middle-Eastern reed instrument that is its "legless ancestor" (89). Likewise, while MacDonald constitutes the kilt-wearing, pipe-playing 85th Battalion as the public face of Cape Breton during World War I, she allows that the private experience of Cape Bretoners also involves dancing the Lebanese *dabke* at *ceilidhs*. "The *dabke*," writes MacDonald, "is all about hips and breeze," unlike Celtic step-dancing, which is "all about feet and knees" (90). "Both," she adds, "can be danced in a kitchen by anyone" (90). Thus the bagpipe and

⁷ Herb Wylie, "Regionalism, Postcolonialism, and (Canadian) Writing: A Comparative Approach for Postnational Times," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 63 (1998): 148.

the *ceilidh*, so often employed as indexes of regional specificity, are used to affirm cultural syncreticism.⁸

Although the novel does allow for the possibility of a unique Cape Breton identity, it insists that that identity is not innate and environmentally determined, like salt in the blood, but is socially produced and strategically invoked. Describing an Armistice Day celebration in New Waterford in 1929, MacDonald writes:

But nothing can dampen civic pride—the turn-out today shows that. Cape Bretoners have reconciled loyalty to King and country with scorn and skepticism for all things “from away”—the foolish arses in Upper Canada and the useless bowler hats in Whitehall. They are fiercely proud of their veterans, yet bitter about the Canadian army that has so often invaded the coalfields. In spite of this, the armed forces are increasingly an option for the jobless and the working poor looking to get off this cursed godforsaken rock that they love more than the breath in their own lungs. (241)

MacDonald emphasizes that her subjects share a love of the rock, but she suggests that their sense of themselves as Cape Bretoners has less to do with the effect of landscape on the mind and more to do with the shared experience of economic and political marginality. Thus, in *Fall On Your Knees* regional identity is experienced as an attachment to a particular place, but it is also produced by intranational power relations. More specifically, a discourse of regional difference emerges in response to the national or extra-regional economic policies that result in regional economic disparities: “The crash of ’29 rocked the world but registered as a ripple in Cape Breton, where it takes a while for the Depression to sink in because it had already been going on for so long” (241). As a result, “It is widely believed that Nova Scotia’s catastrophe occurred in 1867 with Confederation” (241).

⁸ Taken in isolation, this image of *dabke*-dancing Cape Bretoners would seem to replace one myth with another; by placing emphasis on accessible and reproducible heritage images (song and dance), it appears to replace popular myths about Cape Breton as the last bastion of Anglo-Celtic purity with the myth of Canadian multicultural tolerance and cultural pluralism. But that is not the case. As Katarzyna Rukszto notes, “The novel is about Cape Breton, racial strife, inescapable bonds, birth and death and forbidden love, but not in the way that those fond of the romance of multiculturalism and regions would necessarily like. The novel turns the notions of diversity, of unitary identity, in the face of the knowable subject, upside down” (“Out of Bounds: Perverse Longings, Transgressive Desire and the Limits of Multiculturalism: A Reading of *Fall On Your Knees*,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 21 (Spring 2000): 24–25).

In “The ‘Home Place’ in Modern Maritime Literature” Gwendolyn Davies draws on writers as diverse as Frank Parker Day, Ernest Buckler, David Adams Richards, and George Elliott Clarke to demonstrate that “from the 1920s onward, the ‘home place’ emerges as a symbol of cultural continuity and psychological identification in the face of social fragmentation, outmigration, and a continuing hardscrabble economy.”⁹ To the extent that she gives voice to a local “scorn and skepticism for all things ‘from away’” in the context of a discussion about the Cape Breton economy, MacDonald also constitutes the ‘home place’ as a “symbol of cultural continuity” evoked in the face of social and economic strife. But she adds a caveat: the daily reality of life in a resource-based town that contains many recent migrants whose sense of home is tenuous and often conflicted is such that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘down home’ unless you are ‘away’” (241). Thus, while MacDonald acknowledges, like Davies, that “[a]rticulating the nature of Maritime identity is a nebulous and elusive process” (Davies, 198), she does not conclude, as Davies does, that the source of difficulty springs from the fact that “[b]eing a Maritimer is something felt in the blood and in the bone” (198). Instead, MacDonald emphasizes that any common feeling in the blood is complicated by differences in skin colour, class, accent, and local address.

