

“SEA ROADS”: THE CIRCULATORY POETICS OF *THE SONG FISHERMEN’S SONG*
SHEET

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: THE SONG FISHERMEN	8
CHAPTER 3: GEOGRAPHICAL “SEA ROADS”	15
CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL “SEA ROADS”	26
CHAPTER 5: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL “SEA ROADS” MANIFEST IN POETRY	39
CONCLUSION	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY	46

ABSTRACT

This thesis responds to Peter Thompson's call for fieldwork that considers the circulation of conceptions and artistic representations of the Folk at home and elsewhere in early twentieth-century Atlantic Canadian literature. It turns to a relatively overlooked group of cultural producers: The Song Fishermen coterie and their 1928 to 1930 poetry periodical, *The Song Fishermen's Song Sheet*. It proposes that *The Song Fishermen's Song Sheet's* poetic project is reliant on, engages in, and presents a circulatory poetics, a term which refers to the interaction of three distinct but interrelated forms of circulation: geographical circulation of the magazine; the social circulation of ideas among members; and circulation as it appears in the poetry, as in image, theme and poetic form. This thesis considers the combination of antimodernism, modernism, earnestness, irreverence, regionalism, and dislocation that underlies the Song Fishermen's collaborative creative impetus.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

<i>SFSS</i>	<i>The Song Fishermen's Song Sheet</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Myth & Milieu</i>
<i>SIMLH</i>	<i>Studies in Maritime Literary History</i>

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I would like to begin by acknowledging that this thesis was written in and concerns Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. This territory is covered by the “Treaties of Peace and Friendship” which Mi'kmaq Wəlastəkwiyyik (Maliseet), and Passamaquoddy Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1726. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations. Dalhousie University sits on the Traditional Territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people.

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INTRODUCTION

If there is one thing known in common it must be the sound of water, the beaches, from Bay Chaleur down the coasts of New Brunswick and the Island, round the headlands of Cape North, down the eastern and southern shores and round the coast of Fundy to Passamaquoddy and the edge of Maine. The grumbling sigh of calm bays at night, the rush of millbrooks and the soft slap on the shores of lakes. The sound of rivers that run to the beat of their names, Matapedia and Kennebecasis, Medway and Margaree.

(Bruce qtd in Davies *SIMLH* 10)

The above passage is taken from Charles Bruce's "Atlantic Cadence." Gwendolyn Davies, author of *Studies in Maritime Literary History*, sees in Bruce's "Atlantic Cadence," "the mobility that has always informed the lifestyle of Canada's Maritime Provinces" ("Steering" 9). The mobility she notes refers simultaneously to the movement of the neighbouring Atlantic Ocean, to the sounds of the water, and to the idea of a particularly Maritime ongoing-ness: "a sense of continuity with family, place, or tradition that survives both outmigration and the cosmopolitan flair of...returnees" (Bruce 52). In peninsular Nova Scotia, "nowhere in the province is farther than fifty-five kilometres from saltwater" (Campbell 151). Wanda Campbell sees the sea as a "particularly kinetic presence" in Maritime poetry, wherein poets are often attentive to its literal and symbolic movements, as well as to its effect on the "ever-shifting perimeters of their provinces by the sea" (154). It is tempting to dismiss Maritime poetry from the early twentieth-century as stagnant, stale, and regional. With verse saturated in romantic imagery of waves and schooners, and with the looming modernists in our peripheral vision, we

might perceive the sea in Maritime poetry as only a tired example of the kind of effusive and archaic verse that F.R. Scott, in his famous satirical poem “The Canadian Authors Meet,” named the “selfsame welkin ringing” (55). Or, we may feel ourselves growing tired of the glorification of essentialist images of settler, colonial Canada—an interpretation that must be afforded attention in any work that claims to operate within or with regard to decolonial and transnational contexts.

Campbell offers us a way to approach the imagery of early twentieth-century Maritime poetry, which is often interpreted as stagnant and tiredly regional, with movement and ongoingness in mind instead; she argues that “sea poetry is the quintessential marginal poetry” (152) and points to David M. Jordan’s book *New World Regionalism: Literature in the Americas* to assert that marginality is crucial to any nuanced understanding of regionalism in literature. I use the term “marginality” here not to refer to social, gendered, or racial marginalities in literature, but to marginality as a poetic liminality that is linked to depictions and critical conceptions of the region in literature. Jordan contends that a region is a fluid and changeable thing, defined by its margin and “distinguished by its balance between hesitation about the future and its memory of the past and [that] this fragile equilibrium is at the root of its distinct style” (14). In other words, early twentieth-century Maritime poetry is not necessarily stagnated in its historical and geographical context by its regional depictions of the sea, but dialectical and circulating, like the mobile sea, in and among them. “Atlantic Cadence” engages in the ongoing mobility of marginal regionalism, of the changeable identity of a people and a poetry confronted with the margins of a geographical coastline, a shifting culture, and a dynamic literary context.

The interwar years of 1918-1939 in Canada’s Maritime provinces were characterized by movement. The region was subject to economic instability and mass emigration. Ian McKay

writes that the 1920's brought "an immense change in economic and political life" to Nova Scotia (27). Long-standing local, resource-based economies were unsettled; McKay recalls that the "Nova Scotia coalfields were thrown into chaos by layoffs and labour wars [and] across the province, secondary manufacturing and resource industries declined" (27). Davies writes that resource workers were "increasingly marginalized by export-oriented, capital-intensive investment, often from outside the region" (*MM* i). In the face of this unrest and globalization, many Maritimers left home in search of economic opportunity.

By the close of the 1920's, tens of thousands of young Nova Scotians had left the region to seek employment in the United States and Central Canada (McKay 27, Davies *MM* i). Nova Scotian communities were subject to "geographical mobility," "occupational pluralism," and "widespread outmigration to cope with diminishing opportunities" (McKay 28). The rural Nova Scotian villages left behind in the wake of this unrest "resemble[d] transit stations" (28). The socioeconomic unrest of the interwar period had a profound effect on its literature. Davies writes that a "'sense of place" permeated the texts of the inter-war period" (*MM* ii-iii). She suggests that the common themes of interwar poetry—those of fishing villages, ordered and idyllic coastal communities, and resource-based economic practices—have their roots in a cultural nostalgia that longed for the perceived economic stability of pre-industrial, pre-war Nova Scotia (*MM* ii-iii). McKay aptly notes: "In some respects, it is hardly surprising that middle-class Nova Scotians turned so emphatically to the Folk in the interwar period. Progressivism's belief in a regulated, scientific, and efficient capitalism seemed undermined by the troubles of the region's industries" (264-5). As the physical and cultural makeup of Canada's Maritime provinces shifted to accommodate an ever-more globalized economy, Atlantic Canadian literature turned to traditional depictions of the Folk in search of familiarity.

In his influential book *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia*, Ian McKay thoroughly dissects the concept of “the Folk” and offers us useful terminology for encountering Maritime depictions of “The Simple Life” in poetry. He defines “the Folk of the countryside as the romantic antithesis to everything [Maritimers] disliked about modern urban and industrial life” (4) and contends that “the Folk offered a way of conceptualizing identity and dealing with the painful uncertainties of modernity” (219). Distaste for industrial life manifested in literature as the image of a Folk people who “were rooted to the soil and to the rockbound coast” (26)—to a Maritime identity firmly anchored in traditional resource-based economies.

McKay stresses the elitism of cultural producers and artists’ approach to the Folk in their work during the interwar period as “an abstract historic mission” (15) and underscores the ways in which such a reductive and essentialized depiction of an ongoing, living community of peoples transformed them “into mere vessels of national essence, bearers of cultural treasures whose true value they themselves could never understand” (15). He describes the period from 1900 to 1950 as the “golden age of regionalist redescription” (32) and suggests that the cultural reactionary inward-turn to regionalism and neo-nationalism resulted in a “commercial antimodernism”: a form of economic nostalgia that “simultaneously celebrat[ed] the pre-modern, unspoiled “essence” of the province and [sought] ways in which that essence could be turned into marketable commodities” (35). McKay suggests that “*Innocence*” was a local Maritime variant of antimodernism: “a mythomoteur fuelled by *essentialism*” that sought to promote “the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled, the picturesque, the quaint, the unchanging” (30).

Commercial antimodernism permeated the tourism industry of early twentieth-century Atlantic Canada, promoting itself paradoxically, as Herb Wyile writes in his book *Anne of Tim*

Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature, “as an enclave of unspoiled nature and authentic culture as part of a thoroughly *modern* campaign to diversify economically and generate revenue” (22). Demand came from international literary markets for the Nova Scotia “Folk”; local, in-ward turning rural tropes circulated abroad in a paradoxically outward-reaching circuit of literary communication. As McKay puts it: “A “Folk Nova Scotia” arose in the 1920s in a rush of purple prose, syrupy sentimentality, and trite cliché, much of it coordinated by the new government tourism agencies” (230). Maritime writers served as mediators of cultural identity between local contexts and international markets, trading in perceptions of Nova Scotian identity—and consequently, engaging in the cultural creation of a Maritime identity, an act of cultural construction neatly in line with Benedict Anderson’s conception of “national imagination” in his influential 1983 text, “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.” Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community,” asserting that the threads of national commonality that stitch citizens together are primarily imagined and largely culturally constructed: “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15). Though the time period I am concerned with—the early twentieth-century and the interwar period in particular—predates Anderson by about sixty years, I will adopt his critical approach to regionalism and nationhood throughout this thesis for the importance it attributes to fluid boundaries of national definition, community makeup, and art. As Anderson writes, “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (15).

