

THE URGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE IN THE ARTS

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In March 1955 the Prince Edward Island Art Society hosted an exhibition that featured the work of some of the most prominent innovators in the art world of the day, among them Sir Jacob Epstein, Barbara Hepworth, Vanessa Bell, Wyndham Lewis, William Holgate, and John Nash. This was not an altogether extraordinary event. As my colleague, Laurie Brinklow, has already pointed out in this session, Atlantic Canada's small islands were once connected to the world -- through shipbuilding, sea transport and trade, and the movement of people. Our culture was built on this traffic. However, when I first read about the art show I've described, I was surprised -- perhaps even a little bit awed -- that such major international figures had shown their work in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. This set me to wondering why I was so surprised.

In the last, relatively few, years Canada has elaborated cultural policy and set up structures for cultural funding to encourage and build up the profile of Canadian arts and culture within Canada. The agenda has often been explicitly nationalist and protectionist. While Canadian culture and the arts have no doubt benefited from these policies in many ways, we face a fundamental problem here on the East Coast: the nationalist model is inevitably centred on *Central Canada*, and they are not always interested in Atlantic Canadian studies. I believe we need to shift our gaze and to reengage with the international scene we were once more interconnected with. The question is: How should we proceed? The answer may begin, metaphorically, with the Atlantic Ocean, and end with the application of our native ingenuity as island peoples.

The Maritimes. Atlantic Canada. The very names for our region call up images of the ocean we live beside. We identify our region -- and *ourselves* as *Maritimers* or *Atlantic Canadians* -- by the ocean to which we are proximal.

The ocean figures in our artistic and cultural works in obvious ways, each time we represent a beach or shoreline cliff, a fishing boat, a fisher, a schooner, a sailor, an offshore oil rig, an ocean vista, or an island.

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But the ocean is most known to us and is most carefully mapped where it meets the land; we rarely consider the vast expanse of water that stretches to other shores. The Atlantic Ocean's vastness figures too often as a vastness that is also an emptiness, rather than a vast plane of possibility, an endless route of connection to the cultures -- both ancestral and unfamiliar -- that lie at the far side of the water.

I would like to argue today that the untapped possibility represented in connections across the Atlantic Ocean could open Atlantic Canadian cultural space invaluablely. As Atlantic Canadians, we could create opportunity by shifting our gaze from the Central Canadian mainland in the West to the Atlantic Ocean that lies to our East, North, and South.

Some facts about the Atlantic Ocean: It is the second largest of the world's oceans, more than 75 million square kilometres. Its coastline measures more than 100,000 km. The vast territory is divided at the equator into the North Atlantic and the South Atlantic (and it is primarily the North Atlantic with which I will concern myself). The North Atlantic's natural resources include oil and gas fields, fish, marine mammals, and other. Its sea routes are among the most heavily trafficked in the world. (CIA World Fact Book)

In the North Atlantic, sea routes too infrequently open routes for cultural exchange.

The ocean is not necessarily an emptiness, dividing us from the Atlantic rim. Rather, in our cultural thinking, it can be reenvisioned and reclaimed as a space to engage in communication across seas, languages, and cultures to investigate the commonalities among island and coastal peoples.

The sense of opportunity for sharing experience around the edge of the Atlantic is particularly strong among islands. Among islands, the sense of being cut off or peripheral has had to be replaced with a redoubled sense of water as a point of connection with others: a route to the known and the unknown. At the Institute of Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, we have spent the last ten years exploring international, comparative island studies, and have learned much from island-to-island exchanges.

Writers and scholars in the Pacific, particularly among the Pacific Islands, have begun to reclaim traditional, indigenous understandings of their ocean as a fluid medium for communication: a means of connecting people in a "sea of islands" where the movement of ideas, people, and cultural projects was traditionally based on travel and, oftentimes, migration. According to Tongan writer Epeli Hau'ofa, the arrival of European migrants, when seen from a Pacific perspective, represents only one more migration in a long history of migrations. The Europeans who arrived typically saw the islands as isolated and separated by water. The colonial narrative hemmed in the restlessness and complex inspiration and exchange of cultural ideas. Pacific Island writers and artists are now challenged to find new points of connectivity, to reclaim their traditional narratives of travel and fluid trans-Pacific movement. As Booker Prize-winning author Keri Hulme challenged Pacific readers: "The sea connects us. So swim."

It was only in the last century that we as Atlantic Ocean as a cultural space, of the sea as a space for conveying people and ideas. Nineteenth century art and literature from this region are, not surprisingly, much preoccupied with ships and sails. Letters, people, and goods all moved freely across water. And connections across the ocean were often more immediate and more urgent, since migrations across the ocean were so much more recent -- and ties to homelands, for settlers and their descendants -- were more palpable.

In contemporary Atlantic Canada, however, we think less about the islands and shores encircling the rim of the Atlantic. Ideas and people travel from island to island with less restlessness. Still, cultural exchanges among the small islands of the Atlantic could allow us to engage in discussions of how our cultural narratives have been and can be shaped based on patterns of past and present migration from island to island, common themes of exploration and colonization. The Atlantic can be rediscovered as a route of conveyance among the islands at its margins, widely separated by space. As technology collapses distance, such considerations become all the more possible -- and all the more crucial.

It is time to reclaim our Atlantic narratives of cultural exchange across the Atlantic Ocean, which can be reconfigured in our cultural landscape as connective rather than divisive.

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At this point, we might well ask: Why? And to what advantage?

