DÉPARTEMENT DES LETTRES ET COMMUNICATIONS

Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines

Université de Sherbrooke

Seeing the Self through the Everyday and the Local:
A Study of Maritime Women’s Life Writing
1980-2005

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Dans le cadre des exigences du
Mémoire en littérature canadienne comparée

Sherbrooke

Juillet 2006

\[ \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{n^2} = \frac{\pi^2}{6} \]
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the textual construction of everyday and local experiences in Maritime women’s life writing in French and in English, written between 1980 and 2005. The goal of this study is to recuperate a corpus of texts that has been understudied and undervalued within the field of Canadian literature in order to reveal the heterogeneity of Maritime women’s experiences of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the region.

The everyday and the local provide women with the necessary frameworks to discuss and reflect upon their life experiences. Most women in this study construct their personal, local and even regional identities through their daily actions, their relationships with others and their role within society. The focus of this study is how these constructions reveal twentieth century Maritime society as a gendered society in which women, and especially minority women, are marginalized and often confined within the private sphere of the home. For those who leave the Maritimes, former constraints remain in dialogue with the self’s new, sometimes freer disposition.

To discover new, previously undervalued knowledge on the region, all the while acknowledging the unique character of every woman’s life narrative, this study draws on feminist standpoint theory as well as on theories on the everyday and the local, Maritime history and culture, and women’s autobiography. While the analysis privileges the women’s textual constructions of everyday and local experiences as valid knowledge on the region, their claims are discussed within their particular social and historical contexts.

Although standpoint theory finds its roots in earlier, socialist theories, this analysis is informed by more contemporary, feminist theorists such as Dorothy Smith,
Joan Wallach Scott and Sandra Harding. According to these theorists, standpoint theory allows academics to examine the structures of everyday life through the unique knowledge of those who experience it directly. Rather than looking at society from the perspective of ruling groups, such as academia, standpoint theory historicizes and contextualizes the daily experiences of non-ruling groups.

This is not a comprehensive survey of all texts written by women from the region since 1980. Nevertheless, a wide variety of texts were included in the initial research and are discussed further in the introduction. Among them, readers will find autobiographies, letters, travelogues, community histories and memoirs written by women from diverse backgrounds.
RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce mémoire, je propose une étude du quotidien et du local, tels que représentés dans les récits de vie écrits en anglais et français par des femmes des provinces maritimes de 1980 à 2005. L’objectif de ce projet est de valoriser un corpus qui est très peu étudié ou mis en valeur dans le domaine d’études littéraires canadiennes. La lecture de ce corpus démontre, entre autres, le caractère hétérogène des expériences féminines de la région au cours des vingtième et ving-et-unième siècles.

Le quotidien et le local sont des sites importants de création identitaire pour les femmes. Justement, la plupart des femmes dans cette étude définissent leurs identités individuelles et collectives par l’entremise de leurs actions quotidiennes, leurs relations avec les autres et leur rôle au sein de la société. En examinant les procédés par lesquels les femmes construisent leurs identités multiples, cette étude démontre à quel point le vingtième siècle fut contraignant pour les femmes et, surtout, contraignant pour les femmes de minorités. Même les femmes qui quittent la région ne peuvent oublier ces contraintes qui les suivent toujours dans leurs actions quotidiennes ailleurs.

Afin d’acquérir de nouvelles connaissances sur la région, tout en respectant le caractère unique de chaque récit de vie à l’étude, ce mémoire se base sur les théories féministes axées sur le point de vue des femmes (standpoint theory), ainsi que sur des théories du quotidien et du local, sur l’histoire et la culture des Maritimes et sur les récits de vie des femmes. Quoique cette analyse privilégie les représentations textuelles du quotidien et du local comme sources valabes de savoir sur la région, reste que ces points de vue seront discutés en parallèle avec leur contexte socio-historique.
Quoique les théories privilégiant le point de vue unique des groupes dévalorisés trouvent leurs débuts dans des théories socialistes antérieures, ce projet est informé par des théories féministes plus contemporaines, telles que celles articulées par Dorothy Smith, Joan Wallach Scott et Sandra Harding. Selon elles, ces points de vue permettent aux académiques d’examiner les structures de la vie quotidienne par le biais de ceux qui qui en font l’expérience. Au lieu d’étudier la société d’une position de privilège, telle que celle occasionnée dans le domaine du savoir, les théories sur le point de vue mettent en contexte les expériences quotidiennes des individus qui ne sont pas en position de
Composition du jury

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1980-2005

Stéphanie LeBlanc

Ce mémoire a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed to this work, both directly and indirectly. I would first like to thank Monika Boehringer, whose work on Acadian women’s life writing and whose encouragements inspired me to undertake this project. I would also like to thank Roxanne Rimstead, my thesis supervisor, whose judicious comments guided me throughout my journey. Appreciation also goes to Isabelle Boisclair and Winfried Siemerling, the members of my jury, who gracefully accepted the extra challenges brought on by my distance – Merci.

I am also most grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Fonds québécois de recherche en société et culture, who funded my research through their generous grants.

To my family who was there for me, near or far – Thank you.

To Chris, who has radically altered my experiences of the everyday in the most positive ways – Merci pour toujours.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction:**

*Discovering Maritime Women’s Everyday and Local Experiences* ... 1

i) The Everyday, the Local and Standpoint Theory ... 4
ii) The Regional and Local Context of Maritime Writing ... 10
iii) Nostalgia and Recollecting the Everyday ... 14
iv) Marginal Experiences ... 23
v) Travelling through the Everyday and the Local ... 29

**Chapter 1:**

*Experiencing Local, “common day to day living”* ... 39

i) Writing the Self: Women Looking Back on their Lives ... 42
ii) Everyday Experience: Women’s Daily Tasks ... 45
iii) Local Experience: Community Influence ... 54

**Chapter 2:**

*Experiencing the Margins* ... 62

i) Writing the Self: Marginal Identities ... 65
ii) Everyday Experience: Fighting for Acceptance ... 75
iii) Local Experience: Embracing Community ... 82

**Chapter 3:**

*Travelling Selves* ... 88

i) Writing the Travelling Self ... 90
ii) Experiencing the Everyday and the Local from a Distance ... 102

**Conclusion** ... 112

**Bibliography**

i) Primary sources ... 120
ii) Secondary sources ... 121
Introduction:

Discovering Maritime Women's Everyday and Local Experiences

This thesis explores the textual construction of everyday and local experiences in selected works from Maritime women's life writing in French and in English. Very few academics have focused on contemporary life writing from women of the region, and even fewer have attempted to look at French and English texts beside one another. The purpose of this work is, therefore, to focus on Maritime women's devalued voices in texts written in both official languages from 1980 to 2005. Although this is not a comprehensive survey of all texts written by women from the region since 1980, a wide variety of texts were included in the initial research and are discussed further in the Introduction. Among them, readers will find autobiographies, letters, travelogues, community histories and memoirs written by women from diverse backgrounds.

Some of the women whose texts I examine no longer live in the Maritimes and some never mention the region within their texts. However, all of the women included within the frameworks of this study were either born or raised in the Maritimes. Many of the women are in their senior years and write about a time much different than today, when the region was still mostly rural and under-developed in comparison with the rest of the country. Acadian women, Anglophone women of British, Irish or Scottish heritage, Mi'Kmaq women and Afro-Nova Scotian women construct varying experiences of gender, class, race and ethnicity while providing readers with unique perspectives of everyday life in the region and, in some cases, abroad. Travelling women also offer unique perspectives, as they reflect upon the differences between their home space and their travelled spaces.
Maritime women construct their textual selves through daily rituals, through their experiences of joy, banality, and difficult moments, and through others who have touched their lives. Their everyday, local experiences provide them with the particular standpoints from which they articulate their life narratives. As a result, I have chosen theories on the everyday and the local, as well as feminist standpoint theory as the frameworks for this study. I will draw on such theorists as Dorothy Smith, John Shotter and Danielle Fuller, all of whom have argued for the need to see the everyday world as being “organized by social relations not observable within it” (Smith 89). More specifically, feminist standpoint theorists, which include Dorothy Smith as well as Joan Wallach Scott, Bettina Aptheker and Sandra Harding, articulate a theory whose methodology focuses on the experiences and the voices of non-ruling groups such as women, minority groups and the poor, for example. According to such theorists, empirical ways of knowing are not sufficient in analysing the structural factors that shape women’s practices and consciousness in the everyday world. Standpoint theorists argue that empirical epistemologies produce an authoritative knowledge that is derived uniquely from the experiences of the dominant, whereas standpoint theorists attempt to locate themselves closer to the plane of the women investigated by bringing knowledge from that plane into critical focus. Standpoint theory is, therefore, not a neutral form of analysis, as its goal is to expose the systematic ways that enable patterns of dominance and subordination to legitimate certain forms of knowledge over others.

By looking at Maritime women’s life writing through standpoint theory, this study privileges the autobiographers’ unique knowledge of the region and of their local communities as they have experienced them on a daily, everyday level. As this study
will further reveal, many Maritime women have felt trapped by what they perceived as rigid, social gender conventions which dictated their behaviour and attitudes as well as by the institutional forms of racism that marginalize women of visible minorities. Others, although affected by the same limitations, normalize these attitudes, a sign of patriarchy’s hold on many women of the region. As we will examine throughout this work, women have attempted to free themselves of limitations – either by writing down their life narratives, a cathartic process, or by exploring the world through travel.

My interest in women’s life writing was first triggered while I was a student at Mount Allison University, where I was a research assistant for Dr. Monika Boehringer, whose work included the creation of an on-line database of Acadian Women’s (Life) Writing. Myself an Acadian, I was surprised to see just how many Francophone women were writing and publishing autobiographical texts in the region. As a graduate student, I became interested as to how Acadian women’s life writing compares to other Maritime women’s life writing. Were Anglophone women producing as many texts as their Acadian counterparts? And were their concerns and subject matters similar? In order to answer these questions, I sought out as many examples of Maritime women’s life writing as I could find from 2005 to 2006 in public and university libraries, on local and national bookstore shelves, as well as in local publishing house catalogues. Professor Boehringer’s website proved a useful tool in locating Acadian texts; however, English-language texts were more challenging to find, as there is yet to be any comprehensive, academic cataloguing of contemporary (since 1980) Maritime women’s life writing.
i) The Everyday, the Local and Standpoint Theory

Despite the unique character of every woman's life story, a common thread unites the texts in this study. As I will argue throughout this project, Maritime women often focus on everyday and local experiences as the integral component in their textual identity construction whether they are writing epistolary texts, autobiographies, memoirs, community histories or travelogues. The texture of their lives is apparent within their understandings of home, within their portrayals of relationships with family and friends, within their level of satisfaction with their work and within their positioning inside or outside of their community. Rather than locating themselves within the region, or the nation, the women in this study focus almost exclusively on the local, for that is the site where they live their lives. When exploring the texts, it will become apparent that many selves emerge as the women reveal the impact of these elements. What is more, it is through their distinct experiences of the everyday and the local that Maritime women have willingly or not engaged themselves in a counter-hegemonic representation of the region – that is, a representation that comes from the unique standpoint of women.

Although I do offer some comments on the texts as texts, this study is not focused on the aesthetics of the life stories, but on the texts as sites of knowledge about the everyday and the local and, by extension, the self and the community.

According to the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith, standpoints cannot be placed in some sort of hierarchy (89). That is to say that ruling group standpoints are no more reflective of an entire society than those of non-ruling groups. In the past, according to Smith, women's silencing was enforced by the fact that writing and the print media – sites of knowledge production – were largely dominated by men (9). However,
as women speak out through these media, as they do in their life narratives, the sorts of knowledge that are produced reflect a greater awareness of the specificities of women’s experiences of the world. By referring to multiple articulations of knowledge, including those of non-ruling groups, as does standpoint theory, one obtains a more comprehensive understanding of a particular society in a particular time.

In discussing the applications of standpoint theory, Smith explains that “standpoint is rather a method, that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds” (107). The women in this study are, in fact, “actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds,” and their texts provide a worthwhile alternative or supplement to the normalizing history books that silence the particularities of female and visible minority experiences of the Maritimes. In no way does this study contend that these women’s life narratives paint a truer or more authentic portrait of Maritime experience than other forms of texts, such as history books, sociological studies, works of fiction or even male life writing. For one, this study recognizes that even texts that revolve around an individual’s everyday life are subject to the process of fictionalization through selection, omission, embellishment, arrangement, etc. Secondly, it also acknowledges that there is not one, common Maritime experience reflecting the reality of all women living in the Maritimes. Maritime women and their experiences are as diverse as the various landscapes that define the region.

Throughout the project, I will often draw from the autobiographers’ anecdotes and memories of specific occurrences to investigate how their constructions of their everyday,
local experiences reveal certain realities of Maritime society. Reading the everyday across a variety of texts is challenging because of the specificities experienced by women of varying backgrounds, yet these specificities are what illustrate the diversity of the region. I have chosen a multi-methodological approach that avoids generalizations by focusing on the particular aspects of each text, all the while drawing comparisons between the various works. In addition to standpoint theory, this work is largely informed by theories on the everyday and the local by sociologists, historians and literary critics (Smith, Shotter, Fuller). By arguing that knowledge can be gained by direct experiences in the everyday world and that the articulation of experience by subordinated groups can challenge existing power relations, these critics make claims for the importance of what feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott has termed the “history of difference” (379). Although this “history of difference” is not without its critical weaknesses – for example, the fact that articulating one’s experience does not ensure complete truth since the fictionalizing process is present in many forms of “telling” – it is important because it privileges the unique standpoint of individual speakers.

In *The Everyday World as Problematic*, Dorothy Smith defines the everyday world as “that world we experience directly. It is the world in which we are located physically and socially. […] It is necessarily local – because that is how we must be – and historical” (89). Smith argues for a sociology that will not only be rooted in our everyday experiences, but that will also analyze the social relations that organize the everyday world. In her opinion, the everyday cannot be separated from history, for the larger social and economic relations are, in fact, the organizing principles of the everyday, regardless of the individual’s belonging to either ruling or non-ruling groups.
Other influential critics, such as Michel de Certeau and John Shotter, have also proposed sociologies and histories rooted in the everyday. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, for example, de Certeau explains that “marginality is now becoming a silent majority” (xvii) in that those traditionally on the margins of society (the poor, the working class, women, ethnic minorities) have become a “silent majority” (xvii). The problem here is that the majority remains without a voice. Only through its actions can it somehow speak, and even then, claims de Certeau, the “cultural activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible” (xvii). In this vision of the everyday, the marginal-turned-majority is somewhat void of agency, for he or she has no concrete way to articulate experience. As previously mentioned, knowledge – therefore, power – has traditionally been mediated through text rather than through everyday actions.

Approximately ten years after de Certeau’s theorization of the everyday, John Shotter’s *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life* provides an in-depth look at how society constructs the everyday. Like de Certeau, Shotter also examines how the everyday is dictated by the power politics that play between ruling and non-ruling groups. His focus on dialogism raises the idea that the knowledge possessed by members of a society is the product of our own constitution and reconstitution of the social worlds (13-15). “In this view,” he claims, “new knowledge neither grows out of a special method, nor the special mind of a ‘genius,’ nor ‘new theoretical monologues’ (Billig et al., 1988: 149), but ‘the voices of ordinary people in conversation’ (Shotter 52). While both Shotter and de Certeau focus on diverse cultural practices such as communication, social constructionism and knowledge production, their theories are also applicable to textual manifestations of the everyday, such as those that I examine within this study. Within
their life narratives, individuals interpret their experiences within a particular society, which then contributes to the constitution or reconstitution of what Shotter terms their "social worlds" (13). Theories on the everyday complement standpoint theory, as both focus on the worth of individual voices within discourses of knowledge.

Smith, who focuses on the everyday through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, nevertheless warns scholars that they must be aware of the underlying politics of the everyday when analyzing people's interpretations of their own lives. "In the research context, this means that so far as the everyday worlds are concerned, we rely entirely on what women tell us, what people tell us, about what they do and what happens. But we cannot rely upon them for an understanding of the relations that shape and determine the everyday" (110). Scholars must therefore interpret and contextualize what women are saying about their everyday and local experiences in order to better understand the particular society that is being examined through these voices. Both Smith and Shotter validate the study of history and society from the standpoint of individuals, all the while acknowledging that these standpoints must be examined within their actual social and historical contexts by experts. Although Smith does not necessarily articulate the dialogical nature of her theory as does Shotter, both nevertheless highlight the importance of integrating the voices of ordinary people within academic or ruling group conversations.

According to Lorraine Code, some of the first scholars to emphasize the use of a standpoint approach were feminist theorists who claimed that women's experiences could provide important contributions to the radical analysis of the authoritative knowledge that naturalized the hierarchal arrangements of power and privilege (461). The challenge
within feminist standpoint theory is to avoid an essentialist construction of “women’s experience” by focusing on women’s experiences. More positively, standpoint enables scholars to recognize sources of knowledge that were traditionally silenced or devalued within the political, legal, economic and institutional structures that organize society. It also allows for a greater appreciation of the experiences that are lived daily and that are not always visible to the people who experience them.

In *Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, Danielle Fuller uses a standpoint approach in order to study a corpus of texts that she feels has been undervalued and ignored by Canadian academics. In her analysis of contemporary poetry, novels and oral performances, Fuller argues that women from Atlantic Canada are writing texts that are “profoundly political” in that they “[lend] words to lives that are felt, known and remembered as social realities by particular groups of people, lives that continue to be interpreted in terms of disempowered stereotypes by members of ruling groups, or treated as unremarkable and effectively ignored within, for example, liberal discourses of pluralism and diversity” (4). While Fuller focuses on women’s literary texts and oral performances, whereas this study looks at women’s life writing, her attention to the particularities of individual women’s experiences, all the while establishing a common ground between all of the women under study, makes her study especially relevant to mine, for it reveals to what extent women from the region form bonds through their common attention to everyday and local experiences. Fuller’s study is also important in that it portrays the complexities of Maritime experience, rather than categorizing the region in either despairing or arcadian terms, such as others have
done. Like the women Fuller studies in her work, the women whose texts I examine construct the region in terms that are both positive and negative, rarely simplistic.

ii) The Regional and Local Context of Maritime Writing

Most historians and critics crossing many disciplines seem to agree that Maritime history is a history of loss and despair. For example, in their respective studies of the region's literature, Gwendolyn Davies and Janice Kulyk Keefer focus on the "loser ethos," which they see as the prevailing sentiment alluded to by Maritime writers. Kulyk Keefer specifies that, regardless of his or her background, the Maritimer has always been a "pawn" or a "born loser" (94). Here, she mentions the deracinated Micmacs and Malicetes, the deported Acadians, the defeated Scots Highlanders, the distressed Loyalists and the famished Irish (Kulyk Keefer 94), and I would add the marginalized Afro-Nova Scotians. In addition to these culturally or ethnically specific woes, historians Margaret Conrad and James Hiller specify that the Maritimes as a region also felt great loss after joining the Confederation in 1867, at which time the provinces conceded much economic and political power to their central counterparts (132). What seems to accentuate the region's victimization is the fact that the situation was not always so dire. In fact, the three Maritime provinces certainly saw times where the potential for greatness was tangible.