In the article “‘If You’re in Quest of the Folk, You’ve Come to the Wrong Place’: Recent Trends in Atlantic Canadian Literary Criticism,” Peter Thompson raises a contemporary concern with recent scholarship that considers McKay and Wyile’s “folk paradigm”; he writes that there

is “little fieldwork being done on perceptions of the region from outside of it or on how the images that constitute these stereotypes circulate at home or elsewhere” (246). In this thesis, I seek to respond to Thompson’s call for fieldwork that considers the circulation of the Folk at home and elsewhere in early twentieth-century Atlantic Canadian literature. I turn to a relatively overlooked group of cultural producers: a group of 1920s poets who styled themselves “The Song Fishermen,” who produced a periodical of Maritime poetry called *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet* and who circulated their periodical among contributors and subscribers located both in Atlantic Canada and abroad. McKay writes, of the interwar period, that “[n]ewspapers use[d] the most advanced means of modern technology and culture to create a fictional community” (15). The Song Fishermen do exactly this; *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet* engages directly in the cultural production and circulation of the “imagined community” of 1920s Nova Scotia.

I intend to centre this thesis around the importance of circulation to The Song Fishermen’s poetic project, locating their work within its historical, geographical, and literary contexts to offer a case study in literary fieldwork of Nova Scotian poetry that paradoxically and reliably troubles, unsettles, and creates its Nova Scotian identity and context. I argue that *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet* is reliant on, engages in, and presents a circulatory poetics. My circulatory poetics is comprised of the interaction of three distinct but interrelated forms of circulation: geographical, circulation of the magazine in Nova Scotia and abroad; the circulation of ideas and updates among Song Fishermen through submitted conversations, reviews, and anecdotes on the pages of the periodical; and circulation as it appears in the poetry, as in image, theme and poetic form. These modes of circulation work together to give an overall impression of the text as a moving system. While the forms of circulation that I have outlined are distinct, I argue that they bleed into and influence one another, and that it is their concurrent existence that

makes *The Song Fishermen's Song Sheet* such a resounding example of circulation in identity and form. The *Song Sheet's* three kinds of circulation exist in and present motion, shifting between, and never resting conclusively at, different poles of tension: earnestness and irreverence, regionalism and dislocation, specificity and generality, anti-modernism and modernism—all of which are entrenched in their geographical, literary, and socioeconomic contexts. I argue that this movement is inherent to a circulatory poetics, in which intent, voice, and location are mobile within their broader system.

CHAPTER 2: THE SONG FISHERMEN

The Song Fishermen—as a coterie—are by no means a household name; it is therefore worth our time to review the general history and particulars of the group before we consider any implications of their circulatory poetics. Gwendolyn Davies, in her essay “The Song Fishermen: A Regional Poetry Celebration,” included in *Studies in Maritime Literary History*, provides the most comprehensive picture of The Song Fishermen collective to date. She writes that the group, whose many members include Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, James D. Gillis, Andrew Merkel, Kenneth Leslie, Charles Bruce, and Robert Norwood, primarily:

organized lectures and recitals in Nova Scotia, produced illustrated poetry broadsheets, kept in touch with Maritime writers living outside the region, fostered emerging talent (like that of Charles Bruce), published a memorial to Bliss Carman upon his death, and between 1928 and 1930 channelled their energies into the creation of a poetry publication entitled *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheets* (Davies *SIMLH* 163)

Loosely based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, McKay describes The Song Fishermen collective as “more a light-hearted, whimsical South End literary salon than a disciplined movement” (227). Davies writes that the group came together less so “out of a sense of literary purpose” and more from “a recognition of mutual literary kinship” (164). They partook in recitals, picnics, and poetry readings around Nova Scotia, loosely forming a collective in the mid-1920s that by October 1928—upon the publication of their first *Song Sheet*—“had evolved a dramatic image of themselves as “Fishers of Song,” a loosely-connected fellowship of literary fisherfolk who culled from the wind, the sea, and the traditional life style of Nova Scotia the poetic catches that defined their province” (164). At a literary retreat that Alexander Kizuk describes as an “extravaganza of song at the summer home of Robert Norwood in Hubbards, Nova Scotia,”

Andrew Merkel proposed the idea of “issuing printed ‘song sheets’ of Maritime verse under the imprint of an imaginary publishing house called the Abernaki (sic) Press” (Kizuk 179).

The sheets themselves are casual, typed broadsheets that can only be accessed in full by today’s scholars at the University of Dalhousie’s Killam Library, stored in the archives of the University’s Special Collections. Davies describes the periodical as “a series of nondescript but serviceable sheets run off on a mimeograph machine in the Halifax office of the Canadian Press” that were edited by Andrew Merkel and cost subscribers “a dollar from time to time to cover postage” (Davies *SIMLH* 166). The Fishermen published 16 issues of the *Song Sheet* over the course of the periodical’s 1928 to 1930 run. The publication grew from one sheet “of one poem and eleven recipients in the first issue, to twelve sheets and over 60 recipients by the end of its first year” (166). Contributors and subscribers were often one and the same; the mailing list consisted of poets, readers, friends, and critics. By the summer of 1929, the sheets had grown in popularity and, as Davies writes, surpassed “their original intention of generating fun and communication and had, instead, reached a calibre of performance” that merited a book length anthology (167). The mimeographed pages of the periodical are simple and sparse. Each sheet is prefaced by a small header that includes the date of publication, the page number, and the announcement: “Issued Ever So Often.” The periodical consists—almost entirely—of contributions. Poems, friendly announcements, reviews, and requests sit intermingled on its pages; no subtitles separate sections—in fact, there are no sections—and often, the titles and authors of individual works are absent. *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*, casual in form and intimate in audience, resemble and prefigure the works of the twentieth-century Canadian little magazine movement.

Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, in their influential text *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*, attribute some of the key developments of modern poetry in twentieth-century Canada to the circulation of little magazines. Casual and intimate, Dudek and Gnarowski identify the little magazine as a “makeshift stage—usually a very unpretentious, modestly-printed (or even mimeographed) periodical,” that has “little relation to the general reading public or the large-circulation media of communication” (3). They claim that modern little magazines are host to “[a]ll the important events in poetry and most of the initiating manifestoes and examples of change” (3) in early twentieth-century Canada’s literary landscape. Dudek suggests that the rise of the little magazine was reactionary. In response to a late nineteenth-century increase in commercialized magazines mass-produced for middle class consumption, artistic collectives that Dudek terms “intellectual minority groups” retreated into intimate circles of letter writing as catalytic sites for poetic experimentation (206). With discernable pride, Gnarowski identifies from these groups a “refreshing determination” in their little magazines to abstain from “regionalism...editorial clamour and pretension” (214). In short, little magazines in Canada have long been considered catalysts for modern poetry as texts that operate at the fringes of commercial success and with little regard for the predominant literary modes of their contemporary cultures.

This interpretive lens leaves little room for the study of little magazines that engage less obviously and less enthusiastically in the modernist project. Often reckoning with a perceived Canadian cultural lag behind the United States or Great Britain, scholars of Canadian literature have long fought for the literary recognition and canonization of early twentieth-century Canadian poets. The battle rages even fiercer for poets who lived and worked at a distance from

cosmopolitan literary hubs—such as Toronto, Montreal, or New York City. Canada’s Maritime provinces make up one such oft-overlooked poetic region.

In his 2012 thesis, *Old Provinces, New Modernisms: Toward an Editorial Poetics of the Maritime Little Magazine*, James William Johnson argues that scholarship has consistently overlooked twentieth-century Maritime little magazines, an omission that he finds glaring fault with: “As a territory located on Canada’s geopolitical periphery—a territory lacking key points of access to large presses, arts capital, and cultural media—the Maritimes has been disproportionately served by alternative media like small magazines” (2). He describes the need for alternative publications in the Maritimes in the twentieth-century as “more acute, owing to the lack of a commercial press industry” (13). He contends that Maritime little magazines are thereby significant and worthy of study in their contributions to “both regional and national literary culture” (2). Embroiled in their socioeconomic context, Maritime periodicals or little magazines, like *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*, uniquely represent and capture the disenfranchisement that writers of the region felt in response to the shifting, industrial, increasingly-globalized and commercial Nova Scotian economic and literary landscape of the 1920s.