What makes MacDonald’s exploration of regionalism so interesting is that it articulates a tension between the quotidian experience of home and the strategic or nostalgic representation of the home place. Because MacDonald follows her argument that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘down home’ unless you are ‘away’” with the acknowledgement that “[b]y November 1929 the process is under way whereby, eventually, more people will have a ‘down home’ than a ‘home’” (421), she emphasizes the preponderance of nostalgic representations of Cape Breton. In this regard her interests intersect nicely with those of Ian McKay, who argues that twentieth-century representations of the Maritimes have, for the most part, been produced by displaced, nostalgic Maritimers who partake of a “culture of consolation” (“Among the Fisherfolk” 36).¹⁰ Like McKay, MacDonald undercuts the myth of a people who live “in splendid isolation on a rockbound coast ... never questioning

⁹Gwendolyn Davies, *Studies in Maritime Literary History* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1991) 194. Further references will appear in parentheses within the text.

¹⁰Drawing largely on J.F.B. Livesay’s *Peggy’s Cove*, McKay makes an argument about the ways in which nostalgic, antimodern literary representations of Nova Scotia have perpetuated commercially-driven myths about its “folk culture.” As such, *Fall On Your Knees* is also an exception to his rule.

their place in the world, never troubled by the politics of an uncertain age" ("Among the Fisherfolk" 41). She does so by demonstrating the devastating effects that social isolation and the failure to question one's "place in the world" have for James Piper and his family.

MacDonald's protagonists do live in isolation on a rockbound coast, but it is not splendid. First of all, James Piper and his wife Materia are isolated as a consequence of their decision to elope when Materia is only twelve years old. Before Materia's father, Mr. Mahmoud, renounces her, he beats James, forces him to remarry Materia in a Roman Catholic Church, and then employs people to build a house for the newlyweds "so he wouldn't have to toss them from his doorstep" in the future (17). James, who is an orphan, and who had regularly enjoyed visiting the Mahmoud's family home, reacts to Mr. Mahmoud's outrage by calling the Mahmoud family "filthy black Syrians" and by telling Materia that she is "better off without them" (19). This defensive gesture is the first articulation of the racial prejudice that comes to shape James's response to the world, and which is the cause of much grief for his family. Once in the new house, James disdains the company of his only neighbour, "a Jew who raised kosher meat," thinking, "God knows what rituals involving chickens and sheep" (19). Not long after, he starts to disdain the company of his now pregnant wife, and "hope[s] the child would be fair" (25). As it turns out the child, Kathleen, is fair and James lavishes attention on her and takes her everywhere, but Materia, who is "dark," remains at home because James "didn't want his child stigmatized" (37). Although he parades Kathleen around New Waterford, he discourages her from associating with townspeople, dragging her out of the general store in a fury when its owner suggests that Kathleen's singing voice is inherited from her mother. And, when scarlet fever and various diseases run rampant through New Waterford during the miners' strike of 1909, James enters the pits to earn enough money to board Kathleen at a private school out of town. Thinking only of his daughter's success on the world's stages, he ignores the miners who "accuse him of murdering their children" (48).

Inside the mine, James befriends Albert. Because the men work in darkness and James only sees Albert when they are both covered in coal dust, he does not realize that Albert, who comes from Barbados, is black. When the strike ends, the Dominion Coal Company rewards James' loyalty by giving him a job above ground but, to James' surprise, his "buddy" Albert is let go. The moment is an important one, not only because James' sadness at the

loss of his friend undercuts his persistent fetishization of racial and ethnic difference, but because it underscores his failure to “question [his] place in the world” (McKay, “Helen Creighton” 1). Although James reads voraciously, hoping “to get a perspective on the world outside this island—the real world” (21), he remains stubbornly insensitive to the political and economic forces that change the island’s make-up. MacDonald, however, insists on the direct correlation between “the politics of an uncertain age” and Cape Breton’s ever-changing “place in the world”: “Barbados, Italy, Belgium, Eastern Europe, Quebec The Dominion Coal Company had reached far and wide to break the strike” (49). And once the strike ends, many of the migrants settle in The Coke Ovens, a “cosy community ... snuggled right up against the steel mill” that “put bread on the table and fine orange dust on the bread” (57). Following the “coloured migration to the Sydney coal fields, genuine coloured artists started coming up from the States” (52), and while James encourages Kathleen to study Italian librettos in isolation, the Blackville Society Tap Twizzlers brings the house down only blocks away: while they “hounded, flattered, talked back and twisted,” their “flashing feet that chatted, clattered, took flight and girdled the globe without ever leaving center stage at the Empire Theatre” (52). Thus, when Kathleen arrives in Manhattan and marvels at the diversity on streets that “throng with working girls and doughboys and the gumption of immigrants from the four corners of the earth” (127), the reader is not struck by the difference between New Waterford and New York City, but is reminded of the rich local culture in which Kathleen and her father did not participate.