According to Conrad and Hiller, although settlement began as early as 1604 in the Maritimes, when the French first set camp on the island of Sainte-Croix, most contemporary communities can trace their beginnings to the years between 1749 with the foundation of Halifax and 1815 with the end of the Napoleonic Wars (90). Throughout
this period over 75 000 settlers arrived in the area: some were recruited by British authorities, while others, such as the French and German protestants, were fleeing religious turmoil (Conrad and Hiller 90). The nineteenth century was a prosperous time for the then-British colonies. Conrad and Hiller explain that the economy was kept thriving by the abundance of natural resources that could be traded as far as the West Indies. In Prince Edward Island, the focus was on wheat, root crops and cattle; New Brunswick exploited its forests, which also led to a prosperous shipbuilding industry; Nova Scotia’s economy was the most diverse, as it was based on farming, fishing and forestry (Conrad and Hiller 109). Many agree that the shipbuilding era was, in fact, a “golden age” for the region; however, this age would soon see its decline. The important port and mercantile economy of the nineteenth century soon gave way to the fishing and mining industries in the twentieth century which, at the turn of the twenty-first century, would cede their places to tourism and call centres.

Politically, the three Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island fostered the idea of uniting themselves in the early 1860s. As a result, the members of the “Maritime Union” held a conference in Charlottetown in 1864, at which Upper Canada requested an invitation (Conrad and Hiller 130). It is there that the idea of Confederation was born, and, in 1867, according to Conrad and Hiller, to much of the Maritimers’ dismay, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia joined in with Upper and Lower Canada to become the Dominion of Canada (132). Rapid decline of the region followed this union, as investors switched over to railway and manufacturing ventures, as the new industrial order favoured industries in central Canada, and as Maritimers began to leave in order to find work elsewhere (Conrad and Hiller 109-35).
Conrad and Hiller state that more than half a million people left the Maritimes between 1881 and 1931 – hardly an optimistic beginning to the twentieth century (144). They also argue that the crash in the regional economy in the 1920s was inevitable since a continued exodus and the departure of soldiers overseas made it such that the region could not keep up with the rest of North America. Conrad and Hiller explain that, instead of bringing prosperity, as in other regions, the wars intensified regional disparities, and in 1955, the average income in the Maritimes was 33% lower than the national average (189).

Literary critic David Creelman in his recent work, Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction, sees these losses as the basis of Maritime society's nostalgia and longing: it is not easy to go from being a developed and prosperous area to a chronically underdeveloped region of unemployment (5-13). These economic and political difficulties not only affected how the region subsisted, but they also contributed to the way Maritimers saw themselves within their region, and their country, and how they constructed stories about themselves and the region. As Creelman studies the construction of regional identity within the literature, he concludes that: “East Coast texts are produced within the matrix of tensions created as the ideals of the declining traditional culture come into conflict with the modernist assumptions and sense of alienation associated with the region’s incomplete entrance into the industrial age” (18).

Throughout his work, he furthers that the nostalgic culture is mostly linked to the masculine, patriarchal perspective of how things were. In the literature, he sees the authors construct a society trapped by its ideological and cultural assumptions and where
gender codes are upheld at cost to individuals and communities, as we will see later in this work.

While historians, critics, and even authors have been able to look at the Maritimes from a certain angle, articulating an identity bereft with pessimism, they have also pointed to the sometimes falsely optimistic attitude held by its inhabitants. “Atlantic Canadians, past and present alike,” claim Conrad and Hiller, “have combined regional pride and relentless optimism with a Sisyphean resignation to the idea that it may well be their lot to struggle rather than to arrive” (3). In light of all these characterizations, one wonders how Maritimers actually see themselves, their situation, and their region.

The texts under study reveal the complexity of living in the region through their focus on local experiences in rural communities, in coastal towns, on reserves and in racially or linguistically segregated communities. As standpoint theory allows us to conclude, the regional can only be understood through the various representations of local spaces, in which women place more importance in their texts. The women also construct their regional or local experiences in their travel narratives, in which they are able to compare and contrast their former home space with new spaces. Like the regional literature examined by Creelman and Fuller, Maritime women’s life narratives from 1980 to 2005 detail the hardships and positive aspects of the region, as lived by these women, their families and their communities. That is why this project focuses on the particular rather than the general. Read individually, these texts are vignettes of Maritime life. However, read as corpus, these narratives illustrate the diversity of Maritime experiences — experiences that can be idealized and romanticized by some or be depicted in realist terms by others.
iii) Nostalgia and Recollections of the Everyday

For many of the Maritime women, it is imperative to locate their readers, and maybe even themselves, by beginning their narratives with brief discussions of who they are, what their background is, and where they are from. In addition, some of the women add photos, family genealogies and appendices that include birth and death certificates or paper clippings, in an effort to ground their text in lived experience. Time and space are very much factors in these women’s interpretations of their lives; some have seen the colonisation of new towns, others have lived through the Depression and the Second World War. These events play a role in how they see the world.

As previously mentioned, the texts under study in this project vary in subject matter and form. I have, therefore, opted to divide my thesis into three chapters that each examine particular aspects of the everyday and the local within two examples of Maritime women’s life writing from 1980 to 2005. The first chapter explores two traditional texts, both written by women in their senior years. *Letters From the Manse* (2003) by Joan Archibald Colborne is an epistolary account of her experience on Prince Edward Island in the 1950s while *Ma mère et moi au cœur de notre famille acadienne* (1998) by Eveline Chiasson is both a biography of the author’s mother, as well as Chiasson’s own autobiography. Although both were published fairly recently, their focus is on the past: how the authors lived, how life was different without electricity, how domestic chores we take for granted now could take entire days, how society thought differently. The focus on Chiasson and Colborne’s everyday, local experiences reveals to what extent twentieth-century Maritime society was gendered, especially in its rural communities.
The first author that I examine, Joan Archibald Colborne, was born in Halifax in 1922, into a prominent family. Before getting married to Reverend Blair Colborne in 1948, she graduated from Dalhousie University and attended the United Church Training School in Toronto. After their wedding, the new couple moved to Prince Edward Island where Rev. Colborne was to preach in his first community. In this series of letters written by the author between the years 1949 and 1950, but compiled after the author’s husband died in 1980 and only published in 2003, readers get a glimpse of what life was like in rural Prince Edward Island for a Reverend’s wife. As a newlywed and self-described “city dweller” from Halifax, Colborne has a difficult time learning how to cook, clean, take care of her new baby and husband, all the while entertaining the community’s various callers. As an outsider to the community, Colborne must deal with issues of class and gender, as well as with the difference in attitudes between urban and rural society. In her letters, Colborne describes her personal growth with much humour and wit. Although these letters only span sixteen months, they provide modern readers with a greater understanding of the importance of community in the rural Maritimes of yester-year. They also highlight to what extent inhabitants of small towns were at the mercy of the elements, as snowstorms and mud were greater challenges in pre-industrial communities than they are now. The book’s prologue and epilogue provide complementary information on Colborne’s life before and after her time in the Manse.

Recently, two other women have written about their experiences on rural Prince Edward Island. In 2000, Jean Halliday MacKay published *The Home Place: Life in Rural Prince Edward Island in the 1920s and 1930s* with the Acorn Press in Charlottetown. Born in Eldon, Prince Edward Island in 1920, Jean Halliday MacKay
pursued a B.Sc in Home Economics at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New
Brunswick before obtaining her M.A. and Ph.D. from Michigan State University. She
taught in many areas before returning to Prince Edward Island, where she was a professor
at the University of PEI until her retirement in 1986. At the time of publication, she was
still active in the PEI Home Economics Association and in the Belfast Historical Society.
*The Home Place*, which focuses on MacKay's childhood, is her first attempt at life
writing.

As MacKay indicates in her Introduction, the purpose of *The Home Place* was to
reveal how rural PEI existed between the two World Wars in order for future generations
to appreciate the enormity of the transformations the province underwent throughout the
twentieth century. The first chapter is dedicated to establishing MacKay's heritage on the
Island, from her first Scottish ancestor arriving in the nineteenth century. The following
chapters go through various aspects of everyday, local experience, such as a description
of the Eldon community, school, transportation, domestic work, farm work and social
conditions.

MacKay blends her own memories with quite a bit of research. Although she
speaks about her family and herself, MacKay is more detached from the text than most
women writing life narratives, as her focus is on community life rather than her own
subjectivity. Similarly, Betty Howatt's *Tales from Willowshade Farm: An Island
Woman's Notebook*, also published with Acorn Press in 2003, is more concerned with
providing small tastes of local life than discussing the author's experiences. Betty
Howatt was born in Prince Edward Island in 1929. Before getting married and becoming
a full-time farmer, Howatt taught in rural and city schools. The Howatt's Fruit Farm is
known for its fruit, vegetables and honey. Howatt is an activist on behalf of Island heritage, and was a long-time board member of the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation.

As suggested by Howatt’s subtitle, this work is in fact a series of reflections on life on the farm. In fact, most of them have been compiled from broadcasts presented on the CBC Charlottetown’s radio program “Mainstreet.” While some segments concentrate on descriptions of flora and fauna, others reveal a woman who is not afraid to partake in farm chores. Throughout Howatt’s Tales, Prince Edward Island is characterized as a pastoral space where inhabitants are content with the “simple life.” Early twentieth-century, rural New Brunswick is also remembered in pastoral terms in Elsie Foreman Hickey’s Bits and Tidbits: Memories of Growing Up in New Brunswick, published by Partners Publishing in 2001. Born in 1911 in Stanley, New Brunswick, Hickey begins her Memories with an extensive look at her ancestors’ background before mentioning details of her own life. Written on the occasion of her 80th birthday, this text was meant to be a gift to her brothers, sisters and immediate family, as a legacy of her family. Almost ten years later, her Bits and Tidbits were published.

As she looks back at the past way of life, Hickey can not help but idealize the way things were: “In those days the neighbours all helped each other” (22). As she presents many social realities, such as mass migration to the United States, she also focuses on tasks and chores that she routinely accomplished. The everyday is very much at the centre of her text, such as when she details how the women wove cloth and made clothes, or how her mother would sell dairy products at the corner store to bring in some extra income for the family. What is missing on the whole is a focus on the self. Hickey often
talks in terms of "we," and finishes her memoirs at the point where she completes Normal school. She does not expand on her later, married life.

Like Anglophone women, Francophone Acadian women are also particularly concerned with representing the past through their own, personal experiences. More specifically, two women have chosen to focus on how Acadians in New Brunswick survived the Depression era through innovation and perseverance. In *Du Temps de la Grise*, published by Les Editions du Franc-Jeu in 1993, Edith Léger details the experience of growing up in the precarious time between both World Wars in Caraquet, New Brunswick. She is profoundly interested in history, genealogy and literature, and, in the seventies, she won first place in a local poetry contest and honourable mentions in various song writing and poetry contests. *Du Temps de la Grise* is her first published work.

Léger's approach to writing is unpretentious and modest, to say the least. Aware that she is speaking from the margins, she makes no claims of writing the ultimate History of Depression-era Acadia. Rather, she attempts to present the events as she experienced them, in her hometown of Caraquet. At the beginning of her "petit ouvrage" (10), she states:

> Je ne veux pas traiter ici de l'effondrement des cours de la Bourse ou du fameux Krach de 1929. Je ne veux pas non plus parler des perturbations que cet événement a engendrées dans le monde entier mais simplement raconter comment nous l'avons vécue cette crise de 1929, qui nous a laissé des séquelles puisqu'on en parle encore aujourd'hui. [...] C'est principalement la vie à Caraquet que j'ai surtout observée et qui constitue l'essentiel de mon propos. (Léger 11)
Throughout her text, Léger presents us with what she knows through experience, rather than what she might have reiterated from other textbooks. The accuracy of Léger’s claims is called into question since she experienced most of the events during childhood; nevertheless, her perception is authentic in that it is hers.

Thérèse Fagan-Poirier was born in 1930 in Richibuctou, New Brunswick. «Ce Coup-icitte: j’ai gagné» Anecdotes sur un mode de vie des années 1930 et 1940, her first text, was written in 1997 within the parameters of an adult literacy class and was published by Editions les Balises. In her short series of childhood memories, Fagan-Poirier recalls a world quite different from our own. Growing up in a family of nineteen children, Fagan-Poirier assumed many domestic tasks as early as the age of five years old. Although she did go to school briefly, Depression-era, rural Acadia did not value education for young women. As a child, she had to forego school in order to help her mother with the daily chores, a task that Fagan-Poirier was proud to do.

Throughout the text, Fagan-Poirier shares her admiration for her parents’ innovative methods, such as organizing raffles to pay for shoes, for example, to ensure their family was comfortable throughout the difficult times. She, herself, is a hard-working, determined individual. In fact, that might explain why, many years later, Fagan-Poirier decided to gain the education that she was denied as a child, as revealed in the prologue.

In recent years, les Editions de la Francophonie, a new publishing house whose focus is on Acadian history and culture, has published increasing numbers of autobiographies written by Acadian men and women. While these books are mostly intended for local audiences, some are of interest to the growing number of tourists who
visit the area. One of these is Priscille Frenette Doucet’s *Enracinée comme l’arbre* (2003). Doucet was born in 1915 in St-Thérèse de Robertville in northern New Brunswick. Mother of fourteen children, Doucet stayed at home to raise her family. In her Avant-propos, Doucet begins: “Voilà que je dois mettre fin à cette histoire de la vie de mes parents, de Gilbert et moi, et de ma famille” (7). As this sentence shows, Doucet is hesitant to assume the subject position that is traditionally at the centre of an autobiography, that of the unique individual. Despite her reluctance, she certainly emerges as the main character of her own story. The text is divided into eight parts representative of the major milestones in her life, such as her parents’ life, childhood, growing up, marriage, having children, moving, her husband’s death, and her senior years.

Doucet recounts a simple, happy life. Although she worked before getting married, she was content with her domestic responsibilities and chose to stay at home to raise her fourteen children, which was far from being a simple task! In many instances she chronicles her daily accomplishments, such as getting up before 5 a.m. to bake bread, making clothes for the children, making preserves to last the winter, etc., shedding light upon rural Acadia’s demands on its women. The title of her work, *Enracinée comme l’arbre*, evokes the author’s profound attachment to her local setting, which she sees as integral to how she was raised and eventually lived her life. Like many others published by Les Editions de la Francophonie, this text is part of a growing number of life narratives that portray life in rural Acadia throughout the twentieth century.

Another text published by les Editions de la Francophonie is Germaine LeBreton Jean’s *Mon Témoignage, mon héritage* (2004). Born in 1924, Germaine LeBreton Jean
was raised in Saint-Isidore, New Brunswick. She married young and had eleven children before her husband’s death. Once her children were grown, she remarried and contributed to her community through voluntary work. This text was never meant for publication. In the epilogue, Jean admits: “Ce récit, que j’ai terminé en 1999, n’était pas sensé être publié. Il fut écrit dans le but d’être distribué à chacun de mes enfants afin de souligner l’arrivée du nouveau millénaire. C’était mon cadeau-surprise” (Jean 191).

With a humble voice, Jean remembers the major milestones in her life as well as the small things that characterized her everyday experiences. She also shows a profound attachment to her community, from which she derives her sense of identity. Similar to many examples of life writing studied within this project, Jean’s text includes photos and annexes that give greater detail of her family’s history and her own accomplishments.

The second work under study in the first chapter, Eveline Chiasson’s *Ma mère et moi: au coeur de notre famille acadienne*, published by les Editions du Goéland in 1998 is also a retrospective work by an elderly woman. Eveline Chiasson was born in coastal Caraquet, New Brunswick in 1925. The eldest in a large Acadian family of sixteen children, Chiasson spent over fifteen years as a nun, and then married once she left the convent. As implied by the title, Eveline Chiasson is not the sole subject of her autobiographical text. Rather, as stated in the Preface, Chiasson wants this work to be a tribute to her mother’s life – a life cut short by the physical toll of giving birth to sixteen children. Throughout the text, the mother is characterized as an angel in the house, a perfectly pious woman, devoted to her husband and family. Despite this idealization of the mother, however, there is an underlying frustration emanating from the author.
As the eldest daughter, Chiasson had to forego her education and marriage proposals in order to help her mother with daily tasks. When her mother passed away, Eveline Chiasson assumed her new position as head of the family, until her father remarried a few years later. Many times, Chiasson states her unhappiness about not being able to live her own life. She is constrained by the existing definition of femininity, which limited her greatly. Leaving the father’s house at the advanced age of thirty in 1955, she sees no other option than to submit herself to God, and become a nun. At the convent, she suffers from bouts of extreme depression. Finally, after serving for twelve years, the isolation becomes too stifling, forcing her to renounce her vows.

Chiasson tries to make the best of each situation, but her seemingly jovial tone only thinly veils her bitterness toward the limitations imposed on her throughout her life. However, she did eventually reclaim her self. In her late forties, Chiasson married and began travelling, fully enjoying her love of life.

While the text is the story of two women in particular, mother and daughter, it is also the story of the many Acadian women who sacrificed their lives for others. *Ma mère et moi* contains all of the elements of the “roman du terroir”: the author must make a choice between her own happiness or her family’s, the mother dies, the father’s house is limiting, and traditionalism reigns.

Many of the Maritime autobiographers aforementioned are hesitant about their authorship skills; nevertheless, they insist on writing for various reasons. Most common is the women’s desire to write for posterity, to leave behind a testament of their lives for a specific audience, whether it be for their family, friends or community members. For the majority of the women in this section, it is more important to inscribe themselves within
local or family history than it is within regional or national history or for literary posterity. They describe their lives in terms of ordinariness – one life among others within their communities. However, the books are often marketed in terms of their uniqueness. Whether it be in the prefaces or on the book jackets, editors, friends or even academics comment on the importance of reading these individual lives as testimonials of the texture of everyday experiences in specific, local settings.

iv) Marginal Experiences

In the second chapter, I examine two texts by women from visible minorities, who reveal what it is like to experience life on the margins of Maritime society. Verna Thomas's *Invisible Shadows: A Black Woman's Life in Nova Scotia* (2001) and Rita Joe's *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet* (1996) are two texts in which the authors address their peoples' absences from or stereotypical portrayals in the region's history, as well as the struggles that plague Afro-Nov Scotia and Native women. In order to correct these representations, both women articulate how they, as women of visible minorities, have experienced the everyday and the local. Neither woman is bitter or spiteful, yet they are claiming their right to be heard, to come out of the silence. Like Colborne and Chiasson, they include reflections on their gendered roles within their respective communities; however, both women's focus is on their experiences of race and racism.

The inclusion of minority voices reflects the aim of this project to examine local particularities within the Maritime region. As constructions of the local alter our understandings of the regional, marginal or minority voices penetrate the normalizing
discourse that might lead us to believe in the region's homogenous identity. In the
Introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha argues that the marginal subject
or the minority subject represents an "intervention into those justifications of modernity –
progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past – that
rationalize the authoritarian, normalizing tendencies within cultures in the name of the
national interest or the ethnic prerogative" (4). By writing their life narratives, not only
do minority subjects attempt to disrupt homogeneous narratives, but they also – and
especially – articulate their desire for agency within what many critics refer to as the
politics of decolonisation (Watson and Smith, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin).

According to George Elliot Clarke in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-
Canadian Literature*, as a child and as a young scholar, there was nothing in his native
Nova Scotia that reflected blackness (3). His subsequent research then revealed that
orality, as opposed to textuality, had become an important way for Afro-Nova Scotians to
ensure the cultural survival of their communities. After the clearing of Africville,
however, Clarke claims that a new Africadian "renaissancism" sought to reclaim
Africadian history (118). As a result, a growing number of community histories and even
life stories began to represent certain aspects of Black experiences in Nova Scotia.