The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet does not figure prominently in most conversations that concern Canada’s little magazines. More antimodern and traditional in theme and form than the prototypically radical little magazines of mid-twentieth century Canada, scholars have consistently overlooked the *Song Sheet*. Contemporaneous to, but less obviously modern than other notable Canadian periodicals like *The Canadian Forum* (Toronto 1920) and *The McGill Fortnightly Review* (Montreal 1925) (Davies *SIMLH* 163), the *Song Sheet* has received nowhere near the attention afforded its contemporaries. Davies attributes this to “the central Canadian bias

of much that has been said about Canadian writing in the 1920s” (163). She suggests that romantic and regional writers—especially those operating at Canada’s distant geographical peripheries—are consistently overlooked because of our scholarly tendency to use modernism “as a yardstick of literary excellence” (163). As Johnson points out: “there exists no sustained critical treatment of any of the little magazines published in the Maritime provinces during the twentieth century” (7); he argues that this neglect fails “to acknowledge the considerable influence that magazines in the Maritimes have had, and continue to have, on emergent cultural formations both in the region and across Canada” (7).

Scholarly works that do indeed consider *The Song Fishermen* fall into one of two categories: either they interpret the *Song Sheet* as romantic and antimodern overall, or they refute such sweeping generalizations in favour of a more heterogeneous understanding of the group, as one that is diverse in identity and literary mode. Davies locates *The Song Fishermen* as a group that collectively and actively engages in romance, nostalgia, and an earnest Nova Scotia “Folk.” She highlights a “conscious effort on the part of all the participating poets to sustain the marine metaphors and themes that would give focus to an otherwise disparate collection of poetry” (Davies *SIMLH* 166). She recognizes an overarching goal in theme among the poets, but notes some dissension in form among the ranks. James D. Gillis, for instance, disliked Leslie’s free-verse; when Gillis served as a judge during a *Song Fishermen* poetry picnic, Leslie received a cheeky “consolation prize of a rhyming dictionary,” and the winner—less-radical poet Stuart McCawley—was crowned with an exceedingly Nova Scotian “diadem of dulse” (171). Davies, however, writes that the group’s collective career was marked with a “unity and panache” (171) that wholeheartedly preferred the Nova Scotia “Folk” to the modern, industrial city and its “march of progress” (181). McKay, like Davies, acknowledges the romanticism of the *Song*

Fishermen, but stresses the link between their outward presentation and the “commercial antimodernism” of the Nova Scotian economic and literary climates of the time. He groups the Fishermen with a category of cultural producers whom he states “were far more immersed in an international urban world of culture and perception than they were in the lived experiences of the rural Nova Scotians whose essence they described so confidently” (McKay 217). He claims that Merkel “was a city man who imagined himself to be subjectively attuned to the Folk” (228) and that he “helped shape Innocence as a mythomoteur in the 1920s and 1930s” (227). Johnson, in his survey of twentieth-century Atlantic Canadian little magazines, quickly labels the Song Fishermen as “antimodernist” and too early to be considered a notable example of modern, Maritime little magazines.

Kizuk expands and adds to the claims of Davies and McKay. He agrees that the *Song Sheet* partakes in romantic imagery in an increasingly modern literary era, pointing out “the vibrant sublimations of their poetic language, in which Romantic desire has not been desiccated in the glare of A.J.M. Smith’s Eliotean Wasteland or F.R. Scott’s denigrating remark in the famous poem “The Canadian Authors Meet” regarding the “Virgins of sixty who still write of passion” (194). However, Kizuk turns to a sub-circle of the Song Fishermen in order to highlight their diversity; the sub-group is an urban, economically-diverse group of Haligonian poets who complicate Davies’s near-homogenous conception of the collective as romantic “Folk” producers. Kizuk highlights the work of Molly Beresford, an “unmarried woman, recent immigrant” (180) whose poetry often skews more towards modern modes and themes than antimodern ones. Bart Vautour, in his article “Modernism, Antimodernism, and the Song Fishermen,” negotiates a link between these two poles; his reading of the *Song Sheet* “takes divergent and alternative literary experiments—modernist experiments—as interactive with

cultural antimodernism in a dialectical process” that “recognizes a contradiction that is enabled by the diverse set of cultural and social conditions that occasioned multiple avenues for articulating Maritime subjectivity in the 1920s” (18). Importantly to my purposes in this dissertation, he stresses that we can read “the Song Fishermen, as a cultural formation that contributed much to the construction of the Maritime Folk, can be read as complicit in fostering their own counter-tradition” (23).

My contention of a circulatory poetics builds on of this existing critical literature. I contend that the nature of the Song Fishermen project is circulatory and collective, and as such, its poetics exist in tension, motion, and conversation. The *Song Sheet* undoubtedly offers both antimodern and modernist poetry—I ask: how does the conversation between these two poles (and all other disparate modes, forms, and opinions captured together on the collaborative pages of the sheets) function in geographical, conversational, and poetic circulation? I assert that the form of the periodical, as a circulating and collaborative effort, is essential to interpreting its poetic project. I also propose that this fluidity offers a scholarly escape from the perceived need to propose a definitive Maritime literary identity and intent in the poetry of 1920s Atlantic Canada. I locate my work within what Thompson describes as a recent shift in Atlantic Canadian literary criticism: a movement “away from understandings of region invested heavily in political economy and geographic determinism in favour of a reading of regional space as contested and dynamic” (242).

CHAPTER 3: GEOGRAPHICAL “SEA ROADS”

I pull the term “sea-roads” from a poem by Kenneth Leslie that appears in Issue Number Four of *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*. It reads as follows:

High roads stumble!
Wild roads roam!
Low roads rumble!
Straight roads moan!
All roads crumble!
But sea-roads foam! (*SFSS* 4.1)

Leslie makes use of mesodiplosis to centre and assert the importance of “roads” as the active subjects of his poem. He breaks repetition at his final line, distinguishing the extended “sea-roads” from the string of plain “roads” that precede them. By separating “sea-roads” from the rest, he differentiates Maritime roads—typified by the suggestion of a foamy sea—from those found elsewhere. These distinguished and isolated “sea-roads” are suggestive of an Atlantic Canada akin to the commercial, antimodern “isolated, sheltered fisherfolk” of McKay’s cultural producers (28). Leslie engages with the image of an isolated Nova Scotia, but writes with an exaggerated enthusiasm that edges the poem away from romantic earnestness and into campy irreverence. Partaking in this dualistic tone, his short poem embodies the tensions inherent to interpreting any Atlantic Canadian literature that considers its own fraught regional identity. Specific to a Maritime “sense of place,” but inherently mobile and transitive, “sea-roads” typify the overall tension and fluidity of the *Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet’s* circulatory poetics. The term’s ambivalent and ongoing motion is an apt metaphor for fluid, complex, and multiplicitous forms of circulation. I will return to this metaphor throughout my dissertation, tracing and

troubling the ambiguous “sea-roads” drawn between the collective’s disparately located members, their threads of conversation, and the content and foci of their verse.

To begin, I turn to the actual, physical “sea-roads” of *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*: the geographical spread and scope of the periodical’s mailed pamphlets that connected Song Fishermen members at home, abroad, or a-sea. As previously stated, the collective’s members were by no means geographically confined to Nova Scotia. Members lived and worked not only across Canada, but throughout the United States as well. Contributors mailed their submissions of verse and miscellany to editor Andrew Merkel in Halifax, who sent resulting compilations out to *Song Sheet* subscribers in a dynamic, fluid, and sometimes transnational network of communication. These contributors and subscribers were often one and the same; issues circulated shared content among a specific and select group of individuals who were, largely, invested in both reading and writing for the *Song Sheets*.

Andrew Merkel (1884-1954), a journalist and poet who lived in Halifax for most of his adult life, spearheaded the *Song Sheet* project from his home at 50 South Park Street in Halifax’s South End, serving as the periodical’s editor over the course of its two-year run (Davies *SIMLH* 166). Alexander Kizuk notes that *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet* was printed on pamphlets that Merkel “drew up in his basement and produced from 19 October 1928 to April 1930 on the mimeograph machine of his Canadian Press Halifax Office” (175). McKay identifies a discrepancy between Merkel’s occupational, literal identity, and the one he presented on the pages of the *Song Sheet* as editor:

As a South End Halifax journalist, an employee of the Canadian Press, and the organizer of an urban literary salon, he was a man of the twentieth century. But his subject-position

was that of someone from an earlier day, one of the simpler, plainer Folk from Down East (228)

Merkel leaned into the Nova Scotia “Folk.” In Issue 1 of the *Song Sheet*, he calls for submissions of poetry that he calls “Nova Scotia “Catches”” (*SFSS* 1.1). He sets, in this initial request, the geographical tone of the project: the *Song Sheet* seeks, specifically, Maritime material. Davies writes that the “rhetoric of “the catch”...recurred throughout the sheets as a jocular but functional unifying device” (*SIMLH* 166). Merkel cast an editorial net: “Contributions to this song sheet are earnestly requested. Please make them snappy and send them promptly to Andrew Merkel, c/o Canadian Press, 80 Granville Street, Halifax” (*SFSS* 1.1).