Kathleen is not the only character drawn to New York City. As a young man, her father had dreamed of New York and transferred that dream to Materia.¹¹ But it is also a dream that Materia unwittingly shares with her parents, who attempt to immigrate to the United States, but end up in Sydney Harbour:

[Mr Mahmoud] and Giselle ended up in Cape Breton because of the lying mongrel of a sea captain who took their money and then dumped them on this barren rock. Days of peering at the horizon waiting for land and finally—land! Waiting to see the Statue of Liberty loom up, to dock at Ellis Island be-

¹¹ This is true also of Lily, who retraces Kathleen’s journey to New York, and Teresa, the Mahmoud family’s maid, who has grown up in the Coke Ovens and who says, “despite the grime, she wouldn’t live anywhere else except New York City” (118–19).

fore ferrying to the blessed isle of Manhattan. They dropped anchor in Sydney and the captain turfed them out—“What’s the difference, it’s an island, ain’t it?” (339)

The obvious answer to the captain’s question is that there is a world of difference between a small town on “Cape Breton Island, in the far eastern province of Nova Scotia, Canada” and the city that is, in 1918, “inching towards the center of the universe” (127). Kathleen’s initial impressions of Manhattan certainly bear this out. As she disembarks from the boat that has brought her from one island to another, she reflects: “She’s got plenty of personality and no history, and she has never breathed so much air in her life. She comes from an Atlantic island surrounded by nothing but sea air, yet in the man-made outdoor corridors of this fantastic city she can finally breathe” (122). Despite Kathleen’s initial sense that she has “no history,” it quickly becomes clear that she sees “new New York” (127) through the lens of New Waterford. Some time later, she gazes up at the skyscrapers that dominate the city’s horizon and sees aspects of her own island home:

I love the buildings. They’re called skyscrapers. They’re the closest thing to an ocean here. But it’s an ocean that goes straight up, not flat out. They say that the body of water stretching away to the east of Manhattan is the ocean, but it isn’t. Not my ocean, anyway. It’s weird because back home I just took it for granted, my grey-green sea. Now I have a granite ocean. (463)

Although the fact that so many of the book’s central characters dream of New York testifies to its cultural projection and its archetypal worldliness, the difference between the islands of Manhattan and Cape Breton is, MacDonald insists, one of degree.¹² Kathleen’s early sense that “the Present is a new country, unassailable by the old countries” (176), and her sense of life as a sequentially unfolding narrative that begins with her arrival in New York, are undercut by MacDonald’s insistence on what Edward Soja calls “a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic.”¹³ Rather than using the heterogeneity

¹² Consider, too, the similarities between James’ first impression of Sydney Harbour (9) and Kathleen’s first impression of the South St. Docks in Manhattan (464).

¹³ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989) 1.

of one place to underscore the homogeneity of the other, MacDonald insists on their interarticulation, thus demonstrating the need to examine the usual social production of these places as worlds and years apart.

Soon after arriving in Manhattan, Kathleen falls in love with Rose, the pianist employed by her singing teacher. Like James and Materia, who are initially drawn to each other's perceived exoticness, Kathleen and Rose are entranced by their differences.¹⁴ Rose, who is black and who is raised "to be an example to the Race" (127), repeatedly draws attention to the whiteness of Kathleen's skin, saying, for example, "You're so white, you're green" (534). And, in the early days of their relationship, Kathleen looks at Rose and thinks, "She reminds me of the pictures of African women on P.T. Barnum posters except she hasn't got the rings around her neck [and] she's not wearing a colourful turban" (472). Though Kathleen soon learns what it is to "fe[el] like something out of P.T. Barnum" when she draws unwanted attention while looking for Rose's apartment in Harlem (506), both women continue to negotiate their preconceptions of racial difference during their time as lovers. For example, in response to Rose's assumption that Kathleen's "'Mumsy' is a 'frosty blonde' with arch blue eyes and impeccable taste in porcelain and that 'Fatha' is a judge from 'old money'," Kathleen muses:

I'll let her think she's smart for now. Then I'll show her my family photo. AND she thinks *I* have an accent! She said, 'Where you from, girl?' and I said, 'There you go again, sometimes you have an accent and sometimes you don't, how come?' And she said, 'I asked you first.' I said, 'Cape Breton, Island.' And she said, 'C'Bre'n Ireland?' I said, 'I don't talk like that.' She said, 'That's exactly how you talk.'

'Cape Breton is in Canada, not Ireland, what do they teach you in school here?'

She said, "Useful stuff like how anyone can grow up to be president."

I said, "Don't you know anything about Canada?"

"Freeze yer ass off, right?" (497–98)

Despite Kathleen's smug tone, it is obvious that the process of negotiating her own naïve preconceptions and misconceptions about racial and ethnic

¹⁴ Upon seeing James for the first time, Materia thinks: "His eyes so blue, his skin so fair ... Imagine touching his hair" (12). When James looks up, he meets: "the darkest eyes he'd ever seen, wet with light. Coal-black curls escaping from two long braids. Summer skin the colour of sand stroked by the tide.... His lips parted silently. He wanted to say, 'I know you,' but none of the facts of his life backed this up so he merely stared" (12).

difference in her relationship with Rose helps her to develop an appreciation of the history that she had denied upon arriving in New York. When Kathleen proudly shows the family photo alluded to in the above quote, Rose looks at the image of Kathleen's mother and asks "What is she?" Kathleen says, somewhat smugly, "Canadian." While Kathleen's superciliousness might be read as a comment on the complacency that is sometimes bred by Canadian discourses of multiculturalism, it is also indicative of the larger process by which Kathleen embraces her maternal heritage; though her father has taught her to deny her Lebanese heritage and to devalue Lebanese culture, Kathleen thinks, "I am not ashamed of my mother" (499).

After getting word that Kathleen is having an affair, James sets off for New York. On finding her in bed with Rose, James throws Rose from the room and he rapes Kathleen. Earlier references to his sexual feelings for Kathleen indicate that the act is the culmination of a yearning that he has denied for years, but the emphasis placed on his particular love of her fair skin and his more general fetishization of racial difference suggests that the act is also a response to Kathleen's failure to observe the rigid binomial distinctions that structure his world view—black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. Thus incest is figured as the triumph of sameness over difference. This has relevance for a discussion of MacDonald's representation of regional and local identities in the book because—in the act of rape—James twice uses the word "home" to indicate both the physical reality of the family home in New Waterford and a carefully coded and stratified vision of its social order: "'Shshsh,' he says kissing her hair, her injured face. It's his own fault—I should never let her go far from home—an ecstasy beneath his hands" (549). In the context of an article about father-daughter incest narratives in Canadian immigrant fiction, Sophie Levie argues that MacDonald's "(syn) tactical movement from third-person 'he' to first-person 'I' at the moment of injury creates a literal exstatis, collapsing the distance between father and daughter as James collapses the difference between being 'at home' and far from it."¹⁵ On the following page there is another ecstatic and "(syn)tactical" slippage that suggests that "home" simultaneously refers to New Waterford and to James' body: "The iron taste of her mouth where he's made it bleed, dreadful sorry, I'll take you home again—Be still,' he pleads" (550). Thus, in contrast to the relational idea of home that emerges in and through Kathleen's negotiation of various differences, MacDonald presents an idea of home born

¹⁵ Sophie. Levie, "'This Dark Echo Calls Him Home': Writing Father-Daughter Incest Narratives in Canadian Immigrant Fiction," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71.4 (2002): 866.

of the disavowal of difference. More importantly, she insists on the violence and violation born of that disavowal.