One individual very much involved in this cultural renaissance, Verna Thomas,
was born in Mount Denson, Nova Scotia in 1935, where she stayed until she married and
moved to Preston. Her life has been defined by her activism on behalf of the Black
population of Nova Scotia. In addition to working as a teacher, Thomas was an active
member of the Ladies Auxiliary within her church. Before *Invisible Shadows*, Thomas
co-wrote *The Meeting at the Well: A Brief History Written in Commemoration of the East*

Looking back at her childhood at Mount Denson, and her adult life in Preston, on the outskirts of Halifax, Verna Thomas makes visible those who have been ignored for far too long: the Black communities of Nova Scotia. Part history and part race theory, Thomas’s autobiography tells of the particular challenges encountered by Afro-Nova Scotians throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In her Preface, Thomas states: “This book is my discovery of our lived history, not a picture of how other people want black life to be. I hope to give the reader some understanding of the uniqueness and significance of the Black community in Nova Scotia, and not idealize what was in fact a life of social deprivations” (v, emphasis mine). Notably, the social deprivations mentioned by Thomas include the complete uprooting of Africville on the outskirts of Halifax. Lest we forget that the era in question was not characterized by the same sort of racial awareness emerging from the United States: “[…] people in the Preston area didn’t appear to have any knowledge or racial consciousness about the Civil Rights Movement, and therefore it had no effect on their community at the time” (Thomas 63). Perhaps this was due to the local nature of the community’s racial identity. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the Black community of Nova Scotia was very much hesitant in regards to change and outsiders, including lighter-skinned Blacks such as Thomas herself.

In some ways, Invisible Shadows follows the pattern of the bildungsroman. As a child, Thomas ignores such realities as racism and segregation. However, as she becomes an adult and leaves her parents’ home, she must face and conquer many
obstacles because of her skin colour. Not only does she face discrimination from Whites, but also from other Blacks, because she is not “black enough.”

In *Bear-River: Untapped Roots, Moving Upward* (1995), Florence Smith-Bauld is more positive and places less emphasis on the effects of racism, than does Thomas. A retired teacher, musician and community leader, Florence Smith-Bauld was born in Weymouth Falls, Nova Scotia in the late 1920s. She graduated from the Provincial Normal College in Truro, Nova Scotia in 1957, and later received a degree in music and an education degree from Dalhousie and Saint Mary’s in Halifax. She taught school in her native province for thirty-five years, years during which she also contributed to her community. Notably, she has been recognized by the Red Cross society for over fifteen years of volunteer work, she is the founder of the Black Professional Women’s Group of Nova Scotia, she has received a certificate from Dartmouth Heritage Museum as one of Dartmouth’s Memorable Women 1750-1994, and has been inducted in the Dr. WP Oliver Wall of Honour in 1996.

Like the Afro-Nova Scotian text selected for analysis in Chapter 2, *Bear-River* is a hybrid work that blends Afro-Nova Scotian history with community history and personal memories. The text is divided in ten parts that go back and forth between the time of colonization to more recent, twentieth-century history and Bauld’s own life. She also includes portraits of local, Black achievers and oral history: “One of my main reasons for writing is to share this valuable oral history so that the future youth will appreciate some of these little bits of information” (23). By including her own life story within a community history, Bauld draws attention to the importance of unique experiences within the cultural survival of minority groups, such as the Afro-Nova
Scotians. The tone of the book is hopeful and proud, as Bauld is praising her Afro-Nova Scotian ancestors' persistence throughout the years. Bauld's voice is poetic, itself rooted in the orality that she wants to highlight. "We have come a long way, a long mighty way. There should be no turning back" (62).

For minority women, the past can be much more problematic than it is for women in ruling groups because of their experiences of systematic marginalization. For Afro-Nova Scotians and Mi'Kmaq women who experienced racism, deterritorialization or segregation, the recent past can be a site of pain. These women do not turn back to the past in their texts in order to idealize it or to construct it in nostalgic terms, but to try to come to terms with it or to correct false representations of it. An expert on Native autobiography, Arnold Krupat explains that, in a culture that did not privilege writing originally, "the 'Indian autobiography' developed as an attempt to preserve, complete or correct the record in the name of social justice" (6). This is the case for Isabelle Shea Knockwood. In *Out of the Depths: The Experience of Mi'Kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*, published by Roseway Publishing in 1992, Knockwood reveals the horrors that went on behind the doors of the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia.

Born in Wolfville, Nova Scotia in 1931, Isabelle Knockwood attended the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie from 1936 to 1947. She graduated from Saint Mary’s University in Halifax at the age of 58, with a major in Anthropology and a minor in English. The product of one of her courses on autobiography and oral history taught by Gillian Thomas, *Out of the Depths* was published shortly after Knockwood graduated. In its first year of publication, the book went through a second edition and, in January of
1994, it was reprinted. *Out of the Depths* is mostly the story of Knockwood’s experiences within the Shubenacadie Residential School. However, the author also includes many testimonials from other students. A tragic story of loss, dispossession and abuse emerges through these many voices. In many of the cases, children were forced to attend the school, and could not leave until they were 16. During the tenure of their education, the children were obligated to speak English and were severely punished if they were caught speaking Mi’Kmaq words amongst each other. What is more, they were convinced by the nuns and the priests that native culture was barbaric, which resulted in the profound alienation between the generations that did not attend the school and those who did.

This book reveals the everyday horrors experienced by Mi’Kmaq children within the Residential school system, horrors that they could not articulate as children because no one would have believed them. Knockwood has never been able to forget her experiences, and this work serves to exorcise her memory of the abuse and the hardships she experienced as a child on the margins of Maritime society.

Rita Joe, whose autobiography *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi’Kmaq Poet* (1996) is examined in the second chapter, also attended the Shubenacadie Residential School, yet her experience was not as traumatic – or, at least, she does not construct it in such terms. Born in Whycocomagh, Cape Breton in 1932, Rita Joe is a well-known Mi’Kmaq poet and activist on behalf of Native rights and culture. Her collections of poetry and short stories, *Poems of Rita Joe* (1978), *Song of Eskasoni* (1988) *Lnu and Indians We’re Called* (1991) and *Kelsultiek* (1995), as well as her many public appearances have brought her much praise and attention. Notably, she received the Order
of Canada in 1990, three Honorary Doctorates and the Aboriginal Achievement Award in the category of Arts and Culture.

Rita Joe loves words and loves to write. Through her poetry, she has invited the rest of Canada to come to a greater understanding of her Mi’Kmaq heritage and culture. In her compelling autobiography, Joe traces her journey from the foster homes to the Shubenacadie residential school, and then through her tumultuous coming of age and difficult marriage. Despite the personal hardships, compounded by racism and prejudice, Rita Joe never gives in to negativity.

*Song of Rita Joe* is a triumphant text in which a woman finds her voice through poetry and song, and consequently gives a voice to her people. Throughout the text, Joe denounces the Western world’s interpretation of Native culture and history. In her eyes, Mi’kmaqs and other Natives should reinterpret the history that has been imposed on them in order to reclaim their lives.

v) Travelling through the Everyday and the Local

The final chapter steps out of Maritime boundaries in order to examine how the everyday and the local are experienced by Maritime women abroad, as well as how these travelling women perceive or construct the local women’s experiences. The travelling women are not only concerned with developing their own standpoints, but, in both travel narratives under study in Chapter 3, they are also interested in discovering how others experience the everyday and the local. These travel narratives contribute important knowledge to this project in that they reveal to what extent Maritime women’s ways of seeing the world are largely influenced by their local starting points. Through their
critique or their praise of other societies, female travellers very often construct visions of
the society they have left behind.

There are a wide variety of travel narratives being published by women of the
region who have sought work abroad or who have gone out in search of understanding
other peoples and themselves. One of the texts studied in this chapter is Simone Poirier-
Bures' *That Shining Place*, published by Oberon Press in 1995. Although she now
resides in Blacksburg, Virginia, Simone Poirier-Bures is a native of Halifax, where she
was born in 1945. Born to French-speaking, Acadian parents, Poirier-Bures experienced
the difficulties of assimilation in Nova Scotia. After graduating from college, she spent a
year travelling in Europe and the Middle East. She then went on to pursue two Master’s
degrees in English and Creative Writing. Although she is conscious of her francophone
background, she has pursued her writing career in English, having written over thirty
short stories and personal essays. Her two novels, *Candyman* (1994) and *Nicole* (2000),
address the difficulty of growing up Acadian in Nova Scotia in the sixties. Notably, *That
Shining Place* won the 1996 Evelyn Richardson Award, Atlantic Canada’s most
prestigious award for non-fiction. It was also named “Best of the Genre” in George
Elliott Clarke’s 1996 Best Books list for the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*.

Twenty-five years after her first journey to Chania, on the Island of Crete in
Greece, Simone Poirier-Bures returns to the site where her younger self experienced
dislocation, life-changing moments and a touching relationship with Maria, a local
woman. Upon her return from the second trip, the author combines her impressions of
both journeys in *That Shining Place*. 
The text is neither purely a travelogue, nor a work of non-fiction. Rather, it is an almost poetic, episodic account of Bures' experience in Greece, based on her memories, letters she wrote to family members, images and random objects. Much like Proust's "Madeleine" experience, certain objects - such as an antique coffee grinder - transport her back to the place that has marked her most profoundly, the place where she was a radically different self than she is today.

The place is described with much detail, but the human qualities of the space, embodied by Maria, are at the centre of the author's reconstruction. As a young woman in search of herself, Bures welcomes Maria's love and attention – which are sharply contrasted to the local government's suspicion of the emancipated, female, foreigner. It is through Maria and these others that Bures learns the most on local attitudes and everyday experiences, which she often compares or contrasts with those she experienced at home, in Nova Scotia. The author is "other" in Greece. In addition to her language and her blond hair, she transgresses the gender boundaries established by Greek society.

In *Les anges en transit*, Léger blends her poetic tendencies with travel writing in order to communicate her impressions of her journeys to the former USSR and impoverished New Orleans in the late eighties. This transgeneric text is located in surreal settings that provide readers with harsh, sober constructions of the local spaces that Léger has visited. By focusing on the nightmarish qualities of the former USSR and New Orleans, which she compares to some of her experiences in rural Acadia, Léger points to the bleak realities that exist outside of one’s known borders.

Throughout the text, Léger reflects upon the writer’s role in deconstructing illusions. This ultimately leads her to reflect on how the journey has influenced her subjectivity and on her subsequent re-vision of her own, local space. As a travel narrative, this text is about deconstructing fixed perceptions, and finding community in the most unlikely places. Seeing what women go through in other parts of the world inevitably forces Léger and Bures to reflect on their own and on their mothers’ experiences of gender and oppression.

Other texts could just as easily have been included in this chapter as examples of how travel alters Maritime women’s perceptions of their local communities and of the self. For example, Maureen Hynes’ *Letters from China*, published by The Women’s Press in 1981 or Joan Baxter’s *Graveyard for Dreamers: One Woman’s Odyssey in Africa*, published by Pottersfield Press in 1994, reveal how one’s standpoint, one’s way of interpreting experience, can be completely called into question in foreign lands, and how the process of deconstructing and reconstructing one’s ways of seeing the world can alter one’s understanding of home.
Maureen Hynes was born in Moncton, New Brunswick, and now resides in Toronto, where she is a community college faculty member, a poetry editor for *Our Times* magazine and Creative Arts editor for the women’s studies journal, *Atlantis*. *Rough Skin*, her first compilation of poetry, won the League of Canadian Poet’s Gerald Lampert prize for the best first book in poetry in 1995. She has also published a second book of poetry, *Harm’s Way* (2001), and co-edited *We Make the Air: The Poetry of Linda Chartrand* (1999) with Ingrid MacDonald.

In the spring of 1980, Maureen Hynes was chosen by the Canadian Department of External Affairs to participate in a five-month Cultural Exchange Program to China. *Letters from China* is composed of a series of letters written by Hynes to her family and friends in Canada, as well as diary entries and post-voyage reflections that supplement what was not said in the afore-mentioned texts. Sent to Chengdu to teach English as a second language at the Sichuan University, Hynes’s experience was not as she expected it to be. She admits: “Although I did suffer a few shocks to my political sensibilities, as I did to my other sensibilities, my experiences in China were essentially not ones of disillusionment” (35). As she is experiencing her time in China, Hynes remains highly analytical of what she sees and hears. Although she tries not to judge the Chinese, she admits that she tries to “analyze and sort out” (Hynes 40) people and places by writing about them in letters, which become “shock absorbers” (Hynes 43). This example of travel writing tries to come to terms with the us/them dialectic. Hynes often asks herself who is truly “other” in this world, and, not surprisingly, her answer always changes as she begins to feel like the Chinese in some respects and unlike them in others.

In her travel memoir, Baxter looks back at her years spent in Africa, and reflects upon the changes that they have visited on her self. Notably, she admits that although she left to meet her husband working in Africa with optimism and idealism, her spirits were rapidly crushed. Not only was she shocked by the social and economic difficulties plaguing Africa’s people, but she also had to deal with the distance that settled in between her husband and her in the foreign land.

Baxter also learns that you cannot change things that you do not understand. This proves frustrating for her, as a well-meaning outsider who can never know the locals’ situation as they do. Her experience in Africa forces her to question her positioning within her own country, and she feels guilty about the excess with which she used to live. Baxter feels like an alien in Africa and Canada. Reminiscent of Margaret Lawrence’s The Prophet’s Camel Bell in that both women experience profound dislocation in Africa,
this text reveals the many facets of one woman’s experience of the continent. It also
reveals the most fascinating and treacherous aspects of travel.

In the aforementioned texts, the subject matter and the tone are relatively heavy.
The authors offer deep reflections on the people that they have encountered, on the
stratification of their societies and on the effects these journeys have had on the self.
There are some travel narratives, however, that are lighter in tone, such as Edna
Arseneault-McGrath’s *Fie-toi à moi!*, published by the Editions du CRP /Université de
Sherbrooke in 1999 and Lorraine Boudreau’s *La bicyclette rose: récit de l’aventure de 90

Born in 1938, in Tracadie, New Brunswick, Edna Arseneault-McGrath eventually
settled down in Quebec, where she had three children and worked as a teacher. When she
retired in 1988, at the age of fifty, she pursued translation courses, and later wrote five
Arseneault-McGrath also published two novels, *Il saigne mon coeur* (2001) and *Voir
l’invisible, réaliser l’impossible* (2004). *Fie-toi à moi! is the story of the Arseneault-
McGrath family’s three-year adventure in Australia from 1976-1978 and from 1980-
1981. Written more than fifteen years after the journeys, the text reads more like a novel
than an actual travelogue. The author admits that the time elapsed between the journeys
and writing the book has altered her memories of the places she visited, and the people
she encountered. Nevertheless, the author attempts to recreate the Australian space by
focusing on her and her family’s everyday experiences at home, at school, and on their
various trips. The tone of the book is playful, and there is much reconstructed dialogue.
Arseneault-McGrath remembers her time spent in Australia favourably, even though she admits to feeling nostalgic, homesick and even dislocated. Australia is constantly being compared to Quebec and Acadie. And even though the McGraths are accepted by their local community, they are reminded of their “otherness” every time they open their mouths to speak.

Like Arsenault-McGraw, Lorraine Boudreau is a native of New Brunswick but now resides in Quebec. She was born in Petit-Rocher in 1941, and she now lives in Granby, Quebec where she runs her own orthotherapy clinic. In 1969, ninety women, including Boudreau, undertook a cross-Canada bike ride to Vancouver, where they set sail for Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan as Canada’s goodwill ambassadors. Thirty years later, Lorraine Boudreau opts to relive the journey through writing. Throughout the text, Boudreau reflects on the past, all the while locating herself within the present. She acknowledges that her memory is selective, and most of her focus is on the positive aspects of the journey.

As they bike across Canada, the women are shocked by the generosity shown to them by people of both languages. While this generosity is also to be found in Japan, the women experience profound dislocation in this new land, with its unique people and culture. Like the texts I discuss in the first chapter, this travel narrative returns to a time when Maritime women were still restricted by conservative gender roles, and when travelling women were considered to be daring and outstanding.

Finally, Gilberte Saulnier’s *Compostelle: Ma marche intérieure*, published by les Editions de la Francophonie in 2005 stands apart from the other travel narratives, as it reports an actual pilgrimage. Gilberte Saulnier is from Saint-Irénée in northern New
Brunswick, where she was born into a large family in 1941. In 1960, she went to Normal School in Fredericton, and pursued her teaching career for the next thirty-eight years.

In her introduction to *Compostelle, Ma marche intérieure*, Gilberte Saulnier justifies the publication of her travelogue as being a personal testimony on the depth of experience that one may have on a pilgrimage from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in south-western France to Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle in Spain. To the question "Why another book on Compostelle?", Saulnier answers "j'ai le goût d'ajouter quelques pages, mon humble contribution pour couvrir un autre petit bout de chemin" (7). The text is mostly comprised of dated entries initially written during the pilgrimage, and revisited before publication. In addition to these entries, Saulnier supplies a map of her journey, a list of her equipment, the pilgrim's prayer, a bibliography of sources on Compostelle, her final reflections and her certificate of completion. The trip, which began on May 13, 2003 is completed 33 days and 800 kilometres later.

Throughout the text, Saulnier shares the most elating and the most frustrating elements of her journey. She is conscious that her experiences have had a profound effect on her self, and she sees the end of the pilgrimage as the beginning of a new way of life, rather than simply the end of the road.

Even though contemporary life writing by Maritime women varies in form and content, what is maintained throughout the texts, and throughout this project, is the fact that by voicing their experiences, Maritime women impart new knowledge about themselves as individuals and as women living in particular localities, and on the Maritime region during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By analysing the knowledge produced in these texts from the standpoint of women, we may get only a
partial understanding of a particular time or place. But this partial understanding is no less authentic than that articulated by other ruling or non-ruling groups. A close reading of selected narratives from these three important trends in Maritime women's contemporary life writing – retrospectives by elderly women, collective memory by women from visible minorities, and memoirs by travelling women – will show the depth of Maritime women’s understanding of their region through their understandings of the self and of their communities.
Chapter 1:

Experiencing Local, "common day-to-day living"

C’est surtout un témoignage de vie à travers des expériences de tous les jours que j’ai voulu partager.

(Eveline Chiasson, Ma mère et moi au cœur de notre famille acadienne 203)

And that seems to be the news to date – nothing earthshaking, just common day-to-day living, but it’s kind of fun.

(Joan Archiblad Colborne, Letters from the Manse 31)

In *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, Sidonie Smith theorizes the role of the autobiographer as that of joining certain aspects of remembered experiences in order to construct a narrative that conveys the personal to the realm of posterity (42). In other words, the autobiographer interprets her life experiences, and then attempts to convey these personal events into the public domain of the written word. Far from objective, the process of writing about one’s own life is as much about re-creating the self as it is about creating a text. Smith explains: "autobiography becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission" (42). For many women, life writing is a way to reflect upon the people and the events that have most affected them throughout the years, as well as a medium through which their stories can be heard.
For readers of autobiographies, the experience is also twofold. On a first, basic level, the reader is entertained by the author’s construction of everyday and local experiences. The autobiography is experienced as an aesthetic product. On another level, the autobiography is also a site of knowledge production, providing insight into the life of an individual, and sometimes, into her experiences of a certain time, place, or culture. As the author reconstructs her individual memory, she reveals her particular standpoint. What is more, by including details on the lived era and place, she creates a space where it is possible for readers to experience collective memory.