The geographical extent of this net was far-reaching. Merkel makes repeated calls for submissions regardless of any specific location his subscribers might reside in and without any requirement of a geographical claim to Nova Scotian identity. In the issues, he makes repeated calls for inclusive submissions such as: “We want to hear from everybody” (*SFSS* 2.1) and “ALL HANDS ON DECK” (11.8). The headnote “Come All Ye” first appears in Issue 6 and then recurs for every subsequent issue, a call-in that Davies suggests signifies “the oral and balladic root of much of the poetry” (166) and that McKay sees as “the poets’ determination to reflect the province’s folksongs...and perhaps to become honorary members of the Folk themselves” (228). The headnote, whether earnestly romantic and nostalgic, actively engaging in “*commercial* antimodernism” (McKay 35) and tropes of the “Folk,” or, most likely, a tense and fluid mixture of the two, is a call for the circulation of ideas and content from afar that self-consciously engages with the concept of a Nova Scotian “sense of place.” “Come All Ye” to Nova Scotia—in body, in mind, in form, or in trope.

At least in interest or poetic subject, come they did. Included in the first issue of the *Song Sheet* is a list of the first batch of the periodical's geographically diverse recipients, each individually identified by their names and the locations of their respective mailboxes:

Kenneth Leslie, New York City.

Robert Norwood, New York City.

Seumas O'Brien, New York City.

Bliss Carman, New Canaan, Connecticut.

Charles G.D. Roberts, Toronto.

Miss E.S. Nutt, Halifax, N.S.

D.K. Hazen, Saint John, N.B.

Robert Leslie, Woodville, N.S.

Mrs. Robie Tufts, Wolfville, N.S.

Donald MacKay, Halifax, N.S.

E. J. Vickery, Halifax, N.S. (*SFSS* 1.1)

By specifying the recipient locations—and noting American locations first and foremost—Merkel not only highlights the importance of place to the Song Fishermen's overall poetic project, but leans on the flashier, transnational literary heft of expatriate Atlantic Canadian poets: Leslie, Norwood, Carman, and Roberts. Further, in this first, pilot issue, Merkel states outright that Bliss Carman “is extremely interested in the project and has undertaken to assist” and that the group will adopt Carman's suggestion of a name for their publishing house: “The Abanaki Press” (*SFSS* 1.1).

Allusions to Carman's involvement and support appear frequently in subsequent issues; a comment from A.M. Pound in Issue 9 reads, “Bliss Carman was in my office today, and

expressed his keen delight with the work you are doing” (*SFSS* 9.1). In Issue 10, Merkel includes a rambling update from Carman with his updated address: “2158 Vista del Mar Avenue, Hollywood, only a few miles from neighboring Pasadena and Los Angeles” (*SFSS* 10.5). Merkel presents and reinforces both the *Song Sheet*’s proximity to Bliss and Bliss’s proximity to transnational poetic stardom; “sea-roads” stretch from Halifax to Hollywood. Charles G.D. Roberts is also dutifully listed as a recipient of every issue, and is often the first poet identified by scholars as a notable member of the Song Fishermen collective (Davies 163, Kizuk 177-8) despite his only submitting one printed poem over the course of the periodical’s two-year run (*SFSS* 7.2).

Throughout the sixteen issues, the *Song Sheet*’s request for “Nova Scotia “Catches”” is loosely interpreted by poetic contributors on the whole, but expatriate Maritimers like Carman and Roberts author some of the work that most egregiously deviates from the intended geographical, regional theme. Roberts’s poem “Pan and the Rose” is classical and pastoral; his “shadowy stream” and “white nymphs in the copses” offer no earnest nor ironic meditations on seaside life (*SFSS* 7.2). In “Wind of the Desert,” Carman adapts the call for “Nova Scotia “Catches”” to his current geographical moment. Written “On the Mojave,” he parallels the sea and the desert, merging a remembered Nova Scotian landscape into his immediate surroundings: “The desert wind in the yuccas / With the sea’s ceaseless rote / All day on the lone Mojave / Sounds its eternal note” (11.10). Carman offers a “Nova Scotia Catch,” but extends and adapts the theme beyond its own geographical boundaries; the Song Fishermen’s poetic project is directly impacted and shaped by the circulatory nature of its expatriate poets and their transnational, extra-regional material.

The “Come All Ye” headnote implies that the Song Fishermen are an easy-going, inclusive, and egalitarian literary community—one that is rooted in traditional Nova Scotian language and form. This notion is complicated by the clear favouring and figuring of the flashy expatriate poets. Kizuk, identifying this discrepancy, separates the Fishermen into two distinct circles: “the Song Fisher *Folk* (Haligonians living in Halifax and enthusiastically throwing themselves into the project...) and the Song Fisher *Poets* (legitimizing signatories and titular laurel-bearers)” (178), many of whom contributed to the group from afar. This is hardly surprising. As Nick Mount argues in *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York*, many renowned Canadian poets of the early twentieth century lived abroad, partaking in literary Canadiana while living afield in New York City. Mount describes large American cities at the time as “the centres of a continental literary culture” (13) from which writers partook in “North American cultures of letters, cultures based in the literary centres of the United States but with a transnational and in some cases transatlantic membership and audience” (14). Mount remarks that the “antimodern rebellion that fed the desire for virile, outdoor literature was an urban phenomenon, born of anxieties only an urbanite could feel and offering an escape no ruralist needed” (39). Canada fascinated as a topic, but did not suffice as the literal, geographical site of serious work. So too did peripheral, peninsular Nova Scotia for many members of the Song Fishermen. Kizuk’s group of “legitimizing signatories and titular laurel bearers” who often contributed to the magazine from afar, consisted of Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, Robert Norwood, Kenneth Leslie, and Charles Bruce (177-8). The poets that Kizuk calls the “*real* Song Fishermen, the “Fisher Song Folk” as Stuart McCawley referred to them” were Andrew Merkel, Charles Bruce, Robert Leslie, Molly Beresford, Ethel H. Butler, Joe Wallace, and Stuart McCawley” (178), all poets who lived and worked within Nova Scotia. Kizuk affords this group

greater claim to an essential Nova Scotia “Folk” identity. Vautour takes issue with this assertion, arguing that “[b]y blurring the distinction between the poets and their subjects, [Kizuk] minimalizes the cultural power that some of the poets living in Nova Scotia had in shaping non-nostalgic, alternative local poetic subjects” (21). By locating the two groups of poets firmly within their respective geographical contexts, Kizuk disallows consideration of the circulation of ideas—both local and regionally divergent—into and out of the places and corresponding literary modes that they occupied.

The Haligonian sect’s claim to an overarching Nova Scotia “Folk” identity is patchy and contested. The *Song Sheet* was produced in urban Halifax and editor Andrew Merkel helmed the group’s social endeavours from his home in the city’s affluent and comfortable South End neighbourhood. From there, as Vautour writes, “they could imagine themselves at home in the smelt shacks of rural Nova Scotia” (20), partaking in an urban indulgence in the romantic unrealities of rural life. Yet, the poets Kizuk identifies as “Song Fisher *Folk*” were not wholly geographically confined to Halifax’s cushy South End and its affluent elite. Merkel, in his journalistic work for the Canadian Press, reported on labour unrest in rural Cape Breton (Davies *SIMLH* 168); Wallace had ties to the Independent Labour Party and the Workers’ Party (169); and McKay writes that “the radical poet Kenneth Leslie, who broke ranks with Innocence and his fellow Song Fishermen on some issues, celebrated the domesticity of the fishing cove in his home at the cliffs of Peggy’s Point” (262). The Haligonian Song Fishermen were certainly privileged, educated, and often affluent, but it would be facetious to neglect to account for these engagements with regional affairs and the mosaic of economic perspective and privilege the collective nature of the periodical’s authorship afforded its poetic project. Davies writes that even Norwood, working in rural Nova Scotian parishes, “knew the precariousness of rural and

resource economies” (*SIMLH* 169). I suggest that the poets’ geographical and economic diversity, more nuanced and blurred than Kizuk claims, enabled the Song Fishermen poets to engage in a circulatory and shifting exchange of ideas that contributed to the overall circulatory nature of their poetic project. Notable examples of poetry that engages directly in labour skirmishes and other economic instabilities include “The Yahie Miners” (*SFSS* 8.6) and “The Workingclass to Saccho and Vanzetti” (10.5). Merkel includes an explanatory note after Stuart McCawley’s “The Yahie Miners” wherein he explains that “the ballad deals with a condition that is largely responsible for the difficulties that are encountered in the prosecution of the coal industry in Nova Scotia” (8.8).