The time that Kathleen spends exploring New York and exploring her own burgeoning sexual, ethnic, and national identities allows her to develop an independent and fluid understanding of what Homi Bhabha calls “the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world.”¹⁶ But when James forces her to return to the family home in New Waterford, she suffers “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place” (141). Because a home—by which I mean both a physical structure and the social relations that transpire between its walls—is a microcosm of the larger sociopolitical order, the home that is made unsafe by abuse inevitably affects the victim’s understanding of that social order. Sophie Levy puts it this way: “as the boundaries of home are undermined by abuse, the difference between inside and outside becomes unclear, blurring the distinction between events in the external world, and imagined worlds” (864). Thus it is not surprising that the births of the twins who are the product of Kathleen’s rape are presented in highly imaginative, heavily metaphorical terms:

With a series of precise and dire yanks, the catch is dragged from where it lay lodged halfway down the canal that locked despite the battering of the seismic tides that were set off by those first gravitational yearnings. The bundle of tiny limbs and vestigial gills and unique fingerprints is hauled towards the torn surface of its small swollen sea. (136)

Although contextual evidence quickly makes it clear that the gilled catch is not a fish, MacDonald’s metaphors disorient the reader, mimicking the horror and disorientation of Kathleen’s youngest sister, who watches the birth and who, in a desperate bid for psychic self-preservation, quickly develops a penchant for secrets and lies.

A few lines later, Kathleen’s body is imagined differently. No longer a swollen sea, it is a coal mine:

Kathleen is an abandoned mine. A bootleg mine, plundered, flooded; a ruined and dangerous shaft, stripped of fuel, of

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “The World and the Home,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 141. Further references will appear in parentheses within the text.

coal, of fossil ferns and sea anemones and bones, of creatures half plant, half animal, and any chance that it might end up a diamond. (136)

If in the moments before death, Kathleen “levitates in a profound and complete relief,” enjoying a feeling of placelessness or exstasis, the book subsequently brings her body home: because *Fall On Your Knees* has as a central concern the social, political, and economic consequences of the coal mining strikes that simultaneously united and ravaged Cape Breton in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and because it holds the British Empire Coal and Steel Company responsible for the premature death of so many Cape Bretoners (228, 231), the description of Kathleen’s death is also a meditation on the strife, deprivation, bounty and fortitude that characterize the place and its people. In the end, then, the musically gifted, “faerie-haired” Lebanese-Canadian whose body is violated is not just of the place, but is the place.

MacDonald likes metaphors. This much is clear. But the passage that describes Kathleen’s death in childbirth—sea creatures, mines, diamonds—is one of the book’s most insistently figurative passages. Certainly this has much to do with the multifaceted horror of the scene, a horror that is beyond accommodation, beyond representation, and which can perhaps only be approximated in the recourse to metaphor. Nevertheless, the choice of a metaphor that appears to collapse person with place in a book that also resists geographical essentialism is intriguing. Equally, given that Kathleen’s father used her body to his own ends, and given that he brought her home against her will, one wonders about the implications of MacDonald’s decision to bring her body home. The answer, I suspect, has something to do with the imaginative play that metaphor involves. MacDonald’s use of metaphors whose sheer decadence and persistence draw attention to their own metaphoricity functions as a reminder that home is not merely bricks and mortar, or mortar and mine shafts, but is also an imaginative construct, context and text. At the same time, the reference to fossil ferns and to the ancient “creatures half plant, half animal” of which coal is composed introduces memory into a meditation on raw matter, reminding us to examine what Simon Schama calls “the veins of myth and memory” that also lie beneath the surface of the land.¹⁷ And because the metaphor of the stripped mine draws attention to the

¹⁷ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995) 14.

way in which a place has been changed by human occupation, it indicates an understanding of place both as that which produces a culture and which is simultaneously produced by the cultures that inhabit it.