Since the 1980s, more and more Maritime women have adopted the centuries-old practice of putting their lives into words. However, unlike their mothers and grandmothers, whose attempts at writing were mostly limited to private media such as diaries or journals (as documented in Margaret Conrad’s *Recording Angels, The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces, 1750-1950, 1982*), contemporary Maritime women have recently gained access to wider dissemination through their local publishing houses. Many of these texts, which one may find on the shelves of local bookstores, are written by elderly women in their seventies and eighties. Despite the fact that they are writing in contemporary times, most of these women locate their narratives in much earlier years. Throughout this study, many of the texts recall periods as early as the thirties or forties, and follow the author’s experiences of the remainder of the twentieth century.

In many ways, elderly women’s life writing provides readers with alternate interpretations of the tumultuous twentieth century, as experienced in the Maritime provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. While sociologies and social histories may risk homogenizing the Maritimes under one, common experience
through the analysis of economic and political contexts, women’s very personal accounts of everyday and local experiences often provide counter-hegemonic interpretations of the region in that they highlight women’s previously silenced contributions to society.

Women offer different perspectives onto the world, which make it possible for readers to look at spaces, time periods and events through different eyes. Yet, we must also remain vigilant as to how these narratives threaten to homogenize women’s experiences under a nostalgic veil. According to feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott, these standpoints are neither more complete, nor truer than other standpoints; however, the simple fact that they are being articulated testifies to the existence of a world of alternative values and practices within our “known” world (381).

The primary focus of this first chapter will be the construction of the self and of the region through the depiction of everyday and local experiences in Joan Archibald Colborne’s *Letters from the Manse* (2003) and Éveline Chiasson’s *Ma mère et moi au coeur de notre famille acadienne* (1998). The former author being 81 years old and the latter being 73 years old at the time their texts were published, both Colborne and Chiasson acknowledge that they are writing about a dramatically different era than we are living in today. In addition to living in rural settings without electricity – even in the fifties! – both women experienced versions of the Maritimes that were steeped in tradition, that firmly adhered to religious beliefs, and that were dictated by strict gender conventions. As the present selves constructed by Colborne and Chiasson reflect upon their past selves, we can see to what extent there is a gap between their younger, perhaps more innocent, subjectivities and their wiser subjectivities. As this gap between the actual and the authorial identities becomes apparent, the issue of audience unfolds as an
important component in the construction of a persona. Who are these women writing for, and what kind of story are they telling these people? By examining these versions of Colborne and Chiasson’s life histories, as well as the histories of their community and even their region, I will also explore the impact of everyday and local experiences on their constructions of self.

i) Writing the Self: Women Looking Back on their Lives

In Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada, Danielle Fuller discusses the various ways of understanding local knowledge, and theorizes that: “common ground can be a shared memory or a memory made common through its articulation” (4). By choosing to articulate their experiences textually, Colborne and Chiasson have, therefore, created a common ground with their local readership. The writing process not only allows the women to share their memories, but, according to Lucie Hotte and Linda Cardinal in La parole mémorielle des femmes, it also acts as a catalyst which activates the process of remembering (11). By writing down one’s memories, claim Hotte and Cardinal, one hinders them from falling into ephemera (12). For those who knew the authors before approaching their texts, such as family members, friends, and even community members, the act of reading the life narratives may also engage them in the process of remembering as they relive the shared memories.

Within their para-texts, both Colborne and Chiasson admit that their initial desires were to communicate their interpretations of particular experiences to an intimate audience of family and friends. Upon initial readings, those audiences encouraged both women to have their texts published, in order to reach a wider readership with their
knowledge. Colborne’s text is particular in that it is comprised of copies of letters she wrote to family members between 1949 and 1950, supplemented by an editor’s introduction, a prologue and an epilogue. In the Prologue, Colborne explains how the letters came to be published:

When I found the letters in Blair’s files, I wanted to share them with our children and grandchildren, and some close friends. It was my son David who thought they might be of interest to the wider world. I am thankful to my publisher, Laurie Brinklow, and my editor, John Cousins, for putting our story in perspective. It is not easy to see that you are part of historical change when you are living through it. (16)

Colborne is obviously humble in regards to her textual contribution. While she is willing to share her story, she is hesitant about the range of the potential audience. This is exemplary of the position many Maritime women take in relation to their work, in which they feel the need to apologize or justify their endeavours within the para-texts. Similar to the self-deprecating tone Helen Buss studies in pioneer women’s autobiographies, the disclaimers reveal the “complex subjectivity of women writing themselves into […] literature and history” (Mapping 3).

For Eveline Chiasson, it was important to tell her mother’s story because she died at an early age. Nevertheless, in the Prologue, Chiasson informs us that what started as a biography eventually became an autobiography as well:

Étant donné que je suis l’aînée de la famille, je suis certaine de faire plaisir à mes frères et sœurs qui me questionnent à l’occasion, mus par le désir de connaître davantage le vécu de notre mère Eva.
Afin de répondre à cette piété filiale, et pour les plus jeunes surtout qui
n’ont pas eu la chance de la connaître, j’ai décidé d’écrire en toute simplicité une
esquisse biographique de cette grande femme que fut Eva LeBouthillier. Mais les
evénements se sont déroulés de telle sorte que le sujet a pris des proportions
innatendues et j’ai intitulé mon livre *Ma mère et moi au cœur de notre famille
acadienne.* (7)

Similar to Colborne, Chiasson hesitates to promote her text as being relevant to others.
Even though they seem doubtful that their personal stories would be of interest to readers,
the simple inclusion of para-texts testifies to their desire to be taken seriously. In *De
l’éloge à l’exclusion: Les femmes auteurs et leurs préfaciers au XIXe siècle,* Rachel
Sauvé argues that prefaces, prologues or introductions are textual strategies though which
women express their competence as authors, and as communicators within the literary
institution (7). Keeping this in mind, we realize that both Colborne and Chiasson are
positioning their texts within a tradition because they understand that that is how their
voices will have the opportunity to be heard. That is how their knowledge will be shared.

Although Chiasson chose Editions du Goéland, a very small publishing house, to
publish her text, her readership has been surprisingly large. Although the book is not
available in major bookstores, it has been edited and reprinted twice, and it has even been
used in French as a second language classes for adults (as seen on the cover of the book).
Although the language and the structure are relatively simple, the message remains quite
compelling. Monika Boehringer, who includes an annotation of Chiasson’s text on her
online bibliography of *Acadian Women’s (Life)Writing* attributes the book’s success to
the fact that the Chiasson family is representative of many Acadian families going through the twentieth century's rapid changes (http://www.mta.ca/Research/awlw/chiasson_eveline.html, March 20, 2006).

When Colborne decided to publish, her text was picked up by the Island Studies Press, which publishes books on the history, culture and environment of Prince Edward Island, as well as scholarly books of comparative studies of P-E-I and other regions. The text is easily available at most bookstores, and was even featured on a CBC radio show as a recommended book by a Maritime author (http://www.cbc.ca/maritimenoon/links_books_movies.html, March 21, 2006), which indicates that it has most likely had a significant readership. What is more, the narrative's historical value is emphasized by the fact that the back cover features comments by Margaret Conrad, an eminent scholar on the Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick. Her positive response to the book highlights the fact that the book is a valuable reminder of a period long past.

ii) Everyday Experience: Women's Daily Tasks

As Joan Wallach Scott points to in "The Evidence of Experience," autobiographical works are becoming increasingly important in the establishment of a "history of difference" (379), a history that articulates what other narratives have silenced. In fact, the two autobiographical texts under study in this chapter, as well as many others that were discussed in the Introduction do just that. By documenting some of their life experiences, Joan Archibald Colborne and Eveline Chiasson provide readers with glimpses into the everyday, as they experienced it, and as they understood it when
they were writing. Regional issues are only present to a certain degree within the texts, as the women emphasize their own, private lives as well as their life within their local communities. Nevertheless, we come to see the region – or, at the very least, the women’s communities – through their eyes, through their standpoint. But what is this standpoint from which the women articulate their subjectivity? What experiences determine the way they see the world?

The societies in which both Colborne and Chiasson are located in are quite different from contemporary Maritime society. Colborne’s narrative takes place in the early 1950s, and Chiasson’s text ranges from the early 1930s to the mid-nineties. In *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction*, David Creelman explains that twentieth century Maritime society upheld cultural expectations that dictated both male and female behaviour: men were to go to work, while women were to stay at home (111). In both *Letters from the Manse* and *Ma mère et moi*, the women’s main setting is, in fact, the home, and the standpoints from which Colborne and Chiasson speak are rooted in the highly gendered, domestic realm. That is where their everyday is experienced, and where a great deal of knowledge is gained. It is also a space that can limit them, and that can limit their access to other, more public knowledge. The “history of difference” (Wallach Scott 379) that Colborne and Chiasson are writing is the other side of what normative historical accounts would have us know in that it looks at how women contributed to Maritime society from their position within the home. It is the story of the private realm, as they experience it, which comes to complement or challenge public history.

In *Tapestries of Life: Women’s Work, Women’s Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*, Bettina Aptheker articulates a new way of reading history, based on
women's standpoint, which is applicable to Colborne and Chiasson's works. The point, she argues, of validating women's standpoint,

is to suggest a way of knowing from the meanings women give to their labours. The search for dailiness is a method of work that allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. If we map what we learn, connecting one meaning or invention to another, we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality. This way of seeing is what I refer to as women's standpoint. (39)

Although she privileges women's standpoint over men's, which can be just as problematic, Aptheker's philosophy echoes Dorothy Smith's emphasis on the everyday as a site of knowledge and John Shotter's insistence on the constructed nature of society. If we apply these notions to the texts in question, we realize that both Colborne and Chiasson understand and construct their realities from their respective positions within the private sphere of their homes. However, the women have different reactions to their experiences of dailiness and, therefore, construct their experiences of the private sphere differently.

In both of their texts, Colborne and Chiasson reveal some of the realities women could go through in their day-to-day lives during the mid-twentieth century. Domestic chores that one can do quite easily today, such as laundry for example, could take up an entire day in the years they wrote about, especially in rural settings. Knowing these components of the everyday is not only important in terms of appreciating the domestic commodities we have today, but it is also focal to our fuller knowledge of life in the Maritimes. For men to be able to go out fishing, or to work at the pulp and paper mill, or
to write sermons — the jobs that, according to historical accounts, kept the region going economically and spiritually — women were expected to be at home, in order to provide those men with nourishment, clean clothes and to take care of the children. In *Who's Science?* *Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, Sandra Harding argues for the worth of looking at women's perspectives, as they are based in everyday life. While she is interested in answering such questions as "Who can be subjects, agents, of socially legitimate knowledge?" (109), she is careful to locate her research within history. To strengthen her argument on the importance of historicizing male supremacy rather than merely criticizing it, she cites Dorothy Smith, who explains that:

> Women have been assigned the kinds of work that men in the ruling groups do not want to do, and ‘women’s work’ relieves these men of the need to take care of their bodies or of the local places where they exist, freeing them to immerse themselves in the world of abstract concepts. The labor of women ‘articulates’ and shapes these men’s concepts of the world into those appropriate for administrative work. Moreover, the more successfully women perform ‘women’s work,’ the more invisible it becomes to men. (Harding 128)

Although it is silenced, “women’s work” is what enables a society to function, to evolve. For the women who perform it, such as Colborne and Chiasson, the work also becomes a way to define the self, even though they do not always all agree with this identity. Throughout Colborne and Chiasson’s texts, a clean home, a wonderful meal or a perfectly pressed shirt are things to take pride in, and through which a women can reveal her self to others.
But this was not always the case for Joan Archibald Colborne. When she arrives in Springfield West in Prince-Edward-Island in 1949 as the new reverend’s wife, she is hardly accustomed to the various tasks she must assume because of her position. Although from the Maritimes, Colborne is quite dislocated in rural P-E-I, where the realities are far from those she experienced in her native city of Halifax, where she came from a prominent family, or even Toronto, where she attended the United Church Training School. At this point in time, the gap between the city and rural settings was still quite considerable. A well-educated city-dweller, Colborne is overwhelmed by her new identity: “nobody ever told me how busy a housewife’s life was!” (26). Throughout the text, which is comprised of a series of letters, Colborne focuses on her daily exploits, for those are the events that come to characterize her experience of the Island. For her readers, Colborne’s interpretations of her everyday adventures provide insight into the mores of the time, as well as into the gender conventions, and the importance of religious figures within the lives of their parishioners. What may seem like trivial things today are magnified tenfold in such a setting:

As I have said, life has been very full, both with activities and domestic comedies and tragedies as well. We’re learning much in these first couple of weeks. I’m learning to close doors after using, ever since a rat got into our room and ate our whole supply of meat. And Blair is learning to empty slop pails cheerfully (?) as our sink has completely given up the ghost. I have learned that when you serve tea to the Board of Stewards here you do not use your best china – because the farmers get so completely scared that they will break something that they can’t eat. (26)
Here, we see the impact that small actions have on the lives of all those involved. Closing a door can be the difference between eating well or rationing, and the choice of dishes with which to serve the local farmers can communicate an important message about the role of the church couple within a smaller community.

As the letters progress, it becomes apparent that Colborne seems more concerned with proving herself to the other women of the community than to her husband. As a model for the other women of the community, she must adhere to the strict gender conventions of the times. In those areas where she feels inadequate – such as cooking and cleaning – she needs other women’s approval. As she writes about her domestic endeavours, her readers sense that she is constantly pretending to be someone else in her everyday life, and that, in fact, only her readers get to know her “true” thoughts in regards to the role she is assuming. For one, she is always on her guard when receiving visitors:

Last week two of the women from Glenwood came most opportunely – I had slaved all morning and I had the kitchen floor scrubbed and waxed and a big batch of bootheels (soft molasses cookies) made when they arrived right after dinner – so I didn’t have to try to keep their eyes of the floor all afternoon and I was able to serve tea and bootheels. After they had gone Blair and I sat back and congratulated ourselves: Wasn’t it lucky I had the floor scrubbed, said I. Yes, and wasn’t it fortunate that I shaved this morning, said the man of the house. It certainly was, I agreed. And wasn’t it lucky that I made these cookies. Blair agreed, and then a funny look came over his face. But wasn’t it too bad you didn’t wash your knees before they came? And I looked down and sticking out
from a short skirt were two bare legs topped by the filthiest pair of knees I have ever seen! (88)

Although Colborne does not seem particularly frustrated with the behaviour she must assume, it is not in any way “natural” for her to spend her days cooking and cleaning, especially as she was used to a more intellectual life as a student at Dalhousie University and then at the United Church Training School in Toronto (Colborne 15). The gendered roles that the couple must play demand a constant attention to propriety and to domestic perfection, which explains why Colborne could take such pride in a clean floor.

The situation is quite different for Eveline Chiasson. Born the eldest in a family of eighteen, in a small, coastal town in New Brunswick, Chiasson is no stranger to the dailiness of domestic work. In fact, her life is consumed by her duties as the eldest daughter, which entail that she sacrifice everything to help her mother, as well as the rest of her family. As young as eleven years old, Chiasson must abandon school to help her mother raise the increasingly large family, a bitter deception that will follow her throughout her life:

Les saisons et les années se succédaient et les bégés continuaient d’arriver. Vu que maman ne pouvait plus suffire seule à la tâche, j’ai donc dû quitter l’école dès l’âge de onze ans. Ce fut pour moi un vrai choc émotionnel et mon premier grand chagrin. J’aimais tant étudier et apprendre des choses nouvelles! Bien sûr, je savais lire et écrire, mais mon bagage d’instruction était si pauvre et j’avais tellement soif d’en connaître davantage! (35)

Here, the gender codes demand that Chiasson be stopped from doing what gives her most pleasure and sense of self-worth. Within this society, education is not as valued for girls
as it is for the boys, who can continue their schooling. With nothing else to focus on, Chiasson must transfer her sense of accomplishment to her domestic undertakings. The older self recollects that the effects were not only devastating on the young girl that she was, but also on the woman that she is now:

Chaque matin, le cœur serré, je regardais les enfants s’en aller à l’école.
Les larmes aux yeux, je restais longtemps immobile, les deux coudes appuyés sur le rebord de la fenêtre. J’étais perdue comme dans un rêve et je ne pouvais me mettre au travail qu’après avoir vu le dernier élève passer.

Ce sacrifice fut énorme pour moi. Pendant plusieurs semaines, je pleurais tous les soirs avant de m’endormir. Je l’acceptais pour ma mère que j’aimais plus que tout au monde, mais je savais que j’en subirais les conséquences le reste de ma vie. (35)

Although she professes nothing but love for her family, there is an apparent bitterness in regards to every one of her mother’s new pregnancies, for as the number of children increases, so does the amount of cooking, cleaning, mending and sacrifices. In order to help her mother, Chiasson eventually refuses work opportunities and a marriage proposal with its promise of a new life in the United States. When her mother passes away, Chiasson becomes the head of the household, until her father finds a new wife and she leaves for the cloister.

Unlike Colborne, who can reflect upon the gap between the role she is called upon to play and what she sees as her “true” self, even laughing about this with her husband, the young Chiasson cannot initially step out of her prescribed domestic role. Although her elderly self can conclude that everything was for the best, and that she has
no regrets, it remains that Chiasson was never given the choice to live the life she lead. Like many other women in a traditional society, her everyday life was dictated by societal conventions about gender roles. Notably, Catholicism was particularly restrictive in regards to women and birth control in Acadian society. Her interpretation of her experiences focuses on the positive aspects of her life, yet an alert reader can certainly detect anger toward the patriarchal order. When her father remarries, one would think that Chiasson could finally reclaim her self and find freedom; however, as a twenty-nine year old woman in a conservative, Catholic society, there are not many options left for her. With nowhere to go, and the desire to belong somewhere, Chiasson chooses to become a nun.

At the convent, Chiasson continues to deny herself, up to the point where depression overtakes her daily life, and she becomes unable to pursue her vocation. After seventeen years within the walls of the cloister, she eventually decides to become a free woman.

Je constatais qu’après toutes ces années en communauté, je menais encore un combat contre moi-même en refoulant mes sentiments, et la nostalgie de ma famille me poursuivait toujours. […] Lors de mon départ de la maison paternelle, j’avais enjambé le corps de ma petite sœur, mais je dois avouer qu’une fois au couvent, j’ai dû bien des fois marcher sur mon propre corps. (179-80)

By making her decision, Chiasson reclaims agency over her life’s narrative. Instead of following the script that has been given to her, she decides to break free from it.

Nevertheless, as she is writing, she portrays her early self as somewhat of a martyr within
the family. This might be a strategy to elicit sympathy from her family, or simply a way to reveal the extent of the sacrifice experienced by many young women in her situation.