The nuance of the “Nova Scotia Folk” in *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheets* is perhaps best exemplified by contributing poet James D. Gillis, who was born in, lived in, and contributed to the sheets from Cape Breton, and by the ways in which he was treated and framed by the rest of the group. The Song Fishermen believed or were at least entertained by the idea that Gillis had claim to a distinct “Folk” identity. McKay writes that they saw him as “less a fellow poet and more a specimen” (236) of an authentic, “Innocent” lost age of Nova Scotian regionalism. McKay is critical of Gillis’s inclusion in the group’s broader efforts; he writes that the Fishermen “never showed the slightest interest in understanding how he functioned in his community or in placing him in his cultural context” (236), that “[h]ad Gillis not existed, it would have been necessary for Halifax to invent him” (237), and that his involvement functioned as “a stimulus for something close to camp humour” (238). Gillis’s participation fuelled and satiated a recurrent desire of the collective’s, evident in the *Song Sheet*, to experiment with Gaelic, adopting and trading in the regional persona it conferred. In an announcement to the group, to mark the close

of the *Song Sheet*'s first year of publication and circulation, Merkel writes that the poets should "[k]eep [their] eyes free from the glare of big cities" and to turn their attentions toward

old things which have been proved in many thousand years of human blood and tears. An instance is the Gaelic tongue, an instrument of spiritual and lyric expression welded through untold centuries by a poetic people, living right here in our midst and allowed by our educational authorities to wither and die for lack of literary development in our schools (*SFSS* 15.2)¹

The Fishermen appointed Gillis as judge for a poetry contest, proposed in Issue 11 of the *Song Sheet*, on the theme of a semi-historical story he wrote, called "The Fishing Boat Exploit" that was originally presented in his book *The Cape Breton Giant*. "Euchd A Bhat Lascaich" (*SFSS* 14.7) is one such responding poetic endeavour. Issue 14 compiles contest submissions and follows each with a reviewing note from Gillis. His comments are often grand, earnest, and take their engagement with a "sense of place" seriously; he calls Ethel H. Butler's submission Miltonian, makes such statements as "Poetry calls for true wit and humor" (*SFSS* 14.7) and decrees that "The Poet who wrote in Gaelic had an advantage over the others. In love, war or hunting the Celtic language seems to revel" (14.9). In his earnestness here and throughout the periodical's sixteen issues, Gillis was presented as living motif of the Nova Scotia "Folk." McKay writes that to "the modern middle-class ear, he was delightfully comic" (236). I suggest that the nuance, jest, and specificity of the Song Fishermen's poetic project lies in the tension and mobility of this simultaneous earnestness and irreverent camp—the difference dependent on the nuanced geographical perspectives of each contributing poet. Gillis was a "specimen" to

¹ For instances of Gaelic verse in the *Song Sheet*, see Stuart McCawley's "Tougal Mhor and Tonal Mhor" (*SFSS* 11.6), John Daniel Logan's "My Scotia By the Sea!" (8.1), and the sequence of translations of Michael D. Currie's "Euchd A Bhat Lascaich" in Issue 14.

poke fun at, but also represented and engaged in something close to the revered rural “Folk” to which the Song Fishermen so outwardly dedicated themselves. The geographical “sea-roads” that stretched from his home in Inverness, Cape Breton to his urban companions in Halifax are part of a fluid and circulating Nova Scotian literary identity, one in dialogue with its disparate parts amid the tumult of industrial and economic change, encroaching literary modernism, and a reactionary turn to conceptions of the “Folk.”

The Song Fishermen’s ardent dedication to place remains steadfast over the course of *The Song Sheet*’s run. As previously discussed, the first issue presents a list of subscribers alongside their respective locations. The second issue closes with a similar list. By the third, however, as readership grew considerably, subscribers were lumped into sub-lists organized by geographical location. The Halifax readership is followed by the New York City sect, and a conglomerate of readers from elsewhere make up a paragraph that identifies each geographical location individually (*SFSS* 3.3). As readership continued to expand, the *Song Sheet* abandoned the specificity of this closing practice, but continued to highlight and note the geographical locations of their contributors and subscribers throughout their recurrent and haphazardly extra-poetic material. In Issue 6, an editor’s note informs readers that Martha Ann and Bob Leslie “would try what Kentucky has to offer for Christmas” and that Kenneth Leslie “sailed on the Augustus a week ago last Saturday for Italy” (6.6), and Issue 9 relates that the same “Kenneth Leslie, who spent the winter in Southern Europe, is due in New York, March 28” (9.7). The group constantly locates themselves in relation to each other. Their stated imperative may be for “Nova Scotia “Catches”” of verse, but they are equally attentive to the literal, physical movements of their members wheresoever they may be, as recorded in the casual miscellany of notes, anecdotes, and announcements afforded space on the pages of the periodical. The group turns its attention not

only to a Nova Scotian “sense of place,” but to a broader, circulatory one, wherein members recognize and participate in the varied geographical makeup of the collective and to the unique and nuanced perspectives these disparate physical vantage points together confer. *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*, explicitly dedicated to a regional literary identity, paradoxically but unavoidably complicates its project’s driving impetus by its dedication to a “sense of place”; their geographical claim to a Nova Scotia “Folk” is contested and complicated. The Song Fishermen are both fluidly Nova Scotian and not. Their circulatory poetics rest in the tensions between their locality and their worldliness, in the threads of connection that stretch between them across geographical space, and in the formation of a Nova Scotia “Folk” of their own—their own “imagined community.”

CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL “SEA ROADS”

I have thus far considered the physical, geographical “sea-roads” of *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet’s* circulation: the locations and resulting perspectives of contributors and subscribers, the periodical’s ardent dedication to an overall “sense of place,” and the nuanced and complex negotiation of regionalism in the literary and economic landscape of 1920s Nova Scotia as experienced or observed by a geographically disparate group of cultural producers. I turn now to a second component of the Song Fishermen’s “imagined community” of Nova Scotia “Folk” as poetic project: the group’s social makeup as displayed in conversational anecdotes and updates on the pages of the *Song Sheet*. I assert that the conversational “sea-roads” that stretch between members who casually offer updates, respond to each other, and engage in social activities, are tied to the group’s efforts to present themselves as a down-home, friendly, Nova Scotia “Folk” collective, and also to their functional identity as a little magazine community: an “intellectual minority group” (Dudek 206) operating at the literary—and, debatably, the geographical—fringes of broader society.

In the first issue of the *Song Sheet*, Andrew Merkel calls for “Nova Scotia “Catches.”” He offers, at the same time, another motivation for the periodical’s publication: “This song sheet is being issued in order to keep The Song Fishermen in touch with conditions on the Grand Bank” (*SFSS* 1.1). Members not only write and submit poetry to the *Song Sheet*, but keep in touch with each other through anecdotes and notes they write to Merkel—they function as a collective of not only artists, but friends as well. Bliss Carman writes in “from New Canaan”: “Please report safe arrival with great love to all friends” (3.1) and later gushes, upon receiving an issue of the *Song Sheet*, that “it’s a treat to have news of home after so long a silence. Without any word I have felt like a Siberian exile” (10.5). Casual, friendly, and intimate updates are

commonplace. Some notable examples follow. Gillis offers a blunt and intimate update: “I hurt my foot slightly” (14.12); Merkel wishes “all hands good fishing throughout the Christmas season and the New Year” (6.6); and Norwood professes, “I am with you with all my heart” (7.7).

In these casual pieces of news, the Fishermen locate and reach out to one another, stretching “sea-roads” of both geographical social connection and circulation between them. Seumas O’Brien writes that he is “spreading the news about the new literary movement in Nova Scotia” (7.7), but Merkel later updates that “the latest news from Seumas is that he had a bad fall recently and is under the weather in consequence. Here’s hoping for his speedy recovery” (7.7). The Fishermen keep each other posted on Seumas’s condition: “Eve Tufts writes of the visit she paid to Seumas O’Brien who has been ill since Christmas, but who is now on the road to recovery” (9.7). Kenneth Leslie admits that he is “jealous of Seumus” (10.2) for receiving a visit from Tufts and Seumas chimes in to let the group know that he is “coming around slowly and hope[s] to get out of doors next week” (10.8). He writes, “I did not know how many good friends I have until I became ill” (10.8). Issues are strung together by sequences of updates, responses, and care similar to this interaction; the social circulation of the sheets bind the periodical and its members to each other. They engage in the frank and open intimacy of a constructed “Nova Scotia Folk” identity, but the updates are often also earnest and genuine. Kizuk turns to Molly Beresford’s letters to Andrew Merkel to corroborate this; he writes that “beneath a superficial frivolity, at least some social relationships were based on complete trust and a deep personal regard for one another” (188). This is perhaps best exemplified in the ways the group mourns the passing of their members. Merkel tells the group that “John Logan is dead. But his soul goes marching on” (*SFSS* 8.7) and the poets chime in in response, expressing sorrow and commending

his character. The entire thirteenth issue is a tribute to Bliss Carman, wherein heartfelt passages are plenty; Kenneth Leslie writes, “Go lank rover, get you home...Now your wild heart shall go free, / Free in loved lost Acadie” (13.9). Molly Beresford later reflects, “Love to all good fishermen. Are we not knit more closely together now Bliss is knit closer to God?” (15.6). For all their jest and “*commercial* antimodernism,” the Song Fishermen are often earnest and loving; they engage in an ongoing, circulatory network of care and attention that stretches social “sea-roads” between members, and contributes to the insular nature of the *Song Sheet*’s overall poetic project: an identity assuredly created and crafted, but also earnest.