I'd like quickly to suggest four ideas that demonstrate the importance of opening up the Atlantic as a cultural space:

- first, I'll briefly outline the problem of relating to mainland and central Canada, and the limitations of the Westward gaze;
- second, I will suggest the necessity for radical creativity in islands and so-called "peripheral regions" such as Atlantic Canada;
- third, I will suggest some natural points of connection and compatibility among islands and peripheral areas around the Atlantic Rim, all of which offer opportunities for exchange
- fourth, I will suggest some of the benefits that could come from such exchange, particularly as they relate to expanded markets, expanded opportunity, and cultural diversity and multicultural understanding.

Within the Canadian federation -- and, in the larger context, in the North American continent -- it is difficult to deny that the region is peripheral, on the geographical margins of Canadian society. The map shows Atlantic Canada as an appendage, an anomalous zone of coastlines and islands on the verge of a vast continental mass. All too often, this geographical fact gets translated into the cultural idea that we are peripheral or marginal to the major movements in art and culture.

Atlantic Canadians too frequently accept ideas of their own peripherality. The political and economic structure of Canada requires us to look inward to central Canada for supports and sustenance. Reorienting ourselves culturally to the Atlantic as a cultural space -- replacing our frame of reference by focussing on small islands or coastal communities and other points of comparison -- could be a means of shifting perception and self-perception.

In a context of small North Atlantic Islands, Atlantic Canada is not, in any sense, peripheral. Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Cape Breton, les Iles de la Madeleine, and (to stretch the definition of "island" very slightly) the Acadian Peninsula: all are models that can be compared on an equal basis with islands such as Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, the Isle of Man. As

Laurie will describe later during this session, comparisons among the small islands of the North Atlantic in any number of fields have been extremely fruitful.

In a world we are told is globalizing rapidly, it is altogether critical that we look beyond the borders of Canada and North America to find new venues and markets for our artistic production.

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Second, a theme I would like to call "radical creativity."

Dr. Godfrey Baldacchino, in a 2001 talk at UPEI, suggested that a better definition for "island" -- rather than the problematic "body of water surrounded by water" -- is that an island is a region circumscribed by the sea so that it has no back-country, or hinterland, from which to draw additional resources. The resources available on small islands are, almost by definition, finite. This we have seen too often in Atlantic Canada as moratoria on fish harvesting threaten the fishery, soil erosion threatens farming, forest depletion threatens forestry, globalization threatens traditional industries. Dr. Baldacchino sees the finite nature of resources on islands not as a vulnerability, but rather as an opportunity. Islands, by necessity, become adaptive. In order to survive and thrive, they must use what I call radical creativity on a societal basis.

It is just such radical creativity that is allowing provinces on the Atlantic Rim, under pressure from finite resources, to move relatively quickly to embrace the knowledge economy (or its rhetoric, if not its practice). The economic shifts that will take place in this generation are already remarkable and will be more remarkable still. The cultural sector and the arts have an absolutely vital role to play in the shift. It is in the arts that we see amply demonstrated the radical creativity which has always and will always create the circumstances for our survival at the edge of the continent. And I would suggest that embracing a comparative view of islands and coastal areas -- shifting our gaze across the Atlantic -- would inevitably help inspire and develop the radical creativity we need.

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Third, some suggestions for natural connections on the Atlantic rim.

In the North Atlantic, we have connections island to island and coastline to coastline, only a few of which we are currently exploiting.

Some of the most obvious connections with implications for culture and the arts include

- • travel routes and points of contact first forged by the Vikings -- with archaeological sites in Newfoundland and well-established evidence of possible visits to New Brunswick and even Prince Edward Island
- historic, ancestral, cultural connections with people around the North Atlantic rim, where many of Atlantic Canada's ancestors resided (in some cases, their migration was island to

island -- as was the case for settlers who came from the Isle of Skye to Prince Edward Island in 1703 -- the 200th anniversary to be celebrated next year)

- shared colonial and postcolonial experience with other New World peoples, particularly those in the Caribbean islands (I have been discussing the North Atlantic islands first and foremost, but there are yet to be explored links to make with Caribbean islands, not to mention more far-flung islands, such as Tasmania.)
- shared contemporary use of (and concern about) tourism and its relationship to culture and identity (raising key questions about what aspects of art and culture we create for ourselves, what we create for others, and what is "authentic.")

Finally, I'd like to suggest some of the benefits that could result from greater cultural exchange around the Atlantic.

The first opportunity that we might consider is opening new markets and venues. More importantly, understanding the Atlantic as a cultural space would allow us better to control our own narratives -- to know our history, to control our destiny. We could reduce dependence on central Canadian institutions, offering our own radically creative solutions to our issues, problems, and challenges.

I would suggest there are also implications for our expression of multiculturalism in the region, providing a richer sense of the cultures from which the majority of Atlantic Canadians have descended, but also creating new opportunities for exchange among indigenous cultures around the Atlantic rim, and their histories and experiences, exploring new ways of understanding the history and experience of black Atlantic Canadians, by creating connections with Caribbean islands -- and by better understanding the general experience and importance of migration as an essential part of the narrative of coastal people everywhere.

How might we reap these benefits? Through networks, festivals, exchanges, events. Through Websites, radio broadcasts, television, and film. Through each artist and cultural producer in Atlantic Canada making a concerted effort to pull his or her eyes away from central Canada, to look outward to where the Atlantic itself could become our most valuable and vital cultural space, a fluid medium for exchange.

This talk has been short and is necessarily broad and suggestive. In closing, I would say that in the 21st century, we have an unequalled opportunity to transform our idea of what constitutes "coast to coast," to cross the Atlantic with our ideas, beyond national, regional, and linguistic boundaries.

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