As we have seen, then, the everyday experiences that women depict in their texts have greater repercussions than simply within the home. The routines assumed by Colborne and Chiasson, which are representative of the routines assumed by many of the women, have implications for the entire community. What is more, the community’s perceptions of and contributions to both women’s experiences are also central to their understanding of the self. A closer analysis of how local experiences are constructed within the texts reveals more about the women’s positioning within or outside of their communities. It also reveals why such books are particularly appealing to readers within local markets, since they reconstruct spaces that have been forgotten or previously idealized in nostalgic literature.

iii) Local Experience: Community Influence

According to Dorothy Smith, “the practice or ruling involves the ongoing representation of the local actualities of our worlds in the standardized and general forms of knowledge that enter them in the relations of the ruling” (3). As seen in the Introduction, for most of the twentieth century, those in power in the Maritimes – such as the Catholic church, and men of Anglo-Saxon descent – sought to marginalize women and minority groups in order to maintain the traditionalist society that had once showed promise and potential for economic growth. In examining Maritime fiction, Creelman argues that, as a result of the region’s economic and political decline, Maritime society tended to adhere to the values of conservatism rather than those of liberalism. He
explains that, as opposed to liberalism, in which “man’s essence is his freedom,” conservatism withholds the “conviction that liberty is the precious inheritance of an historically established community, rather than an individual right to assert self-interest against that community” (Creelman 16). Many Maritime writers, including the women in this study, have revealed the tensions between the ideals of community and individual identity.

The twentieth century was not a very prosperous era for the region. Although the women whose life writings are under study never seem to be too interested with the state of the economy, their preoccupations with their own family’s subsistence reveal how the local economy has affected their everyday lives. Both Colborne and Chiasson make it clear that while they lacked many of the comforts we would not go without today, they did not mind then, for hardly anyone within their communities had commodities such as refrigerators or cars, for example. To say though, that the Maritime region in its entirety was in the same situation, is to present a false picture of the area. In fact, living conditions could change drastically, even from one community to the next. For example, in Springfield, P-E-I, where the Colbornes settled, they “were two miles from the nearest power line. And, at that time, there were only two snowploughs on the Island” (15). However, the next year, in Halifax, Colborne tells us: “we had electric lights and a washing machine and an upstairs apartment in the city” (127). In the next chapter, I will show how the disparity was even greater for those living in socially marginalized communities, such as Africville and the Mi’Kmaq reserves, for example.

Within their texts, neither Chiasson or Colborne refers to herself as a “Maritimer.” Even their provincial identity seems negligible to their sense of self. Where the women
do define themselves, is within their local communities – whether that be in a rural town on Prince-Edward-Island or in a coastal village in North-eastern New Brunswick. Many factors come into play when constructing the local experience. In addition to place and space, community members play an important role in reinforcing or denying one’s sense of belonging. The local has a direct effect on how both women lead their everyday lives, and how they eventually come to perceive their experiences.

By looking at the local in terms of a geographic experience, we realize that the impact of place and space on the individual’s construction of the self is not to be neglected. According to Michel de Certeau, “a place is […] an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability,” whereas “space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (117). In Colborne’s text, Springfield West is the place: that is where she lives for the entire year. However, the described space alters throughout that time, consequently altering her perception of the place. While the harshness of winter is a source of isolation and frustration – especially when one does not have access to a snowplough! – the arrival of spring is nothing but enchanting to Colborne, who exclaims: “And, oh, what a difference it makes in the way you feel about life! All last month I was itching to get away – anywhere; this month I don’t want to leave at all, because it might mean missing something of this very boisterous spring” (68).

For Colborne, a city-dweller, the arrival in a small town where she is isolated from previously enjoyed commodities is quite an adjustment. Simple things such as sending and receiving mail, purchasing food, and going to church are made challenging
by the place she inhabits. Furthermore, the dramatic alterations that occur on the space, as we have seen, directly affect the author’s mood. While place and space certainly play a role in Chiasson’s life as well, she feels the impact on her self quite differently. In Chiasson’s case, home has always meant being in the coastal town of Caraquet – except, of course, for her brief stay in Montreal, or her longer time spent in the convent. The sea has, therefore, always been a presence in her life. When she was a child, her father was the keeper of the lighthouse. Many of her brothers would later become prosperous fishermen, and three of them lost their lives at sea. While these events certainly have an affect on her life, Chiasson hardly emphasizes place and space to the same degree as Colborne, for her familiarity with the landscape does not raise as much wonder as it does for the latter.

Rather, for Chiasson, local experience is mostly determined by the notion of community, which both helps and hinders her. Fuller explains that, often, “women’s narratives prefer social rather than physical geographies as a means of understanding identity or mapping communities” (37). In other words, women’s relationships with others, such as family, friends or community members may contribute more to the way they see and portray themselves textually than do places. What is more, Chiasson is perhaps less anxious to inscribe belonging than Colborne, since Chiasson assumes she is one of the community and is of the place itself. At first glance, Chiasson seems to construct community as a positive force that has come to her and her family’s aid on various occasions. When her childhood home burns down and when her mother passes away, the generosity of friends and neighbours is overwhelming. She also experiences the importance of giving yourself to others as she watches her mother voluntarily perform
midwife duties for dozens of women. The ties between women are constructed as being strong in Chiasson’s text.

Despite these positive representations, another construction of community is implicit in the text. As stated earlier, Chiasson recounts having sacrificed much of her life/work because of her role as the eldest daughter in a family of eighteen. A conservative mentality that favours the well-being of the community over that of the individual proves stifling. For one, Chiasson expresses a palpable resentment toward the Catholic Church, which, during the time she was growing up, exerted control over its congregations by convincing parishioners of their religious duties. The rage Chiasson feels toward her mother every time she gives birth to another child is really geared toward the institution that encourages women to sacrifice themselves for their church, as well as toward the tight-knit community that reinforces these politics:

Par principe religieux, il n’était pas question non plus d’empêcher la famille. À cause de cette situation, j’avais rassuré ma mère, lui promettant de rester auprès d’elle jusqu’à ce que le dernier soit élevé. Cependant, dès que j’apprenais qu’elle était encore enceinte, j’oubliais ma promesse, allant même jusqu’à lui faire des reproches. […] Dans ma revolte intérieure, je me disais que des enfants, j’en aurais jamais moi-même et la destinée en a bien décidé ainsi. (78)

Like many fictional and non-fictional mother-daughter stories in other regions, this text questions the ways in which women’s everyday lives are circumscribed by gender codes that exceed the local. While Chiasson does admit to feeling frustration, she usually follows these brief outbursts with more positive, if not idealistic, reflections on the events that characterized her experience of a small community. Despite the limits imposed on
her throughout her life, she chooses to present a self that accepts all of the repercussions of self-denial, as if the text itself could heal the wounds inflicted in the past.

For Colborne, the experience of community is also two-fold. On the one hand, the people of Springfield show immense generosity to she and her husband, with gifts, food and praise. However, by assuming a leadership role within the community, the Colbornes also have to learn to live under constant scrutiny, as the others look to them for guidance. For example, when Colborne hangs her clothes out to dry one Sunday afternoon – proof that she is doing housework on the day of rest – it does not take long for the washes of the other women to follow. “It was the first evidence I had of the influence of the minister’s wife in a community,” admits Colborne in her epilogue. But having such an influence is not always welcome, especially since the community’s expectations of what a minister’s wife should be like are quite overwhelming for the young woman. In retrospect, she admits: “I have never in my life felt so inept in that community [sic]” (127). When she compares herself to the women in the community, she states: “The women of Springfield West did all those things [cooking and cleaning] so easily and so well. They also worked in the fields, they milked cows, and dug potatoes. How those women worked!” (127). Trying to live up to those standards requires much effort from Colborne, and, although she enjoys the community, she feels quite lonely within it. Similar to Chiasson, the text becomes a way for Colborne to reconcile herself with the role that she has to assume: in the letters, she confesses her domestic inadequacies and successes to her family, and, in her paratexts, she reflects on how these triumphs and failures shaped her perception of herself at the time.
For both women, the self they must portray to others within their local environments is often a skewed representation of their “true” self, or, at least, the self they want to be. Whether or not they were conscious of it at the time, both women were called upon to play roles that limited the expression or the enactment of their deeper desires. Although the action of writing cannot rectify of change the effects of these limitations, it does provide the women with a certain degree of power in the sense that they are able to look at the events in retrospect and rationalize them differently. For all of her complaints about the domestic work, a wiser Colborne later admits that “it was not a lack of refrigerators or washing machine that bothered me most – it was that nobody except my husband ever called me by my first name” (127). For her part, writing seems to have brought peace to Chiasson, by enabling her to conclude that her life was a fulfilling one, despite its ups and downs. “Au cours des années, comme vous avez pu le constater à la lecture de ces pages, j’ai peut-être rencontré des jours sombres, mais je peux dire que ma vie fut intéressante à cause des nombreux défis que j’ai eu à relever” (200).

Although Joan Archibald Colborne and Eveline Chiasson’s texts have opened up some of the Maritime’s private landscapes, we cannot say that their everyday and local experiences speak for all of the Maritime women who lived through the twentieth century. While the said society limited women’s endeavours, many women did manage to break free from the domestic realm. Others, however, were marginalized to an even greater extent because of their belonging to visible minority groups, such as the Afro-Nova Scotians or the Mi’Kmaqs. In addition to the limitations of gender, these women experienced racism and prejudice, not to mention ghettoization into Black-only towns or
Native reserves. Because of these personal and collective obstacles, the construction of self through life writing will take on different manifestations than discussed in this chapter, as the women in question articulate their distinct experiences in order to decolonise their selves and their communities.
Chapter 2:
Experiencing the Margins

Writing is just one of the many ways that I have tried to inspire others to let go of their fears and participate fully in society.

(Verna Thomas, *Invisible Shadows 2*)

My message is gentle: If one wishes to be healed, one must dwell on the positive.

(Rita Joe, *Song of Rita Joe 14*)

In *Writing the Everyday*, Danielle Fuller reminds us that the local or indigenous condition of Maritime women is linked dialectically to the global condition of women (23). In addition to white-settler culture women's experiences, Mi'Kmaq and Afro-Nova Scotian women's experiences represent some of the effects of marginalization felt by women throughout the region and the nation. While it cannot be said that all women live through events or eras similarly, many standpoint theorists have argued that women's interpretations of experience provide knowledge that may expose the falsehoods with which social hierarchies are sustained (Code 462). In accordance with the proponents of feminist standpoint theory, the previous chapter sought to examine accounts of two women's experiences of the twentieth century in the Maritime provinces. The knowledge articulated by these two women enabled us to see the pressure they often felt to obey conventions and to live up to certain standards of femininity. By focusing on the form and content of these narratives, we gained insight into specific times, places and spaces as
articulated through Colborne and Chiasson's standpoints – worthwhile alternatives to the history books that too often neglect women's role in Maritime society. Particularly, Joan Archibald Colborne and Eveline Chiasson's everyday and local experiences highlighted the depth of the gender gap throughout the twentieth century, as well as the socio-economic differences that divided urban and rural settings.

To avoid essentializing experience, we must concede that these two authors' interpretations of Maritime life can hardly speak for all the women from the region. In addition to marginalizing women, Maritime society has a long-standing history of marginalizing its minority groups. Contrary to what the French-English polemic would have us understand, the Maritime region is not only home to people of Anglo-Saxon and French descent. While their voices may have been the ones to speak the loudest throughout the region's development, other voices have recently emerged from the silence, articulating their stories as they know them. In this chapter, the focus turns to accounts by women from two important groups that have helped shape the history of the region: the Mi'Kmaqs and the Afro-Nova Scotians. How do their everyday and local experiences articulate the sometimes strained social relations within Maritime society? And how do they reflect the greater inequities throughout Maritime history?

In Rita Joe's *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'Kmaq Poet* (1996) and Verna Thomas's *Invisible Shadows: A Black Woman's Life in Nova Scotia* (2001), the conflation of local and everyday experiences reveals the many hardships associated with interpersonal and institutional racism. Throughout both autobiographies, it is apparent that visible minority groups were systematically marginalized by Maritime society through forms of legalized slavery such as domestic and menial work, through the
implementation of residential and segregated schools, and through the majority’s imposition of important decisions without the Mi’Kmaq’s or the Afro-Nova Scotians’ consent. Despite these obstacles, neither woman assumes a defeatist attitude in her work. Rather, both point to their personal and collective triumphs to provide positive representations of their peoples. Like Colborne and Chiasson, Joe and Thomas are participants in and observers of their times, yet, unlike the former, their positions within Maritime society are circumscribed by race. As Joan Wallach Scott would argue, the knowledge they produce must be analysed in terms of the differences they highlight, and the alternative perspectives that they bring (387). As speakers from the margins, Joe and Thomas are not afraid to articulate their discontent with how they and their ethnic groups have been treated by the white majority.

Some statistics claim that as much as 97% of the population residing in the Maritime provinces in the late eighties was born there (Kulyk Keefer 37). Although many narratives tend to homogenize the Maritimes as a predominantly white settler region – in comparison with more cosmopolitan areas – one must realize that the Mi’Kmaq people are indigenous to the area, and that the Afro-Nova Scotians were settled as early as the eighteenth century – some even before the Highland Scots (Conrad 103). Despite these two peoples’ seminal histories in the Maritimes, they have experienced marginalization, deterritorialization and racism from the white settlers and their descendents. As in the rest of Canada, the Mi’Kmaq were confined to their reservations, and many of the children were sent to Indian residential schools, where their culture and their language were denigrated. According to Penny Van Toorn, these residential schools were implemented in order to erase Native culture by separating the children from their

In this chapter, I will discuss the decolonizing texts produced by Joe and Thomas by paying particular attention to their gentle yet unapologetic voices. Both women target multiple audiences in their works, for it is important to them to reach both their communities and those in the ruling groups that have systematically marginalized Mi’Kmaqs and Afro-Nova Scotians throughout Maritime history. I will also explore the various textual strategies that both women adopt. By including orality, poetry, memory, local knowledge and historical documents, Joe and Thomas draw attention to the importance of discourse in constructing the self. Like Colborne and Chiasson, both women focus on everyday and local experiences as formative components in their definition of selfhood, as well as indicators of their people’s systematic experiences of oppression throughout the history of Maritime settlement and contemporary times.

i) Writing the Self: Marginal Identities

In their work on women’s memory, Lucie Hotte and Linda Cardinal argue that traditional historical narratives, essentially comprised of discussions on the past, can only offer material frameworks (27). According to Hotte and Cardinal, the complexity of history lies in the meanings, the interpretations and the ever-changing relationship between the present and the past found in both individual and collective memories (27). Although most texts under study in Hotte and Cardinal refer to Québécois women, many of their arguments could equally apply to women elsewhere, especially minority women.
Minority women's life writings are often based on their own perceptions of events according to their personal and collective memories. As a result, their individual memories add to and challenge collective memories of ruling groups in the Maritimes. In Joe and Thomas' texts, Native women and Black women address their absence from normative history, and challenge the authenticity of whatever information is given about their people from an exterior point of view. For both women, history must be reconstructed since many portrayals of their peoples do not reflect either past or present realities.

For one, Rita Joe deplores the negative portrayals her people have been subject to in classroom textbooks, and warns her children to read these texts critically. Joe recalls her reactions when her children brought home derogatory books: "I would try to explain that the negative stereotypes were just copied and recopied in the books, and that our history had not been written by our own people" (96). Similarly, Thomas encounters *Little Black Sambo*, a children's book written by Helen Bannerman in 1899, when her children begin their schooling. Although the book is finally banned from the educational system in the fifties because of its stereotypical portrayals of Black people, Thomas is concerned with the fact that some of the stereotypes remain present within today's society. Because of such incidents, both women take it upon themselves to tell their people's histories from an insider's standpoint within their own life writing.

The scope of these autobiographies is larger than those in the previous chapter, for Joe and Thomas are not only asserting their own voices, but they are also speaking out for and to their people. Interestingly enough, the dissemination of these texts is also somewhat wider than Colborne and Chiasson's texts. If we look at the context behind the
production of these works, a few elements explain their greater readership. For one, these texts are part of an increasingly popular, global movement toward redressing past, social wrongs by hearing the marginal subject’s voice. In De/Colonizing the Subjet: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography, Smith and Watson explain that marginal women’s autobiographies provide important counter-discourses that “have the potential to celebrate through countervalorization another way of seeing, one unsanctioned, even unsuspected, in the dominant cultural surround” (xx). As a result, marginal women’s autobiographies have taken a greater space in the academic forum, as well as within the mass market.

Publishing houses play an important role in the distribution and the marketing of the texts. As previously discussed, the first two texts by Colborne and Chiasson were printed by publishing houses that focus on the local, which inevitably limits the texts in terms of distribution to the mass-market and to both public and university libraries. Rita Joe’s text was initially published in 1996 with Ragweed Press, which is established on Prince-Edward-Island and publishes a wide variety of works. It was also picked up that same year by the University of Nebraska Press, which specializes in Native American Studies. The autobiography, which is still widely available in most major bookstores and online, is in its tenth printing as a Bison Book (division of the U of Nebraska P). Its back cover is commented by a Professor of American Indian Literatures, Professor A. La Vonne Brown Ruoff, which reinforces the author’s credibility. One must keep in mind that at the time of publication, Rita Joe’s reputation as a decorated poet was firmly established. In 1990, she received the Order of Canada, in 1993, she met with the Queen, and she subsequently received two Honorary Doctorates.
While they may not have been recognized to such an extent, Verna Thomas’s contributions to her community are certainly important. Alongside her activism on behalf of Afro-Nova Scotians’ rights, Thomas’s participation in the Preston Women’s Auxiliary has positioned her as a community leader. Before *Invisible Shadows*, Thomas co-wrote *The Meeting at the Well: A Brief History Written in Commemoration of the East Preston Ladies Auxiliary 69th Anniversary* with Joyce Ross and Mary Glasgow in 1987 and *Report on the Halifax Jamaica Women’s Project* with Valerie Carvery in 1990. In fact, Thomas admits that she undertook her last project, *Invisible Shadows*, as a local history as well; however, it was soon transformed into a hybrid text, mixing local history and autobiography. Published in 2001 by Nimbus, a publishing house that has focused on Atlantic Canadian works for the last thirty years, the book has also received wide distribution. What is more, the text’s cultural worth, on both regional and national levels, is emphasized by George Elliot Clarke’s foreword. An eminent scholar of Afro-Canadian literature, and an Afro-Nova Scotian himself, Clarke compares Thomas’s autobiography to W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1902), claiming that Thomas has “her own development of ‘double vision’ as a consequence of racism” (Thomas vii).