How does one join such an insular community? The Song Fishermen collective negotiates a mobile outward identity that shifts between the poles of inclusivity and exclusivity. Call-ins are frequent; you need only to flip to a random page to see one of the common phrases, “We want to hear from everybody” (2.2) and “Come All Ye” (6.1). Yet, the group seems to have often recruited members by referral or by selecting specific poets and critics for the mailing list. Clifford Baker writes in to Merkel, desiring a regular spot on the mailing list after reading a review about the *Song Shees* in the Halifax Chronicle. He wants in: “Apparently this ‘sheet’ which has won the flattering attention of the Chronicle’s self-confident critic, is making quite frequent appearances to a small and select circle beyond whose circumference is one, Baker, thirsting for culture” (7.7). Mr. Jerry Murphy, affectionately referred to as “the Saint John sandwich man” joins the group through his friendship with poet King Hazen. Murphy appears to function, like Gillis, as more of a “Folk” specimen for the Fishermen than as a serious member. Merkel lightly recounts that Murphy “dropped in to see [Hazen] the other day and noticing a copy announced that he could write verse quite up to the standard of Charlie Bruce” (2.1). Hazen later updates the group that Murphy “happened in just after I opened the song sheet and seized

upon the dulse enclosed. After partaking of it he became filled with a deep emotion and exclaimed: ‘Are the fruits of Paradise sweeter than those tender strips of silken sheen?’” (5.4). Murphy’s “Folk” love of the seaweed, dulse, becomes an inspirational trope for the group, who later pen numerous poems to and about dulse. Beresford pokes fun at the antimodernism of such a muse, writing, “Last night before going to bed, I baited my hook with some of Jerry’s well-beloved dulse; at 2.5 a.m. I was jerked out of bed by the enclosed flounder – proof positive that if dulse dulls the poet it at least rouses the rhymer” (6.5); she dismisses the tradition of Maritime imagery along with rigid rhyme schemes. Murphy’s love for dulse is given earnest attention, but is also undercut by the Song Fishermen’s conscious engagement in reactionary antimodernism and the awareness, on the part of Beresford and others, that they are trading in traditional forms and themes. Beresford offers a more critical ditty to dulse:

If you think my muse is mouldy,
That she limps on leaden feet,
That my nonsense will the Skipper of the Song Sheet quite repulse,
Let me warn each poet and rhymer,
Tender-footed or old-timer,
You’d best use a bait sublimer
Far than Dulse (6.6)

Beresford, though she actively engages with Maritime imagery, is often irreverently critical of her fellow fishermen’s earnestness. She cautions early on for variety, “lest you all catch sea fever” (3.2) and pokes fun at, in her poetry, the romantic tropes her companions indulge in: “I look out Stuart’s spy glass / At old Lukie’s boat and cargo” and “So down Ken’s road I’ll be going / To see Charlie’s birch tree growing, / And to smell the Dulse Stream flowing / Through

King's sluice" (6.6). Her response to dulce, as a popular and inspirational Song Fishermen trope, exemplifies the circulatory poetics of the social makeup of the group: the stereotyping of Murphy and the insular nature of the collective build not only their Nova Scotia "Folk" image, but inspire a critical and nuanced conversation about such tropes that rises in response to it.

The Song Fishermen frequently engage in ongoing dialogues of call and response that span multiple issues of the magazine. The responses are both friendly and critical, earnest and irreverent; they portray a circulatory poetics wherein the collaborative nature of the group results in a mosaic, fluid overall project. Ethel Butler responds to Merkel's recurrent requests for submissions in "It's Up To The Skipper"—referring to editor Merkel himself. She cheekily challenges him to submit more of his own verse and to rely less on that of others:

The Songsters try
To serve a lordly dish
Now Skipper, you
Should bait your rod
And see what you can do.
Your "Bluenose To The Wind"
Was art! But is it right,
And is it kind
To have such appetite
For our poor fish?
And never put your catch
Upon the dish? (*SFSS* 10.2)

To this challenge, Merkel responds right away. He prefaces his answering ode, located directly below Butler's challenge, "To Nova Scotia," with "Well here goes" (10.2). The poets' banter shapes and propels their poetry; the social interactions of the collective are not only recorded in the anecdotal miscellany of the *Song Sheet*, but affect their poetic direction. Merkel later calls for submissions to a poetry contest about a Cape Breton "Folk" hero, the "Giant McAskill." I considered this contest and the poetic submissions for it in the previous chapter; they take part in not only the troping of James D. Gillis, but also in the circulatory conversation of the Song Fishermen's call and response poetics.

However, the themed poems were not the only results of the prompt. In an extra-poetic note, Merkel relays information from Stuart McCawley, who was inspired to investigate the true story of the "Giant McAskill" and "The Fishing Boat Exploit." McCawley's journalism occurred as follows: "Dear Skipper: I sent the Song Sheet with the Giant McAskill story to Ross Macaulay of Englishtown and asked him to interview the giant's brother and get the true story of the incident" (12.2). The brother tells Macaulay that McAskill "wasn't abnormal. He was a big, well-proportioned intelligent, lovable character, who owned and ran a general store" (12.2) and the brother expressed his "hope that the poets will appreciate that Angus was Read, Handsome, Intelligent and not a Freak" (12.2). The voices that make up this conversational investigation exemplify the nuance of earnestness, Nova Scotia "Folk," and "*commercial antimodernism*" as they exist simultaneously on the sheets, in tension and in motion. McAskill is used as a "Folk" specimen—a dulse-like muse—but this figuring inspires at least one member, McCawley, to deconstruct and investigate the veracity of such an image. Rather than antithetical, these dialectical perspectives construct the complex, ongoing, and non-definitive nature of the Song Fishermen's poetic project.

The Fishermen respond not only to Merkel's direct calls for action and submission, but to each other's works, stretching "sea-roads" of circulatory conversation between their updates and poetry. For instance, King Hazen responds to Virginia Clay Hamilton and Martha Ann Leslie's "Freud En Cuisine" (*SFSS* 8.5) in his poem, "Aux Cuisinieres" (9.4). He addresses them, "You write with cold sophistication, / Of things beyond the ken of man, / Albeit full of sweet suggestion" (9.4). Martha Ann responds in print: "Tell King Hazen that if he'll come to the farm sometime I'll attempt to make him a lascivious looking and lovely Angel Cake, and give him plenty of time to woo it" (10.6). Their banter mixes literary criticism with ironic, irreverent flirtation. Threads of conversation shape the group's poetic output, and this poetry subsequently inspires further topics of conversation—a cycle of inspiration develops. As the periodical circulates, so too does a propellant undercurrent of dialogue. Ethel Butler writes "Seven Sonnets," a long and rambling poem that features a dramatized conversation between Bob Leslie, Kenneth Leslie, and Andrew Merkel. The poets' conversations not only populate the *Song Sheet's* pages in extra-poetic anecdotes and conversational poetry, but are actually treated as significant poetic subjects themselves. The *Song Sheet* does not just present conversations, but is literarily invested in them.

An instance of rapport between poets worth note is a sequence of interactions between William M. and Molly Beresford. William begins the conversation with a poem titled "Let the Mollies Defend Themselves" (*SFSS* 5.3). He prefaces it, broadly, "Dear Fishermen" and expresses in it some anxiety about the insular nature of the group and his frustrations with his exclusion. He writes, "Ive [sic] had a look to lee / And the sight made me stare. / With the way the tide is running, / It has given me a scare" and he reflects, "I am neither mate nor look-out, / Its [sic] a family affair" (5.3). He goes on to complain about the frequency of Molly Beresford's

work in the *Song Sheets*: “Three Mollies to one mariner - / It isn’t hardly fair. / I cannot help suspicion / There is something in the air, / And me, your faithful brother, / In a state I can’t compare” (5.4). Beresford responds to William in the next issue, rebutting his dismissal of her work. She writes a poem titled “Gosh!” and exclaims in it, “O William M. what’s this I hear? / It sounds to me extremely queer / That you should think one mariner / Might have three Mollies” (6.1). She offers an irreverent and resoundingly feminist argument:

From the first hour that gave me birth
I’ve always owned my little worth,
And owned that man was lord of earth
Despite his faults
But now, bedad, I tell you this,
That the sweet words of Joe and Bliss
Make me so proud [sic] – one Molly is
Worth three “Old Salts.” !!! (6.1)

Here, Beresford refers to the “sweet words of Joe and Bliss”: the positive critical response poets Joe Wallace and Bliss Carman have offered her verse. In this interaction, we can see the complexity of the group’s social strata. There exists an inner circle of poets who appear more frequently in the sheets, on the grounds of their perceived poetic prowess or because of their advantageous friendships, from which a less involved and perhaps less experienced poet, like William M., feels excluded. However, this interaction also depicts an occupational friction that may lie in sexism. Beresford appears frequently on the sheets, but so do many other male poets; William M. selects her in particular as the target of his complaint. The *Song Sheet* thus functions as a site for a variety of perspectives that partake in conversation and in argument. Perhaps

cheekily, Merkel prints the whole conversation, which allows for rapport to develop, banter to occur, and entertaining social frictions to take shape on the page. Betraying his own sympathies, Merkel lets Beresford have the final say. His editorial choices are holistic and dialectical, underlying the inclusive albeit patchwork nature of the Song Fishermen's circulatory poetics, but also inflammatory and provoking, stoking the tensions that inherently arise in their collaborative creative setting to later print them for further entertainment and inspiration.