This doubleness is evident in the last recorded conversation between Rose and Kathleen. While making love, Rose notices and struggles to define the scent of Kathleen's skin. She says:

“You have a scent.”
 “So do you,” I said.
 “What’s mine?”
 “... Trade winds—”
 “Ha—”
 “—everything that’s ever been worth stealing.”
 “Hm.”
 “What’s mine?”
 “... Mineral.”
 “You know, it’s because I know you that I’m able to translate. I know that what you’re really saying is, ‘Darling you’re ravishing, milk and honey are under your tongue—’”
 “‘And the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.’”
 “Ha!”
 She kissed me. And after a while she said, “Actually, you smell like the sea.” ... “Like rocks. Like an empty house with all the windows blowing open. Like thinking, like tears. Like November.” (534–44)

The “Ha—” and the somewhat more ambiguous “Hm” that follow Kathleen’s comment about tradewinds invite us to read that comment ironically. The same can be said of Rose’s suggestion that Kathleen smells like mineral: it is undercut by the joking intertextual reference to “the smell of Lebanon.” But Rose’s subsequent suggestion that Kathleen smells like “thinking” and “tears” and “November” is not undercut. Instead, it is allowed to stand, to resonate. And because this comment that attests to the centrality of place in the construction of individual identity comes at the end of the last recorded conversation between Kathleen and Rose, it has a particular resonance. But because it comes at the end of a discussion that implicitly addresses exoticism and racial essentialism, MacDonald also asks that her readers consider how regionalism interacts with other ideologies. Put differently, the reason that Kathleen’s comment about tradewinds is met with laughter, while Rose’s final comments about Kathleen’s scent are not, is that Rose’s comments attest to the presence of place in the person while also allowing for the extent to which myths of place also get under the skin.

In the act of rape, James refers to “home” in order to disavow difference and to indicate his preference for the purity and putative safety of the self-same. By bringing Kathleen home against her will, he indicates that he believes it to be his right as *paterfamilias* to inflict that view on his family. But if “home” for James suggests the desire for a fixed hierarchical vision of the world, it is for MacDonald something tremendously fluid. It is a quickening of the heart in response to the physical beauty of the “cursed godforsaken rock that they love more than the breath in their own lungs”; it is the economic and social realities that have caused so many of them to leave that rock; and it is all the stories that that rock has generated. And it is something and somewhere else, besides. For the Piper children, all of whom are born in Cape Breton, home is also the “Old Country.” For Materia, the Old Country is Lebanon. But for her children, it is a series of highly imaginative, romantic stories about Lebanon, and it is the warmth of their mother’s flesh and the smells of her baking that they associate with those stories. This is clear when, twenty years after Materia’s death, Mercedes, who is one of Kathleen’s younger sisters, smells steaming rice and imagines that she is “in the kitchen with Mumma and the Old Country” (431). It is an occasion like this that Mercedes remembers:

“Tell us about the Old Country again, Mumma.”

On the kitchen cot, before Kathleen gets home, they sink into Materia’s soft body, which provides a pillow for each head, her plush smell of fresh wet bread and oil, a pot of *bezzella* and *roz* with lamb on the stove, the lid buzzing sleepily. Outside, the winter drizzle blurs the windows.

“Lebanon is the most beautiful place in the world. There are gentle breezes, it’s always warm there. The buildings are white, they sparkle in the sun like diamonds and the sea is crystal-blue. Lebanon is the Pearl of the Orient. And Beirut, where I was born, is the Paris of the Middle East.” (87)

A few lines later the mention of jewels is echoed, but this time in reference to Cape Breton: “Cape Breton is not a pearl—scratch anywhere and you’ll find coal—but someday, millions of years from now, it may be a diamond. Cape Breton Diamond” (88). The narrator’s “Cape Breton Diamond” observation is immediately followed by more stories about Lebanon. Indeed, it interrupts those stories and locates Cape Breton at their centre.

In doing so, it suggests that home—and more particularly, its imaginative reconstruction as narrative—is as much the site of dissonance and dif-

ference as it is a confirmation or consolidation of the self-same, the familial and the familiar.

In the end, MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees* does belong within a tradition of Atlantic Canadian fiction that employs "the 'home place' as a symbol of cultural continuity and psychological identification." But what distinguishes the novel is the extent to which it differentiates between the quotidian experience of home and its strategic reconstruction in narrative. Where others have presented regional identity as a natural and foundational constituent of personal identity, MacDonald urges us to ask why it has been accepted as such. And, while she insists on the uniqueness of a particular physical and social geography, she also insists that the local and the universal be understood as always interimplicated. Ultimately, the crucial question posed by the novel's study of the production and consumption of regional identities is not all that different from the question posed by its rogue sea captain who sails into Sydney Harbour with a boatload of passengers who are scanning the skyline for the Statue of Liberty: "What's the difference, it's an island ain't it?"