As texts, the two autobiographies deploy a multiplicity of strategies to convey their messages. Both *Song of Rita Joe* and *Invisible Shadows* emphasize orality, local knowledge and memory as credible strategies through which to articulate their life stories. According to Fuller’s study of Maritime women’s textual strategies, many Maritime women refer to shared memory in their texts in order to establish a common ground between the author and her readers, or what Fuller calls “textual communities”
(4). This common ground then becomes a form of public knowledge. Thomas looks to community members, for example, as one important source for her book. She then blends her story with theirs:

This book is my discovery of our lived history, not a picture of how other people want black life to be. [...] It was never my intention to write a memoir, but because records of black history are few, lacking in detail, and obscure, and because ours is primarily an oral tradition, my research is interwoven with personal experience. Also, being black and growing up in a predominantly white community, then moving to a predominantly black one, has given me a unique perspective on the problems created by racism throughout Nova Scotia’s history. Mine is, of course, just one story of many. (v)

For Thomas, it is obvious that the oral tradition of her elders is a legitimate way of transmitting information. This is true for Rita Joe as well:

It is hard to follow the white man’s way. We Native people must use our own way, use what our own hearts tell us, no matter what we talk about – welfare, housing, problems in marriage, spirituality. Throughout my life, I have tried to remember what my elders told me. I remember the things my dad told me when I was a child. [...] When I was in my thirties, I began to write down what I remembered. (14)

For both women, the emphasis on orality and local knowledge testifies to their willingness to remain true to their respective cultures, and to resist the forms of cultural imperialism that have sought to silence them.
The focus on orality is also noticeable in the structure of the texts. Already in the title, *Song of Rita Joe*, one distinguishes the importance of the spoken word. Throughout her telling, Joe uses a simple, yet poignant vocabulary. Her text is divided into four parts which all reflect the different stages of her life: “Song of My Girlhood,” “Song of My Youth,” “Song of My Talk” and “My Song (The Spirit Path).” Although the parts follow a chronological development, the stories within them go back and forth, as if one were adding on to a story as the memories surfaced. Similar to Joe, Thomas only follows a loose chronology. She focuses on issues, and uses personal anecdotes to reflect these issues, without relying too heavily on a linear narrative. One should not, however, conclude that Joe and Thomas’s texts are incoherent. Rather, every subsequent story builds on the former. Joe and Thomas layer stories, creating a palimpsest-like effect in which the themes and concerns are repeated and reinscribed differently throughout the text.

In her discussion on women’s ways of knowing, Sandra Harding highlights that, throughout history, women’s efforts have ensured survival for themselves, their families and their communities. She explains that “women’s resistance on behalf of their children – to poverty, to social agencies of the dominant culture, to slavery and concentration camps, to molesting and abusive husbands and fathers – have made survival possible” (Harding 130). As demonstrated in their texts, Thomas and Joe have often had to fight to maintain acceptable conditions for themselves and for their families. For Joe, who was raised in foster homes, and who would later marry an abusive and alcoholic husband, it was important to provide her children with much love and security. For Thomas, who never knew the hardships of racism as a child, it was difficult to witness her children’s
encounters with prejudice and segregation. Now in their senior years, the immediate struggles may seem further, yet they obviously still see the need to address a mainstream readership in order to reveal the extent of their struggles. In fact, whereas Colborne and Chiasson initially undertook the writing process for their own, personal reasons -- a desire to share their story with family and friends, a desire to come to terms with certain aspects of their lives through writing -- Thomas and Joe are consciously inscribing their histories into the public sphere. Unlike their counterparts, Joe and Thomas are not self-effacing, neither do they apologize for their texts. Rather, they see them as necessary supplements to the all too silencing Master narratives that circulated in their children's classrooms and that enabled institutional racism to persist throughout the twentieth century.

The act of writing about their marginal lives engages Rita Joe and Verna Thomas in the politics of decolonisation. The term "decolonisation," as highlighted in Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith's introduction to De/Colonizing the Subjct: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography, "refers literally to the actual political processes set in motion in various geographical locations before and during this century" (xiii). However, it can also refer to the textual practices many colonized subjects adopt to reclaim their own agency. In The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Texts, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin argue that since language is the medium through which power is established and maintained, that the post-colonial (or marginalized) subject's effective rejection of this power can only be achieved through language (7). Ashcroft et al. contend that through the emergence of the post-colonial voice, the marginalized subject is in fact subverting the colonizers' cultural formations (11). The text is then a political site. More particularly, autobiography is a platform for
intersecting ideologies. Watson and Smith suggest that the marginal subject’s autobiographical project is twofold:

On the one hand, the very taking-up-of-the-autobiographical transports the colonial subject into the territory of the “universal” subject and thus promises a culturally empowered subjectivity. Participation in, through re/presentation of, privileged narratives can secure cultural recognition for the subject. On the other hand, entry into the territory of traditional autobiography implicates the speaker in a potentially recuperative performance, one that might reproduce and re/present the colonizer’s figure in negation. (xix)

While the need for recognition is present in both Thomas and Joe’s texts, their textual strategies demonstrate a willingness to distance themselves from “the territory of traditional autobiography.”

More so than in Colborne and Chiasson’s narratives, Thomas and Joe emphasize the role of language in their attempts to represent their experiences. As they construct the self textually, they choose their words carefully, for they both realize that their readership will surpass the circle of family members and friends. If Rita Joe wants her everyday reality to be grasped by both Natives and Non-Natives, she must address both groups in her text: “This is what it is like for the Native people of today. It is hard for you to see our face, and sometimes it is even hard for us to see ourselves” (170). In The Everyday World as Problematic, Dorothy Smith argues that the everyday world is organized by social relations and principles that are not necessarily observable to those within it (89). In her text, Rita Joe gently asks Natives and Non-Natives to open their eyes to the systematic oppression experienced in everyday, native life. Despite her frustration is due
to the lack of communication between whites and Natives, Joe refuses to become aggressive. She is firm in her desire to claim her voice and claim a voice for her people. “Being strangers in our own land is a sad story, but, if we can speak, we may turn the story around. That is why I write today: Let us have our say, or none at all. ‘Iknmulek na! (We give! Let us give!”) (14). The Mi’Kmaq expression present in this passage shows her need to unite both Native and Non-Native readers by being inclusive. While the presence of her Native language articulates a desire to speak in her own voice, the translation ensures that all readers will feel included when reading these expressions, which are frequent throughout the text. However, the translation may also point to a more subversive method of cultural criticism. As a child, Joe was alienated from her Native language in the foster homes and at the Indian Residential School. Many others endured the same fate. The words came back to her only as an adult. Consequently, the presence of simultaneous translations highlights the fact that the Mi’Kmaq language was taken from them, and that its recuperation must now go through the English language.

Like Rita Joe, Verna Thomas addresses a wide readership, which includes her fellow Afro-Canadians and Afro-Nova Scotians, as well as the rest of Canada. Her text is as much about rallying her community as it is about teaching outsiders about the everyday realities of Black life in Nova Scotia. On the one hand, she concedes: “My race claimed a major victory when the chains of slavery were cut from our ancestors’ ankles and they led us – their descendents – out of bondage” (1). On the other hand, she reiterates that this first victory is far from enough and that social relations between white people and people of colour are still strained. To her fellow members of the Black community, she asks:
How long do we plan to stand in the same spot, looking back at the chains of slavery, the master’s whip and dreaming of the pain they inflicted upon our race. Let’s take our share of the blame for what we have done to each other and get on with doing something for our community to accomplish our present and future needs. Let’s not remain at the border between the work of progress and the world of decay reminding others of the moral and political sins of their forefathers. Let’s remove the entrenched jealous hatred among our own black race. (180)

Although most of the text is comprised of personal anecdotes and historical facts, there are many of these interjections present throughout the text. Similar to Rita Joe, Thomas directly addresses present and future generations, for she believes that this is how the systematic oppression experienced by Afro-Nova Scotians, Afro-Canadians and even other ethnic communities will slowly be displaced from the everyday. Both women are constructing their selves as proof that positive things can come out of struggles, and that others, too, must persist in their quest to break free from the effects of discrimination.

How, then, do these women construct their selves? And how do they manage to privilege their own subjectivity when also discussing historical narratives of entire communities? As we have seen with Colborne and Chiasson, Thomas and Joe construct their subject positions by concentrating on their everyday and local experiences. Like many women around the world, Thomas and Joe’s standpoints – the way they see the world – are influenced by their daily routines, their interactions with family and community, their gender, their class, and their geographic location, which can oftentimes reflect important social values. What is more, their standpoints are affected by their age. As women in their sixties and seventies, both recognize their status as community elders.
In both cultures, this status elevates them, to a certain extent, within the community’s eyes. Thomas and Joe understand that they now have the opportunity to give back to the younger generations, as previous elders have done with them, which might contribute to a certain amount of self-censorship. Of course, the elapsed time between the actions and their textual representations also privileges memory and perception over fact. Wiser, and in a better position to judge certain circumstances, the elderly self comments on the actions of the younger self.

ii) Everyday Experience: Fighting for Acceptance

Although Rita Joe and Verna Thomas’s experiences of the Maritimes generally varied from those of Eveline Chiasson and Joan Archibald Colborne, some of them were similar. Notably, in terms of gender, all women experienced some form of marginalization or some restrictions, albeit to varying degrees. Nevertheless, the dichotomous society that encouraged Chiasson and Colborne to remain within the private sphere, while their fathers or husbands entered the public sphere, exerted the same pressures on Joe and Thomas. Many of the everyday experiences that shape their perceptions of the world are rooted in the home. We will, therefore, concentrate on the component of gender in the everyday before examining another major catalyst in their daily experiences, race.

Rita Joe tells us that she lost her mother when she was five years old. For the next seven years, she was jostled from one foster home to another, where she endured rejection, sexual abuse and alcoholism. Despite these hardships, Joe refuses to focus on the negative: “Mostly, I try to recall the good stories” (24), she admits. Even though she
looked to other women for support, survival remained a constant battle. She claims: “I loved each of my mothers in each different home, and worked hard at being a good girl and accepted” (Joe 25), yet acceptance only came with hard work. During her time spent in these so-called “good” homes, Rita Joe had to go door to door, begging for food, in order to appease her hunger. As a child, Joe came to accept that the everyday is rife with struggle, which might explain why she accepted far too many hardships in her daily adult life.

As she is writing, the older self now recognizes that many of her younger self’s actions or choices were guided by naïveté and a lack of affection as a child. With no one to guide her on the realities of being a woman, which included the potential of being taken advantage of sexually, Joe admits to having equated sex with acceptance. After giving birth to two children with different men, she eventually met Frank Joe, her husband. But life was no “happily ever after” for Joe. Confined to the home, she re-lived the cycle of poverty, abuse and alcoholism. Blinded by her love for her husband, she endured. Even as a wiser woman, she still makes excuses for her husband’s actions:

I loved Frank Joe so much, I continued to ignore his drinking and womanizing.

Frank was a good, good man, but for a long time he was torn. He wanted to live his own life – a better life. He had such high hopes for himself. When we married and had children, one after the other, he felt like he couldn’t realize his ambition. The more he thought this, the more I tried to support him in whatever he did. I continued to build him up. (85)

But her hardships made her stronger. One would think that Joe would tend to see the world with a negative standpoint, or, at least, with a mistrustful eye. On the contrary:
Joe’s experiences have led her to believe – perhaps wrongly – that every one is capable of redemption, and that there is hope for unity between men and women, just as there is between Natives and Non-Natives.

Having children one after another prevented Rita Joe from pursuing her education any further than what she received at the Shubenacadie Residential School. Once her children were in school though, Joe began writing from home. She wrote poems, and she also wrote stories and articles for the *Micmac News*. While this brought her satisfaction and recognition, her husband was frustrated with her accomplishments, as they made him feel inferior. Abating her successes became a routine part of her life. At one point, she tells her husband: “I think I’ll go to college if they’re calling me a literary genius. I’ve got to catch up.” We then learn that “around that time, my husband walked into the house one day and expressed a desire for higher learning himself” (Joe 124), so she encouraged him, and sacrificed her own dreams. Never, though, does Joe express regret for all her sacrifices. The constructed self is peaceful, calm and forgiving – to a point where one must question if her initial reactions were as calm, or if this is the realization of a wiser self.

Being a woman also meant everyday sacrifices for Verna Thomas.Unlike Joe, she did not experience abuse. Her experience of gender was, in fact, closer to those of Chiasson and Colborne, in the sense that her focus was on the children, domestic chores and conforming to certain societal norms. Although she worked before getting married, she informs us: “I quit my job before I got married and my days were spent helping John’s family with the housework” (72). Later on, she quit other stimulating jobs because of family demands. Mostly, “a typical day for me was taking care of my
household chores, which didn’t take a great deal of time since I only had three rooms to keep clean. My greatest task was taking care of my babies, sewing and knitting baby clothes, and doing laundry every day” (74). Interestingly enough, it is during these times, that Thomas stole minutes and seconds to better herself, or to reflect upon pressing issues. Eventually, Thomas did push to obtain her freedom to work, even if that meant going against her husband and her community’s values:

In my day, women held onto the tradition that both authority in the family and responsibility for its economic support were shouldered by the man; he was the head of the household. The woman’s role was as a homemaker. This was a time when it never occurred to a black man that a woman could be married and have a career too. John definitely thought I was stepping out of line when I wanted to go back to work, and my resistance to tradition didn’t make him feel happy. But I had always felt that a woman’s life should consist of more than cooking and climbing a stepladder to clean. I obtained satisfaction from being a mother and a homemaker, but I also enjoyed working outside the home. […] To me, working was more about taking control of my independence than a feminist stance; I was never big within the feminist movement because I never felt that sexism was the main factor denying me an equal place in society. I was more conscious that race as opposed to gender or class oppressed me, and the lack of a critical perspective on racism and discriminatory practices within the feminist movement was far too important for me to ignore. (134)

While this important passage does, indeed, highlight the restrictions imposed by Thomas’s gender, it points to a greater limitation. Race plays an integral role in everyday
experience for both Thomas and Joe. Their narratives support the claims made in the first chapter. Like Colborne and Chiasson, Thomas and Joe articulate a vision of the everyday that reveals the systematic marginalization or silencing of minority women within twentieth-century Maritime society. However, they also point out another, often forgotten, aspect of Maritime life experienced by those living on the margins.

For Rita Joe, the fight against discrimination became a daily battle that inevitably shaped her perception of herself, her culture, and society. As a child, Joe first encountered racism when she was brought into a foster family in a Non-Native town. She explains: "This was when I found out how the Non-Indians act towards Natives. I think I may have experienced this attitude much earlier, in Millbrook, but I did not really understand what it meant until I was ten, eleven, twelve, and lived in a Non-Native community" (40). Looking back, Joe can see her earlier self's naíveté. One detects a tangible sadness in the elderly woman's voice as she goes through the process of reliving her childhood, and mourning the loss of innocence of her younger self. Nevertheless, she refuses to focus on the negative, for she feels that her experiences have taught her more gentle forms of resistance. "This experience of belonging to an alien nation made a permanent impression on me. Even today, I use the method of peaceful confrontation to fight it" (Joe 40). This passage points to the profound dislocation felt by Joe and probably many other Natives across the country and the continent. To be "other" in one's own land is a fundamentally disturbing feeling. For Joe, the local reserve may provide comfort and security, yet she is uncomfortable beyond its boundaries.

The feeling of being an alien in one's own land has given Joe a critical edge in discussions between Natives and Non-Natives. As an outsider in Non-Native contexts,
Joe has shown her capacity to see through institutional racism. Notably, she deplores the representations of Natives by Non-Natives, which have contributed to perpetuating negative stereotypes of her people. Earlier on, she encouraged her children to voice their knowledge: “When you’re in a classroom and you hear a discussion about Natives and you know that what people are saying isn’t right,” she would tell them, “don’t hesitate to put your hand up and say, ‘I’m a Native, and this is what I know’” (96). Within her poetry, she entices all of her people to do so, as well. “One of the things I keep saying is that we are the ones who know about ourselves” (Joe 131). Here, Joe is articulating a crucial tenant of feminist standpoint theory, in that she is arguing for the worth of everyday – Native – knowledge. Dorothy Smith claims that “our own special and expert knowledge” may not seem important to us at first because we are so familiar with our daily lives, but that, in fact, the articulation of this knowledge is what enables us to understand the relations that shape the everyday. This knowledge then enables us to potentially transform the social frameworks that dictate everyday experience. Joe has constructed a gentle self through her presentation of everyday experiences, yet she has also constructed a resisting self, which she hopes will inspire her fellow Natives to reclaim their agency.

Verna Thomas does not remember experiencing racism as a child. Growing up in Mount Denson, a predominantly white community, Thomas was conscious that her skin was a different colour, yet she was hardly conscious of what this would imply in her future. “I grew up knowing I was black, but I didn’t notice being treated any differently than the other children in the community. I had no racial consciousness as a child and no interest in learning about my motherland – I didn’t know there was any such place”
(Thomas 1). However, race eventually comes to play a central role in her daily living. As a child visiting her sister in an all-black community, Thomas remembers feeling apprehensive:

I was on the steps watching the people going and coming, when for the first time I really took notice of the different shades of black people. Some looked like the few black people back home and some looked different. It was then that I became aware that Cherry Brooke was a black community. Having seen a wild animal and not a single white person reminded me of what I had learnt in school about Africa. A short section in our school textbooks about this beautiful continent left me with the idea that it consisted only of dark people and wild animals. I wrote a letter back home, telling my mother I was in Africa and asking her to please come get me. (55)

Later, she herself went to live in the all-black community of Preston, where she also experienced a similar – yet less naïve – dislocation. Although she got past her initial, childhood impressions of all-black communities, certain apprehensions remained. Strength may be found within an all-Black community; however, the fact that such communities exist points to the issues of segregation and institutional racism.

For Thomas, not only is it important to discuss the complexity of black and white race relations, but it is also imperative for her to reveal the racism that exists within the black community. As she quickly learned when she moved to Preston, “the issue of race among many black people was in fact skin deep: if you were light-skinned, as I was, it meant you had a white bloodline you couldn’t deny, no matter how black you felt on the inside” (93). This realization had a profound effect on Thomas, which might explain why
she constructs her self as tolerant and non-judgemental. Because of her experiences, she favours unity over segregation.

iii) Local Experience: Embracing Community

As we have seen up to this point, the experiences that have characterized Rita Joe and Verna Thomas’s daily lives have had a profound effect on how they see themselves, and on how they eventually chose to represent the self textually. These everyday experiences cannot be separated from the actual spaces where they occur. We have already seen that for Chiasson and Colborne, the local – which includes the geographic place, and the space constructed by the community – played an important role in everyday living. This is even truer for Joe and Thomas. For the latter, the inhabited place (the geographic location) is almost pre-determined by both women’s ethnicities, while the spaces they construct textually reveal how the communities’ attitudes shaped their experiences of segregated places. In both cases, the space is filled with ethnic and cultural connotations – both positive and negative.

For many of the Mi’Kmaq people living in the Maritimes, the local has meant life on the reserves. As early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Mi’Kma’ki lost a great deal of land and hunting resources because of the influx of European settlers (Conrad 105). As the colonies expanded, the Natives were marginalized into reserves. Things hardly improved in the twentieth century. Natives were barred from industrial ventures by local prejudice, lack of capital and the rigid provisions of the Indian Act (Conrad 145). Integration was hindered, as Natives could lose their Indian status if they pursued a higher education, took up a profession, or if a Native woman married a white
man (Conrad 145). Clearly, isolation was encouraged on both physical and institutional levels. As a child, and even as an adult, Rita Joe experienced life on a reserve with both frustration and love.

Rita Joe was born on the Whycocomagh Reservation in Cape Breton in 1932. As a foster child, she then went from the Membertou Reservation, to Pictou Landing, to the Millbrook Reservation, to the non-Native community of Oxford, and then to the Shubenacadie Residential School. When she finally left school, she spent time in Halifax and Boston before permanently settling down on the Eskasoni Reservation (also in Cape Breton). Although she experienced difficult times in the various reservations, Joe constructs these spaces positively. She is able to do so because of the community-oriented dynamics that exist on the reserves. However, Oxford, Halifax and Boston are remembered for the alienation and the prejudice that were brought upon her there. If some days were difficult on the reserves, she knew that she could find support within the community. In Halifax, she became aware of “the losing game of having little education and being a minority” (Joe 64). In addition to being underpaid for doing backbreaking work, she was the victim of racial intimidation on the streets, and felt alienated. She finally left for the States. “I didn’t know yet,” she recalls, “that the situation in Boston was the same as in Halifax” (Joe 67).