The poets frequently review and critique each other's poetry. Characteristically varying, their reviews offer critical commentary on the poems' literary attributes, their adherence to a Nova Scotia "Folk," and their modernism. Martha Ann Leslie colloquially writes, "I was delighted to see Bob's Bitter Bread in the Sheet. It's my favorite of his, I think. How I do love that line 'strut the three-ringed circus of the mind'" (*SFSS* 10.6). Bliss Carman offers both praise and critique: "[The sheets] look very well and I have high hopes. Glad to see Ken's 'Roads' but I don't care for 'moan' as well as 'home', the reading in the version I saw in N.Y. (Entirely the fault of the miserable being who edits this sheet)" (5.4). Bliss is casually enthusiastic while poking fun at Merkel, underscoring their intimacy, the insular nature of the sheets, and his own prominent position in them. Norwood offers praise for some of the group's female poets: "Tell Bob's Martha that her Frying Pan Elegy is unique, and Bob is to be congratulated for drawing such a lyrist. Molly Beresford is always on top, and one of the most brilliant squibs I ever read came from the pen of the only Evelyn Tufts" (7.7). Beresford responds to him with affectionate cheek; with a healthy dose of irony, she redirects him to the project's call for "Nova Scotia 'Catches'" and Maritime imagery. In response to her being "always on top" she writes, "that's not very complimentary. Were we dairymen he might convince me that he was thinking of cream

or haply of the froth on Bliss's beer, but being fishermen, - well it's the flotsam that comes to the top" (8.7).

The Fishermen blend literary critique with the banter of friendship, and locate their conversations within the framework of a constructed—both earnest and irreverent—Nova Scotia “Folk.” The poets often expand on each other's reviews. Ethel Butler writes that Charles Bruce “really can sing” (10.6). Kenneth Leslie concurs: “I agree with E. H. B. regarding Bruce. His line has an overtone that draws you back to its music again and again” (11.2). Molly Beresford expands: “Tell Charlie Bruce I second the deserved compliments paid to him...with one reservation – he is too prodigal of words” (11.2). These differences in opinion encapsulate the periodical's divided approach to modernist poetry. Beresford feels “the finest poets have a certain austerity rather than a too prolific outpouring of words” (11.2). This sequence of opinions is thus both conversational, casual, and insular, as well as implicated in international modes and trends in poetry—the periodical navigates this tension by allowing space for dissenting opinions to exist concurrently on the page, and to percolate forward in conversation. Nat Benson chimes in to trouble the figuring of Bruce's work as antimodern, writing that “[h]e has more than promise, he has menace to the complacent oldsters” (11.7). More than simply steadfast in traditional, romantic poetic wordiness, Bruce's verse offers something new to Benson, straddling the line between regionalist resistance to change and a wholehearted cosmopolitan desire to shake off old habits. The circulation between these poles, and the dissenting, conversational opinions that express them, form the social aspect of the *Song Fishermen's* circulatory poetics.

The collective certainly critique and disagree with each other in the *Song Sheet*, but they also seek to entertain each another. In Issue 7, Merkel includes a poem called “Guess Who's Here,” which is framed as an anonymous poem left and found beside a trout stream. It is at once

a jocular, engaging, and exclusive. The activity, of guessing who wrote the poem, is inherently reserved for those Fishermen in the know, the well-studied, for whom the verse may be recognizable. This insular, casual fun is a central tenet of the *Song Sheets* project, one which the Fishermen promote for themselves—and one that is tied to both the essentialism of the “Nova Scotia Folk” persona and the closed, exclusive “intellectual minority groups” of the little magazine movement. Merkel, in the fifteenth issue, proposes “drying out the year’s catch, pressing it into drums,” (15.1) meaning that he intends to compile and bind some of the poetry into a printed book. He caveats: “We are fully conscious that in doing any such thing we are endangering the casualness which has been the mark of our undertaking. We have been writing for fun, and for our own fun. We are rather isolated down here in Nova Scotia” (15.1). This statement, which Davies describes as “as close to writing an editorial or stating a rationale for the existence of the group as [Merkel] was ever to do” (*SIMLH* 167) is worth dissecting. The Song Fishermen certainly and earnestly have fun. Yet, the casual fun of their “Catches” and conversations is implicated in the regionalist image they seek to present and literarily trade in: the light and laughing “Nova Scotia Folk.” Their casualness is a part of their constructed identity, their “imagined community.” Merkel touches on a central issue: if they extend the geographic and social circulation of the periodical by enshrining their work in a book, they potentially unsettle the very “Nova Scotia Folk” they seek to cultivate; I argue that, while a text would certainly undo some of the casualness and insularity of The Song Fishermen collective, their work already operates in wider geographic and social circles than they present themselves as doing. Their poetics centre the Nova Scotia “Folk,” but do more than just subscribe to the fun-loving parameters they attribute to it, and instead operate in broader swaths of dialectical circulation between commercial antimodernism, regional earnestness, inclusion, and exclusion.

The Song Fishermen poets, despite their geographical variance, are usually the only voices to contribute to the *Song Sheet*. The most notable example of outside input is in the reviews the periodical receives from newspaper critics. Merkel accepts critical acclaim readily, recording its occurrence and responding to it in the sheets: “There ought to be rejoicing among the fisher folk. The song sheet has graduated from its will o’ the wisp vagrancy and landed a place on the reviewer’s desk, in the pigeon hole reserved for amateur vehicles. John Mitchell, who fathered a number of chapbooks put out by Ryerson, has been saying nice things about us in the Halifax Chronicle’s Saturday Book Section” (*SFSS* 7.7). The critic, Mitchell, writes that the *Song Sheets* are a “sort of Cinderella stepsister to those little arty magazines that used to litter American bookstands” (7.7), locating the periodical as related, but adjacent to the radical little magazine movement. He notes its insularity and the radical status that comes with such isolation, but also identifies the slipperiness of the periodical’s artistry and modernity. Merkel engages in conversation with Mitchell on the pages of the sheets: extending their social “sea roads” outwards. He is unenthused with the comparison to “little arty magazines” and notes that it “is the worst thing J.H.M. calls us, but he squares that in the next paragraph by feeling that the appearance of the sheet is momentous—“the first practical attempt to make Nova Scotian literature”” (7.7). Mitchell affirms and validates the Song Fishermen’s “Nova Scotia “Catches,”” squarely attributing to them a Maritime identity in the broader literary landscape. Merkel is both clearly pleased, but casually dismissive of this, writing that “John will have a lot to answer for in some epic Valhalla if he keeps on trying to sophisticate us” (7.7). Molly Beresford later chimes in to cut Merkel’s ego down somewhat, writing: “I suppose you must have swelled up with pride to find that your good ship ‘Song Sheet’ had been distantly hailed by that distinguished Admiral of the high poetical seas, J.H.M. But remember, Andy, you look much nicer not too stout and so

don't swell any more, whatever he says" (8.8). The conversation shifts between outside perspectives, inner ones, literary acclaim, and casual dismissal. The very social circulation of the periodical, as in who reads, responds, or contributes to it, is up for conversational debate in the sheets. Critical reviews such as Mitchell's in the *Song Sheet* are "sea roads" of social circulation that face both inward and outward, operating fluidly between a casual, "Come All Ye" inclusion, but an isolated regional identity and a closed circuit "intellectual minority group" little magazine structure that is implicated in broader circles of literary acclaim—these fluid identities together construct the circulatory poetics of *The Song Fishermen* as they sketch the mobile borders of their "imagined community."

CHAPTER 5: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL “SEA ROADS” MANIFEST IN POETRY

Thus far, I have considered the ways in which geographical and social forms of literary circulation build and shape *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet* and its circulatory poetics.

Throughout my considerations, I have turned to the sheets’ anecdotal and extra-poetic materials, but I have also touched on the contents of their verse, since the different forms of content that fill the sheets are inextricably linked and often work in conversation with each other. A common but fluid “sense of place” and conversational rapport stitch the *Song Sheet’s* pages together under an overarching poetic impetus of circulation, mobility, and dialogue. Before I conclude, I will turn to a few notable examples of poetry in the *Song Sheet* that encapsulate the Song Fishermen’s circulatory poetics: that exemplify the “sea roads” of connection between members, places and ideas; that seek to partake in the fraught and nuanced identity of the “Nova Scotia Folk” and of the little magazine; and that partake in dialectical negotiations between disparate poles of opinion and perspective within the dynamic literary and economic context of 1920s Nova Scotia.

First, I turn to a poem that served as a frequent muse for the Song Fishermen following its publication in the second issue: Jerry Murphy’s “An Ode to Dulse” (*SFSS* 2.2). “An Ode to Dulse” typifies the Song Fishermen’s complex relationship to the Nova Scotia “Folk.” As previously discussed, its author, Jerry Murphy, was recruited through King Hazen, affectionately referred to as the “Saint John sandwich man,” who’s role in the group problematically was as a specimen-like form of “Folk” inspiration for the poets—similar to the role of Cape Breton’s James D. Gillis. “An Ode to Dulse” is thick with traditional Maritime imagery: “rocks,” “sea fogs,” “ocean spray,” “mermaid’s play,” “clean breezes,” and “sea birds” are plenty (2.2). The poem is imbued with motion; Murphy makes use of lush and frequent verbs: “clinging close,” “embrace thee fast,” “bores rush in,” “Spray flies high and breakers roar, / Strong clean breezes

stir my pulse” (2.2). The poem’s imagery is mobile within its Maritime and poetic environment; it is not only kept afoot by propulsive verbs, but by Murphy’s repeated allusions to geographical locations.