As seen in the text, life on the reservations is challenging. Housing is limited, and the conditions are often inadequate. When Joe arrived in Eskasoni, she was living in a small house with thirteen other people, while other community members went homeless. What is more, many of the residents, including her husband, had to travel long
distances to go to work. But all that seems to fade from Joe's memory, as she chooses to focus on the sense of community that makes living on the reserves a pleasant experience:

Living on the reservation was different from living in Halifax. As in all Native communities, the people helped each other. There are some people in Eskasoni who have helped me in more ways than I can say. There is a friendly atmosphere among my people that I have always known and felt — we share stories, problems, caring for our babies, recipes for Native herbal medicines — and hardships sometimes seem less hard because we can talk about it with each other. […] That is why I like living on a reservation, even today. It is like living with an extended family. (Joe 80)

This passage is important in our critical re-reading of the region. While many might assume that the social and economic challenges that present themselves to Natives on the reservations might make their experiences negative, we realize that this is not always the case. Here, Joe has decided to focus on the positive aspect of cultural preservation that is fostered on the reserves.

The representation of community is more problematic for Verna Thomas. Unlike the Natives, blacks were not strictly forced into reserves. However, the formation of segregated black communities was almost inevitable due to unfavourable social and economic conditions. They also became a way for Afro-Nova Scotians to unite, and to perpetuate their cultural values. While Conrad and Hiller highlight the arrival of three thousand black Loyalists in Nova Scotia in the mid-eighteenth century (103), Thomas's own research reveals that black French slaves arrived in the seventeenth century, exiled Maroons came from Jamaica in the eighteenth century, and runaway slaves fleeing the
Unites States arrived in the nineteenth century (79-88). Many of these immigrants settled in areas near Halifax, such as Preston, where they could find work. Others established themselves in the Annapolis Valley, and a few went up north to Saint-John, New Brunswick. Those who chose to stay in Halifax were eventually ghettoized into Africville, on the north end of Halifax. On a visit to Halifax, Thomas was horrified to see the living conditions in this neighbourhood:

On the hillside slopes facing the Bedford Basin, I saw Africville from a distance: a model of the dominant white strategy for separating and confining Blacks in the capital city.

I got off the trolley coach and went on a walking tour. Just over the hill from the abattoir, next to the city dump and forgotten by the city politicians, I came upon Africville. Walking along the railroad tracks and unpaved streets past open wells and outhouses made me wonder: was this the city I had longed to explore? Later, [...] I was to learn that only after Africville had been settled did the city run railroad tracks through the community, set up the city dump there, and refuse to pave the streets or extend water and sewage services. And the people in Africville paid their taxes just like people in the South End. After just one visit to Africville, it was clear that the city wanted to make life miserable for these people. (89)

As we have seen earlier, and throughout this passage, Thomas does not agree with segregation, for she sees it as a way to further isolate ethnic communities. Even before she begins the second part of her memoir, which focuses on Preston, it is obvious that she favours a more inclusive environment, such as the one she herself grew up in.
In the first part of the text, in which Thomas recollects her childhood in Mount Denson, the space is characterized in pre-lapsarian terms. It seems to be a paradise, where nature and its inhabitants all live in peace. According to Thomas, Mount Denson is "picture perfect," a place where "peaceful silence" reigns and where "nature is profuse with its blessings, from the apple orchards to the corn fields" (3-4). Community members, black and white alike, are kind and generous with each other. While such harmony may certainly have been possible, readers must keep in mind that the place in question is seen through a young girl's eyes. Unbeknownst to Thomas, her parents may have been sheltering her from the impact of racism.

Preston is seen through another pair of eyes – the eyes of a disillusioned woman, whose racial consciousness has been awakened by a series of racially motivated incidents. Only later in life is Thomas in a position to suspend judgement and to see the hardships experienced by residents of the all-black community. She recollects that when she first arrived in Preston, "community residents had a house and a back yard, but beyond that, not much more than the bare necessities of life. Black folk lived on both sides of the Number Seven Highway [...] in homes that were on the whole small and rundown" (72). Her first impressions of the sub-standard living conditions are that the community members are "lazy" or "could care less about their plight in life" (73). As she becomes aware of the reasons behind these conditions (the bank has red-lined the entire community and there is ignorance on all levels of government) her perception begins to alter. Although it takes a long time for the living conditions to change, Thomas eventually focuses on the positive aspects of community life. Similar to Joe, she cites the warmth and generosity of the people as worthy qualities of Preston. Despite her own
desires for integration, Thomas concludes: “The black world and the white world are two different places: that’s reality” (178).

As we have seen in Song of Rita Joe and Invisible Shadows, women’s everyday and local experiences are multiple and varying. Bred by the economic and social contexts of the twentieth century, the conservative society that sought to exclude women from public discourse has had an even greater impact on the marginal communities of visible minorities. As in the rest of Canada, their skin colour has meant that Blacks and Natives have had to fight against many forms of racism and prejudice to have their voices heard in a public forum. Unfortunately, the life narratives under study in this chapter are so compelling because they are still exceptional. Both Rita Joe and Verna Thomas recognize that they are models for their people, and that their triumphs – although accessible to others – are the products of much dedication and perseverance. According to these women, there is still much territory to gain for their peoples. To achieve equality, there must be a willingness on both sides to communicate and to learn. Both Thomas and Joe ask the dominant groups to exhibit more tolerance, while they also ask their respective groups to move forward instead of dwelling on the past.

By voicing their everyday and local experiences, Thomas and Joe have reflected a need that many women throughout the world express: to come out of the shadows, and to have their experiences be legitimated by the mainstream. Other Maritime women have been able to reflect this desire for agency and this quest for identity in their travel writing. As we will see in the following chapter, travelling women’s constructions of experiences in foreign territories, as well as their interpretations of local women’s experiences reveal that the everyday and the local produce sites of knowledge for women everywhere.
Chapter 3:

Travelling Selves


(Dyane Léger, Les anges en transit 72)

I am in Chania, on the island of Crete, searching for something. Some truth that keeps eluding me. Some peace I long for. I am fleeing old griefs, trying to lose myself, find myself.

(Simone Poirier-Bures, That Shining Place 6)

While many Maritime women writing life stories concentrate on their local experiences of the everyday — that is, their experience within the region — some Maritime women have also written about their ventures outside of the region. Despite the change in setting, however, many concerns remain the same. Travelling Maritime women are also very much concerned with articulating their standpoint in terms of everyday and local experiences. Moreover, the context of travel allows Maritime women to look at how women in other parts of the world experience their daily lives.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, most Maritime women writing life narratives have chosen fairly traditional forms of life writing, such as biography, autobiography or epistolary writing. Although we did see that Thomas and Joe played with language, including orality and a bit of poetry in their texts, their texts nevertheless remain within the frameworks of the established autobiographical genre. One could hypothesize that this is due in part to the women’s advanced ages, and to the fact that
they were largely exposed to more traditional narratives throughout their formative years. But to think that all Maritime life writing stays within the generic boundaries is false, for there are Maritime women who have dared to transgress limits in their works. In “Travel Writing and Gender,” Susan Bassnett explains [that] “increasingly in the twentieth century, male and female travellers have written self-reflexive texts that defy easy categorisation as autobiography, memoir or travel account” (225). As travellers span the globe, often in hopes of finding their “true” selves in distant locations, the reconstruction of their journeys can take complex forms. The transgeneric life narrative is, therefore, one of the ways that travellers may address the difficulty of being in a foreign space.

A generation younger than the women studied in the previous chapters, and perhaps more disillusioned with the world, Dyane Léger and Simone Poirier-Bures both use the travel narrative as a subversive way to question the construction of places, spaces, everyday experiences and subjectivity. In Les âges en transit (1992) by Léger and That Shining Place (1995) by Poirier-Bures, life-altering journeys are constructed with the help of literary conventions. For one, Léger includes poetry and surrealism in her text, while Poirier-Bures’ text reads more like a fragmented novel than a memoir. Throughout their texts, both women focus on how their journeys have impacted the self, and how they now see their travels as defining moments in their lives. Furthermore, travelling changes the way these women see the wider, global world, and it changes the way they see their own, local world. Faced with the everyday realities of women in foreign lands, both women reflect upon their gendered positions within these new spaces, as well as within the spaces they have left behind. In addition, Léger and Poirier-Bures sometimes see
these foreign women as reflections of their mothers' or their sisters' everyday and local experiences, creating a dialogical relationship between the foreign and the known.

The approaches taken by both authors to life writing differ greatly from those of the women in the previous chapters. Rather than focusing on the reconstruction of their entire life, as Chiasson, Joe, Thomas have attempted to do, Léger and Poirier-Bures concentrate on a few, intense travel experiences that have changed their entire life path. Travel alters one's perception of self and reality. Therefore, throughout this chapter, I will focus on how travel writing provides ways of constructing knowledge and identity that are different from traditional autobiographies. Also, the implicit goals in Les anges en transit and That Shining Place are different from those in the former texts. Neither Léger nor Poirier-Bures write with the desire to be read by family and friends or with the need to inscribe their life writing into local posterity. Neither do their voices necessarily speak about their community's cultural survival. As both women are authors by profession, their voices are literary, and their audiences – albeit limited – are more or less restricted to that of trained readers. Their messages are universal in scope, and their claims are made on behalf of women, children, the poor and the marginalized. Like the previous women, they continue to focus on the impact of everyday and local experiences on their subjectivities as well as on those of others.

i) Writing the Travelling Self

As a genre, travel writing is increasingly difficult to define. For example, in The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing, the cultural and theoretical implications of travel are examined in contributions made by specialists in various fields such as
anthropology, history, literature and cultural studies. After a long history, travel literature – fictitious or non-fictitious – is emerging in the Maritimes as an increasingly popular contemporary form through which the individual can explore the implications of her movements through space. Although the genre was once considered by many as “subliterary,” Mary Baine Campbell explains that “[t]he interest in travel writing – across a wide political spectrum – was part of the necessary re-imagining of the world first occasioned by the post-World War Two resistance movements and wars of liberation in the former European colonies, as well as by the waves of immigration that followed” (261). In other words, travel writing became a way of examining changing subjectivities as people across the globe came increasingly into contact with each other.

According to Susan Bassnett, women travellers have mostly focused on the complexities found within the networks and patterns of everyday life (230). Like their male counterparts, they have created (and continue creating) self-reflexive texts that often defy categorization. In Dyane Léger’s *Les anges en transit* and Simone Poirier-Bures’ *That Shining Place*, experimentation with form challenge our understanding of travel, space, place and subjectivity. In their texts, both women journey through time and memory to deconstruct and re-construct the knowledge they gained from their travels to see how it compares to their everyday, local experiences in the Maritimes.

Before the fall of Communism, Léger made a life-changing voyage to the USSR. Also in the eighties, she witnessed the most impoverished parts of New Orleans while attending a conference. *Les anges en transit*, divided in two parts, is a retrospect of these two journeys. It mixes poetry and prose, creating a surrealist text that challenges the very line that separates fact and fiction. The Acadian author tests the limits imposed by
mirrors, fairy tale motifs and stereotypes as she goes between the former USSR, New Orleans and Acadia. For her part, Simone Poirier-Bures assembles memories and tidbits from her two journeys to Crete in what resembles more of a post-modern novel than a travel narrative. The first journey, which she took in 1966 at the age of 21, lasted four months, during which she taught English as a second language in the town of Chania on the island of Crete. At the time, it was important for her to leave home, to experience something other than her familiar everyday. Twenty-five years later, Poirier-Bures returns to the village with the hope of finding the woman who had befriended her, and maybe even finding her younger self.

As previously mentioned, Léger and Poirier-Bures differ from the majority of Maritime women writing life narratives in that they are both from literary backgrounds. For the two women, these texts represent moments in their careers where the impact of certain experiences required a more personal approach to writing, rather than a literary approach. In 1980, Dyane Léger became the first Acadian woman to publish a collection of poetry with *Graines de fée*, for which she won the France-Acadie prize. She subsequently published *Visage de femmes* (1987), a collection of photos and text in collaboration with Corinne Gallant, and collections of poetry such as *Sorcière de vent* (1983), *Comme un boxeur dans une cathédrale* (1996) and *Le dragon de la dernière heure* (1999). In addition to her many contributions to Acadian literature, Léger is also recognized for her contributions in the field of visual arts. Like the rest of her works, *Les anges en transit* is published with Perce-Neige, an Acadian publishing house that has been specializing in poetry since 1980. Unlike her other works, however, this text is also published with Écrits des Forges, the editing house that has founded the Festival
International de Poésie in Trois-Rivières. Like Perce-Neige, this publishing house caters to poets and to authors in the beginnings of their career. While the text did not receive much critical attention when it was first published, it has recently been looked at more closely by academics. In Gérard Etienne’s long study of the text in the 2004 special issue of *Neue Romania*, Acadie 1604-2004, he claims that Léger’s texts has been the victim of a “conspuration du silence” (201) in that academics have paid too little attention to it in order to concentrate on more nationalistic, Acadian texts.

Simone Poirier-Bures is also from an Acadian family; however, since she grew up in Halifax in the sixties, she was alienated from her parents’ native French language, which is one of the reasons that she has chosen to pursue her writing career in English. After earning a Bachelors’ Degree in English at Newton College, near Boston, she took a year to travel in Europe and the Middle East, a year during which she taught English in Crete for four months. She then pursued her Master’s Degree in English at the University of New Brunswick (1970), and a Master’s Degree in Creative Writing at Hollins University in Virginia (1990). Since 1982, she has been a member of the English faculty at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. In addition to her memoir, Poirier-Bures has published two novels, *Candyman* (1994) and *Nicole* (2000), and over thirty short stories and personal essays. Her work is well received by critics, having appeared on a few “Best Books” lists. In particular, *That Shining Place* won the 1996 Evelyn Richardson award, Atlantic Canada’s most prestigious award for non-fiction, sponsored by the Writers’ Federation of Nova Scotia, and was featured on George Elliott Clarke’s 1996 Best Books list for *The Halifax Chronicle Herald* as “Best of the Genre.” The book is
published by Oberon Press, which focuses exclusively on Canadian authors and claims that “we will not publish a book unless it has literary merit” (www.oberonpress.ca).

Although Léger and Poirier-Bures’s texts are not limited to local distribution, as are some of the texts in this study, their potential readership remains somewhat limited to trained readers or academics. Both texts are aesthetically polished, complex and dense. Neither is longer than one hundred pages, yet the intensity of their experiences is clearly conveyed. For both authors, these texts are the most explicitly autobiographical that they have produced. Simone Poirier-Bures explains:

_That Shining Place_, ironically, started as a novel and became a memoir. That, too, sprang from a need to understand and share my experience. […] It was my life’s great experiment. I wanted to live in a non-materialistic, joyful way and I thought I would learn how to do this from the Greeks. But what began as an idyll turned ugly, and I had to leave. Twenty-five years later I went back to Crete, to try to find the woman who had befriended me back then, and to come to terms with my younger, more idealistic self. I tried writing all this as a novel but it didn’t work – it needed the ring of truth as well as the play of memory. So it became a memoir. (http://www.english.vt.edu/~poirier/homepage.html)

What is important in this explanation is the fact that Poirier-Bures’s first instinct was to fictionalize her experience. Just as a traveller may assume a different persona when on her journeys – because of her anonymity in new territories, because of the adventurous aspects of her journey – the fictionalizing process enables the author to transform her experience into what she thinks it should or could have been.
Both authors cloak their autobiographical experiences with some fictionalizing constructions. Bassnett warns us that “in fact many of the works by women travellers are self conscious fictions, and the persona who emerges from the pages is as much a character as a woman in a novel” (234). So, for example, the young self in Poirier-Bures’ text is very much the author’s construction of what she remembers herself to have been like over twenty-five years ago – or maybe what she wishes she would have been like back then. The extent to which one has the power to create one’s own persona is revealed in the book’s Afterword, in which Poirier-Bures reflects upon how she represented her younger self while she was in Greece for the first time, through her letters to her mother and her sister, and how she has chosen to represent her younger self in her text.

The letters to my sister from Greece contained no new revelations, but they made me consider the whole matter of personas again. The persona who wrote to my mother was a small part of myself – pushed forward because that’s what my mother wanted, that’s what would reassure her, please her. The persona who wrote to my sister represented a larger part of myself – more level-headed, less breathy – but still only a part. The real self, I have come to believe is memory. And that is what I put in my memoir. (93)

Memory is also an important factor in Léger’s text. She writes so that the horrors of what she encounters on her journey will not be forgotten, and that they will be inscribed in her own memory and in her readers’ memories through her text. As a result, she consciously takes on the persona of writer in Les anges en transit, as it enables her to justify materialising the gruesome realities that she has witnessed. She cries out:
Comme un mère qui, le jour de la naissance de sa fille, a juré de ne jamais la faire pleurer, je jure de faire tout ce que je pourrai pour lutter contre le spectre de givre qui noie les chiens, traque les enfants. Je ferai tout ce que je pourrai pour attendrir les yeux du monstre, pour le garder loin de toi, loin de nous.

Ici, je sais – IL NE FAUT PAS L’OUBLIER – la réalité c’est le passé, – ou – ce que les rêveurs appellent le futur. […]

Cela et l’espoir que demain le train arrivera, que demain, avec ou sans lui, je partirai, cela me fait prendre un couteau, et aiguiser mon crayon. (43-44)

Writing, albeit a somewhat violent act for Léger, is necessary to reveal what society’s fictionalizing discourse would have us forget – that others live in poverty, that people of different races are still marginalized because of the color of their skin, and that certain women have to struggle to keep their children alive. It is also necessary because it allows the writer and her readers to hope that change is possible. Léger sees her authorial self as being invested in society, and as having a duty to address certain issues – such as poverty and suffering, in this case – within her texts. In an interview with Michel Giroux, she confesses: “j’écris pour moi-même, c’est un jeste qui est très égoïste, et très intime.” She continues, however, that “en publiant, cela en fait un acte social, politique” (Giroux 162). She asks: “Et, si les poètes ne disent rien, qui va le dire?” (Giroux 162).

Léger’s aesthetically pleasing poetics demand sustained effort on the reader’s part, for they rely heavily on the use of paradoxes, suggesting that the interstices, or the margins, can be fertile spaces of creation. Moreover, the use of surrealism warps fact and fiction. In this dream-like – or, rather, nightmarish – world, a perverted fairy-tale motif cloaks autobiographical details. In her text, Dyane Léger creates an alternative space of
being. As she invites her readers to go through the mirror, to break it and to break free
from it, Léger is challenging readers to change their modes of perception, as she has also
been forced to do. Underneath the surrealism and the poetry, lie the harsh truths that
Léger has witnessed in the everyday life of Russia and New Orleans. The poverty and
the oppression she has witnessed are difficult for her to remember and to write about, yet
she takes it upon herself to do so. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature,*
*Psychoanalysis and History,* literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychiatrist Dori Laub
argue that testimony, which addresses the “crisis of truth,” is the “discursive mode of our
times” (5-6). They add that to bear witness to an event or to a certain deplorable reality,
such as Léger has, is to be responsible for truth. As she realizes that she now knows the
truth, Léger feels that she must reveal it to others: “En ce temps-là… / Je trêvains dans le
ciel avec le fantôme d’une vieille/ machine à écrire./ Je ne savais pas pourquoi les chiens
des pauvres/ ouvraient la bouche quand il neigeait, ni pourquoi/ les jambes des géants
étaient des corps de serpent” (Léger 9). Léger constructs her text with elements of story-
telling in order to de-stabilize her readers, yet romanticism is not allowed in this work.
Even though references to mythology and the fairy tale motif are abundant, there is no
happy ending.