As the poem progresses, he rushes his readers along the coast, moving through the Maritimes alongside his vivid, circulating environmental elements. In the poem’s first stanza, he writes that the dulse, “floatest fair in Fundy’s tide, / Pinioned to Pissarino’s rocks, / And clinging close to Quaco’s side” (2.2). He then describes the dulse’s journey “From Passamaquoddy’s golden bay / To where bores rush in ‘Codiac,” “from Blom’don’s slopes,” and “At Grand Manan or Pocologan” (2.2). These are actual, geographical locations in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Murphy knits these various places together through a common factor: the presence of a mobile dulse, floating, clinging, and rushing. He uses dulse as a symbol of a unified Maritime “Folk” identity; he describes it explicitly as “Alluring, tempting, maritime” (2.2). It represents the Nova Scotia “Folk” at its most physical, stretching “sea-roads” of connection between places that share innate environmental commonalities. The poem is sensuous and palpable; he personifies the coastline, removing personhood and human perspective from the dulse’s journey to centre the poem’s scope, specifically, on the geography of place and not on the complex and varied identities of those living in the region. This simplicity—reminiscent of what McKay calls an interest in the “simple folk” is precisely what appeals to the Song Fishermen who later take inspiration from and gesture back to Murphy’s dulse. King Hazen chimes in after the poem to remark that “[w]hen the Song Fishermens’ [sic] ship comes in they will probably decide to keep Mr. Murphy supplied with dulse” (2.2).

Murphy, as well as his poem, serve as both specimens embroiled in the Song Fishermen’s literary “*commercial antimodernism*” as well as earnest and interesting sources of inspiration:

“Alluring, tempting, maritime” (2.2). This desire for a distinct Maritime commonality is implicated in the economic and literary contexts of 1920s Nova Scotia. Murphy’s circulating dulse stretches figurative “sea-roads” between geographical places to construct a Maritime identity, and weaves conversational “sea-roads” among the Song Fishermen community who later respond to his prompt with fervor, considering his physically, environmentally Maritime “imagined community” as they construct their own literary one. The dulse functions not as a stagnant trope, but a mobile symbol, one that operates within what Thompson describes as “a reading of regional space as contested and dynamic” (242).

Traditional imagery, like Murphy’s mobile dulse, is found throughout the sheets as the poets explore, adopt, and trade in iterations of Maritime persona, presenting a shifting a collective authorial voice concerned with and trading in all the nuances of the Nova Scotia “Folk.” I would like to turn now to two examples of poems that challenge, trouble, and unsettle an earnest and whole-hearted “Folk” identity, but still typify the *Song Sheet*’s circulatory poetics. Bob Leslie offers two poems that Merkel published on the same page in Issue 11 that engage critically with the Nova Scotian “Folk” identity. Vautour highlights Leslie’s work for the ways that his “modernist experimentations...work both with and against the dominantly antimodernist tenor of [the Song Fishermen’s] periodical” (18). I wish to acknowledge and expand on this understanding of Leslie’s work. He certainly uses modernist form and theme, but I seek to locate his perspective within the geographical and conversational circulatory patterns of the Song Fishermen’s overall poetic impetus. Leslie’s first poem on the page, “Ghosts,” uses traditional imagery in a contemporary Acadian setting to evoke the haunting nostalgia of desire for a lost, pre-industrial Nova Scotia. His opening stanza reads,

Ghosts of the ships
That furled their sails
At sailing ships'
Eternal quay,
Still haunt the night
And ride the gales
That blow the coasts
Of Acadie. (11.8)

Leslie evokes traditional Atlantic images with a light and easy rhyme scheme that skips forward. His ghosts have direction and momentum. They are part of a continuing movement, an Acadian ongoing-ness and circulation that seems to move ceaselessly forward in time, but that also partakes in remembrance. The word “still” suggests both stagnation and continuity; the memory of Acadian ships and men gone by is rooted in place and faded into the past, but it lingers too. The poem’s participants in these Maritime traditions and tropes are ghosts, a distinction that suggests the lost past of a “Folk” identity is at once yearned for, uneasily nonphysical and amorphous, and half-mythologized. Thus, Leslie shifts the poem’s tenor between modernism and antimodernism, to rest dialectically in-between. He evokes a “sense of place” that is located in the past, but that is very much still a ghostly reality to the Acadian region and its residents, one they are haunted by, especially in poetry.

Leslie’s second poem is strikingly modernist: “Marginal Note” is a list of place names. Bart Vautour connects this list to the “capitalist resource extraction” of Ontario’s mining industry, the development company Moneta, which was active in the early twentieth century in particular (30-31). The places are mining towns and regions afflicted by what Vautour calls

“hasty industrialization” (31). This poem is an example of the Song Fishermen’s engagement with current affairs beyond the borders of the Maritime provinces; their net of potential inspiration is by no means geographically confined to Nova Scotian imagery. Merkel’s request for “Nova Scotia ‘Catches’” is loosely and variably interpreted. This thematic diversity underlies the shifting, collective voice of the Song Fishermen project.

Yet, though Leslie’s poem is not overtly Nova Scotian, it is still concerned with a “sense of place,” results from threads of circulating news, and is connected to the Maritimes through sympathies Nova Scotians may possess for those undergoing labour struggles. The list of names, in sequence, evokes geographical circulation; held in parallel, Leslie propels his readers over land with a sequence of commas. In form, theme, and content, “Marginal Note” appears to be as antithetical to a Nova Scotia “Folk” as possible. Yet, the poem exists in dialogue with the works around it—the hodgepodge and conversational form of the periodical entrenches it in its surroundings. It follows Leslie’s previous poem “Ghosts” and thus takes shape as a meditatively outward-looking response to the old ghosts of romantic Atlantic Canadian literature—literal, figurative, and literary ghosts walk the shores of Acadia, so we turn our attention to Ontario, to modernism, and to class struggles in an increasingly industrialized Canada. The periodical’s collaborative, conglomerate form is inherently suggestive of dialogue and call and response; Leslie builds on his own ideas. Rather than work against the periodical’s overall poetic impetus, “Marginal Note” joins a conversation that engages in and that is formed by way of, geographical, social, and contextual circulation on the pages of the *Song Sheet*. Both “Marginal Note” and “Ghosts” are built around a “sense of place,” experiment with old and new literary forms, and engage in conversation not only with each other, but with the dynamic and circulating poetic commentary of *The Song Fishermen’s Song Sheet*’s poetic project overall.

CONCLUSION

The Song Fishermen's Song Sheet engages in a circulatory poetics. "Sea roads" of connection stretch geographically between contributors and subscribers both in Canada's Maritime provinces and abroad, socially between contributing poets and critics as they jest, review, and converse, and poetically in theme and form on the mimeographed pages of the *Song Sheet*. In the periodical, these intertwined forms of circulation negotiate nuanced depictions of 1920s nostalgic desire for a Nova Scotian "Folk" identity through a shifting authorial voice, made up of a chorus of geographically diverse cultural producers. The *Song Sheet's* circulation, at home and abroad, contributes directly to our current scholarly understanding of Atlantic Canadian literature as moving away from "geographic determinism in favour of a reading of regional space as contested and dynamic" (Thompson 242). The *Song Fishermen* have been overlooked for myriad reasons; not quite a radical little magazine, nor quite an earnest or authentically romantic "Folk" text, the sheets rest inconclusively between poles of literary form and cultural identity. They are best understood as a conglomerate that is shifting, inconclusive, and mobile. There is much more that could be said about the *Song Fishermen*. For one, their circulatory patterns are not wholly confined to the *Song Sheet*. Their publishing house, The Abanki Press, is similarly implicated in the circulation and publication of literary material that concerns contested ideas of Atlantic Canadian literary identity, and the Press's broader circulations could be a fruitful site for further research. The term circulatory poetics may be useful for other considerations of collaborative, circulating literary efforts, such as cultures of letters or little magazines. Further, many of the poems that reside in the *Song Sheet* are worth close critical consideration individually, a task which is beyond the scope of my holistic survey of the sheets, but that is greatly deserving of attention. As discussed, the poems vary widely, and

paint a fluid picture of the “Nova Scotia “Catches”” they seek to typify. As Charles Bruce writes of Atlantic Canada, “If there is one thing known in common it must be the sound of water, the beaches, from Bay Chaleur down the coasts of New Brunswick and the Island, round the headlands of Cape North, down the eastern and southern shores and round the coast of Fundy to Passamaquoddy and the edge of Maine” (Bruce qtd in Davies *SIMLH* 10). If the Song Fishermen have one thing in common, it is their mobile “Atlantic Cadence”: the shifting chorus of their conversing voices that stretch across their broader contexts, linked in and by way of circulation.

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