Poirier-Bures’s text is divided into ten parts, with an Afterword at the end.
Although the parts make sense as a whole, they could be read individually, or even in a
different order. While there is a loose chronology within *That Shining Place,* the
majority of the events are episodic. Much like in a post-modern novel, the reader must
learn to navigate between three times: the present time in which the author writes, the
recent past, in which the author returns to Greece after twenty-five years, and the distant
past, when the author first travelled to and experienced the foreign land. Even though the author makes it clear that this is a work of non-fiction, the narrative's structure questions the authenticity of certain re-created experiences. But this, in fact, supports Poirier-Bures' desire to create a text that explores the workings of memory. Even though memory refers to the individual's own understanding of experience, it is shifting and can even be unreliable.

One concept that recurs throughout both women's texts, as well as in their discussions on their work, is the idea of agency. As children of the sixties, Léger and Poirier-Bures became adult women who believed that they could assume their own trajectories. In their twenties, both women dared to transgress the gender boundaries that had trapped their mothers before them. By becoming the first woman to have her poetry published in Acadie, Léger drew attention to female subjectivity within the male-dominated, nationalist literature of the time. For her part, Poirier-Bures recognizes that her liberty to travel was not shared by all women at the time. She remembers her mother's immobility in contrast with her own mobility: "I wrote to my mother regularly from Crete, my mother who had wanted all her life to travel, but who had left Eastern Canada only once, and then only to attend my college graduation in Boston" (48). She also remembers her sister's situation in comparison with hers. "While I was off gallivanting," she says, "she kept house, kept children, kept a husband. She was only a year and a half older than I, and her hands were cracked from too many dishes, too many washloads of diapers" (93). In the sixties, seventies, and even eighties, not all Maritime women could assume the same degree of agency. David Creelman, in writing of the role of literature in rendering local experience, reminds us that Maritime women lived in a
masculinist, nostalgic culture that discouraged women from innovating, and stepping outside of the comfort zone of the domestic realm (174). Both Poirier-Bures and Léger recognize that society’s gender rules were limiting to the women before them, to the women around them, and to many of the women they encountered in their travels as well. Consequently, gender inequalities, among other inequalities, are addressed in their texts. Rather than focussing exclusively on the construction of the authors’ own subjectivities, both texts also include an understanding of how others experience limitations in the everyday world.

Although the women focus on the people and the cultures they encounter, it would be false to assume that both women are looking with purely ethnographic eyes. For one, the texts were only written years after the actual journeys, which suggests that Léger and Poirier-Bures were not out to “study” the people in order to write about them. Rather, they were so profoundly touched by their experiences that they subsequently needed to write them down. For example, Dyane Léger wanted to exorcise the demons that were left inside from her journeys to the former USSR and New Orleans in order to cleanse herself of her own, difficult past as well. She explains the call to writing as such:

C’est à ce moment précis qu’à toutes les nuits, le fantôme de la vieille machine à écrire bourrait sa pipe en me disant: ‘Tu vois, le soleil n’est pas mort... et la lune sera toujours un poème écrit à la main dans les étoiles.’

C’est à peu près en ce temps-là aussi que, pour la première fois, j’ai senti le miroir comme un perversion et, quand son œil froid a pénétré le mien, j’ai compris que je venais de tuer le conte de fées que les religieuses de mon enfance avaient dicté.

(Léger 11)
For Léger, writing puts an end to illusions. Her goal is to break the homogenizing representations of the world, for she is fully aware that constructions of reality are always subjected to one’s point of view. Ironically, she must create more illusions in order to destroy those she sees as misleading.

But writing is also a source of paradox for Léger, as she experiences it as both liberating and confining. The fact that she is a woman writing means that she must live with a certain amount of guilt — “[c]e tourment qu’est l’écriture quand on est moitié femme, moitié poète et que le remords est une torture” (Léger 41). In a sense, even though the humble disclaimers made by the elderly women in the previous chapters are absent from her writing, their remains a gendered approach to writing that suggests that women still need to justify why they write. Léger’s position in regards to her role as a writer indicates that desire and fear are in conflict when it comes to venturing into the unknown. Nevertheless, despite the torments that it may produce within her, she explains to Michel Giroux: “que l’écriture rend possible le voyage dans l’imaginaire, c’est une porte d’entrée dans l’univers onirique. […] L’écriture est sans frontières. C’est une bête indomptée, sauvage” (Giroux 151), which makes her endeavors worth it.

Travel and writing come together to help Léger forget her difficult childhood, and even her challenging relationships with certain family members. At the beginning of her text, the act of writing about her trip to Russia is cathartic. Léger’s youth in Acadia is a site of painful return that is also a creation space. More specifically, she is haunted by her relationship with her father. “Les secrets que mon père m’a confiés étaient souvent d’une telle pesanteur que je voyais les mâchoires de la terre s’ouvrir et happer l’ombre de mon ange” (Léger 37). One of her father’s secrets is his call to warn her about his plan to
commit suicide – a call that still rings in her head while she is writing, months after the phone call took place. Not only is she weighed down by her father’s burdens, which include alcoholism, but Léger is also stripped of her sense of protection and security. The father’s role is problematized to such an extent, that Léger uses her own example as a platform through which she can criticize patriarchy as a whole. How could this system, implemented to protect the weak, let millions of women and children suffer and starve? How could it allow slavery and segregation to exist? According to Gérard Etienne, it is precisely this pondering, this come and go between her own problematic up-bringing and that of entire generations in “foreign” landscapes, that marks the major displacement in the text (202). Her childhood memories meld themselves with what she sees on her travels to create a problematic textual space.

For Poirier-Bures, writing is mostly about letting her memory speak. Unlike Léger, she does not seem tormented by the fact that she is a woman writing. However, it is important to note that throughout her writing career, Poirier-Bures has had the opportunity receive a Virginia Commission for the Arts Individual Artist Grant as well as being a fellow at the VCCA (Virginia Center for the Creative Arts) six times. As a result, her time spent writing was funded, which meant that she did not have to make as many sacrifices as others would. In contrast, Léger’s interview with Giroux reminds us that even artists must consider the financial aspects of their work: “Le roman, ça se vend, la poésie ne se vend pas – toujours les considérations économiques” (152). Financial considerations aside, the writing process is not always an easy task. When Poirier-Bures began writing That Shining Place, she often asked herself: “What [is] this thing, anyway?” (88). Later, she realized that “it had come from a need to tell; it wasn’t trying
to be anything” (88). Unlike Léger’s Anges, this text is not an exorcism or a catharsis. Rather, it is a loving act, much like those studied in the previous chapters, in which the author wants to relive a moment through writing. Similar to Léger’s text, however, is Poirier-Bures’ need to tell, like the other women in this study, to have her voice heard and to speak the truth. According to Felman and Laub’s work on testimony, “memory is conjured […] essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community” (204). For Maritime women, travellers and non-travellers alike, providing a testimony on the everyday is an important way of communicating their experiences, in order to enter them into their readers’ consciousnesses and into their own consciousness of a personal quest for identity.

ii) Experiencing the Everyday and the Local from a Distance

According to Susan Bassnett, the idea that everything is knowable and mappable is fundamentally a patriarchal concept (230). Drawing on Gillian Rose in Feminism and Geography, Bassnett argues that “a feminist concept of geography sees the world differently: here the goal is not to map every detail, but to reinsert a physical dimension into the discourse, to engage with the everyday as an end in itself, not as a means to a different end” (230). In the previous chapters, we have seen that everyday experiences came to define Maritime’s women’s ways of seeing the self. The things women do on a daily basis – whether it be their work at home or in the workplace, their relationships with family, friends and community members, or their daily obstacles (such as racism, sexism) – provide them with standpoints proper to articulating their knowledge about their own lives. Travelling women are also concerned with the everyday – their own,
everyday experiences in foreign lands, and the locals’ (especially, local women’s) everyday experiences. Before examining the authors’ constructions of their everyday during their time abroad, we must focus on the people they meet and on the challenges that these people face, for the traveller’s experiences are mostly linked to the locals’ everyday.

According to many critics, the “other” is often a mirror for the self (Todorov, Paterson, Said). One’s alterity is characterized in relation to others, and it is always variable and changing. Consciously or not, the traveller constructs the other in terms of how he or she resembles or is different from her. In this dialectic, the traveller is the point of reference with which the local is compared. However, in travel writing, it is not always obvious who is “other.” In both texts under study, the author initially sees the local inhabitant as “other,” yet her perception changes when she realizes that she is the “other” in foreign lands. When seeking to define her self in opposition to others, the female traveller looks at how they spend their daily lives, and how these routines and ways of knowing compare to what she knows.

Les anges en transit retraces two of Dyane Léger’s most marking journeys to Russia and New Orleans. Throughout the text, memories of her physical wanderings abroad provoke internal reflections on her everyday experiences at home. In fact, experiencing Russia’s extreme destitution and New Orleans’ profound racial divide, triggers thoughts and dreams on Léger’s own upbringing in Acadia. Léger grew up in a home touched by alcoholism and poverty in Notre-Dame, New Brunswick (see Léger 37, 55), in a time when Acadians were still living on the margins of society. Even though she realizes that what she sees abroad is more severe than what she has gone through
locally, the trips serve to magnify her Acadian reality. As a result, travel provides her with a new outlook on the everyday struggle of poverty and exclusion in her own past.

In both places, the everyday is characterized by death. In Russia, the harsh environment is compounded by the even harsher social realities faced by the people. In Léger’s eyes, even in the nineteen-eighties, people in Russia die because of the cold, because they are starving, and because they are committing suicide due to their belief that nothing can change. Everyday existence is so bleak for the “peuple d’Ivan” (Léger 30) that Léger wants to forget everything she has witnessed: “J’aurais voulu ne pas lire les pensées de ces femmes qui rêvaient d’acheter la mort, plus humaine que la cruauté du quotidien qu’elles répétaient, calvaire après calvaire” (Léger 16). Léger is uneasy with what she sees, for even though she herself has experienced difficult moments, she is not prepared for the raw forms of existence that she encounters. Dislocated by the extreme poverty and hardship, she bluntly remarks: “Facile de vivre la misère et la torture quand cela ne nous arrive pas à nous. Encore plus facile quand on est poète et que l’écriture sert d’exorcisme” (Léger 31). The everyday conditions are hardly better in New Orleans, where Léger is surprised that slavery still exists, and that the Cajuns and the Creoles are living on the margins of society: “[...] nulle part ailleurs aurais-je pu comprendre de façon aussi explicite la ségrégation raciale” (Léger 55).

More specifically, Léger looks to the women’s everyday with particular empathy and hope that they will have the strength to survive their experiences. She contrasts their lives with her mother’s and her own lives, which suggests that although the standpoints from which they speak are unique, many women share common experiences, such as motherhood and male domination in these cases. At first, Léger tells us: “Je les connais
ces femmes. Je les connais toutes comme on connaît un poème appris par cœur” (Léger 18). For one, they are like her mother in that they are victims of repression and despair. Consequently, she feels close to the women that she meets: “Tout près des femmes qui n’ont plus d’histoire à conter. Trop près de ces femmes qui portent leur corps comme ma mère, la haine qu’elle éprouve contre mon père. Comme elle, ces femmes acceptent mal… et n’oublient pas. Comme elle, elles n’oublieront jamais leurs jeunesse perdues, leur vie ruinée” (Léger 16). However, she then admits:

Et pourtant, je ne sais rien d’elles, absolument rien de ces femmes dont les pieds sont les racines de la misère et dont la fatalité du destin indigne les steppes de la famine. Je ne connais rien de ces femmes. Seulement, elles éveillent en moi un sentiment de honte parce que, malgré moi, je n’ai pas encore vu l’épouvante qu’elles supportent à peine, je n’ai pas encore souffert l’atrocité d’une vie qui devrait être derrière des barreaux. (Léger 18)

While Léger can represent these women’s sufferings textually, she acknowledges that she cannot speak for them. Their everyday realities are characterized by so much suffering that Léger could never claim to “know” what they are going through. What is important to Léger is to begin to tell these women’s stories in order to reveal the potential violence and pain that lie in some women’s everyday experiences. By comparing these sufferings with her mother’s and her own experiences, she also begins to reveal the hardships of local lives. Through her characterizations of women’s everyday lives in Russia and New Orleans, Léger is making sense of the harsh realities of her own everyday life in Acadia in order to construct a new picture of her past.
In *That Shining Place* the everyday realities in Greece are not as harsh as those reported from Russia and New Orleans in *Les anges en transit*. Poirier-Bures constructs everyday life in Greece as being simple and pared down, yet she does not refer to their lifestyle as being difficult or lacking in anything. In fact, Poirier-Bures wishes to emulate the Greeks’ daily habits, which she perceives as being more authentic than those experienced in North America. For example, as the younger self attempts to get rid of her Western attachment to things, she idealizes the Greeks’ lack of materialism: “To me, their lives were closer to the real thing” (24). Like Léger, she focuses on women’s everyday experiences. As in other societies, the 1960s Greek society experienced by Poirier-Bures is profoundly divided along gender lines: women stay at home, while men are free to do as they please. Although she respects certain local traditions, such as wearing appropriate skirts and keeping her shoulders covered, Poirier-Bures realizes that, as a foreigner, she is freer than most local women. She is fully conscious that Greek women do not go out at night – especially if they are not accompanied by a brother or a male, family friend – nor do they leave the home for reasons other than domestic concerns. Accustomed to a certain amount of liberty, she very much wants to preserve agency over her actions. On one particular evening, Poirier-Bures remembers how Bryan, her roommate, brought home a sailor, and how this elicited controversy within the community. “The next day Maria tells me: it’s not good to have sailors come to your house. People talk. She waves her hands around to discredit such ‘talkers,’ but I recognize that she is right. I want no limits on my freedom, but I don’t wish to offend. I am an outsider, but I don’t wish to remain totally apart” (Poirier-Bures 36). Poirier-Bures
accepts to respect such rules, yet the Greek women, such as Maria, do not have a choice in such matters:

In the evenings, when I slip out to dance with the sailors on the waterfront, to drink, to behave in a way that is totally unacceptable for Greek women, I wonder what Maria thinks, at home, alone with her children. *The rules are different for me; this is part of my appeal.* Come with us, I say to her one Saturday evening when the winds are warm and we can smell spring coming. Giorgos never stays home – why should you? She clicks her tongue and throws back her head. I have proposed something preposterous, impossible. I might as well have proposed that we fly to the moon. She laughs, chides me for being so silly, but she puts on lipstick, and I know she is tempted. (Poirier-Bures 7, emphasis mine)

Despite the local women’s limitations, the younger Poirier-Bures romanticizes her experience in Greece, preferring to see the positive aspects of their everyday lifestyle. Like Léger, Poirier-Bures cannot truly know the local women’s experience, for she has the freedom to escape from the local realities, whereas Maria cannot.

As a result of this idealization, the Greek landscape is also represented in a positive light. Of course, it is characterized in opposition to her home in Halifax, which she is fleeing. She admits that, upon arrival, “among other things, I was full of the angst that came of living in northern climates by the sea, where the mornings were thick with fog, and it seemed always to be winter. I wanted warmth. I wanted something ‘other’” (17). In contrast, the Cretan landscape is full of promise: “it’s all wonderful and timeless, somehow. The wild, beautiful Cretan countryside, open, unfenced, owned by the gods, it seems” (Poirier-Bures 41). This construction of the landscape reflects the young
woman’s perception of the people, whom she admires for their seemingly endless joy and generosity. However, once the community’s gender rules begin to apply themselves to her, her perception of the people and the landscape change.

As “other,” Poirier-Bures could assume certain behaviour in her everyday actions that local women could not in their everyday actions. Once she becomes immersed in the culture, this permissiveness is put to an end, and she begins to feel stifled. Local authorities start suspecting the presence of such a liberated, female foreigner, “[a]nd suddenly it is all falling apart, the delicate balance. The waters are churning, roiling, the darkness is bubbling up everywhere. The old man with his donkey is no longer picturesque; he is simply poor. The eyes that watch me on the waterfront are no longer curious, but full of danger” (Poirier-Bures 67). Like the local women, Poirier-Bures is now limited because of her gender. She resents that she should have to alter her self, and this resentment is subsequently projected onto the local people and the landscape.

Similar to Poirier-Bures, Léger reacts to the local women’s everyday experiences in other countries by projecting her frustration onto the landscape. Léger refuses to recreate clichéd representations in these cruel spaces. Instead, she chooses a surreal portrayal that captures the horror and the nightmarish quality of what she encounters. She dislocates her reader, as she, too, has been dislocated by the events. What her text suggests is that to be disoriented sometimes provides us with new insights, new ways of seeing the world. This heightened form of awareness encourages movement between reality and fiction. According to Gérard Etienne, the identification process underway in Les anges en transit manifests itself through an opening to a dream-like world (206). By travelling between reality and dream, Léger can then fuse myth and fairy tale to what she
observes, creating a new space of consciousness. More precisely, she uses the trope of the mirror to illustrate the limits of traditional perception. The mirror is a condensed space in which all phenomena, events and persons converge (Etienne 232). It is also a site where violence and desire manifest themselves: “Sur le mur, le miroir était un océan dans lequel un derangé avait vidé son revolver. Dans le carnage, émergea le regard d’une femme” (Léger 12). To know this woman, the traveller must penetrate the mirror, and cross over to its other side. The mirror also suggests that what the traveller encounters is a reflection of her own experience. While their lives might differ immensely, the traveller and the inhabitants of the traveled spaces share a common experience of want, of desire for something more. Entrapped in power structures where economic and racial exclusion are everyday realities they all want to escape their confinements.

Although she has tried to separate herself from what she has seen, Léger eventually breaks down and opens herself up to what is happening before her eyes. In Russia, she cries out: “Seulement, je ne peux plus faire comme si ce genocide ne me touchait pas. Ses morts sont aussi les miens. Les larmes de sang qui coulent des yeux de cette femme coulent aussi des miens” (Léger 39). Her newfound recognition that she resembles the oppressed enables the traveller to reflect on the effects that poverty, marginality and power relations have on people around the world and back home. Although the face of oppression may vary from one area to the next, Léger realizes that the consequences are similar.

‘Pas besoin d’être noir ni nègre pour être affligé d’esclavage’ dit la sorcière en tournant du bout du doigt un revolver.
Je pense au blanc éclatant de la peau des miens. Je pense à ma mère qui, grâce aux enfants qu’elle avait torchés pendant sa vie de jeune fille, paya comptant sa robe de mariée.

Je pense à mon père qui, ne sachant ni lire ni écrire, éleva sa famille en abattant des forêts entières. Pas besoin de grandes explications pour comprendre que l’esclavage n’a pas de couleur. Ne connaît pas de mesure; que même vannée en plein ouragan, la lâcheté colle à l’homme. (Léger 53)

What Léger’s text seems to point out is a certain universality in oppression. To that effect, geography and space create different manifestations of power relations that lie beneath the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. Going to those places has the effect of bringing the traveller back to her own space through memories and recollections.

For the younger Poirier-Bures, the act of travelling is undertaken as a way to leave behind the self she no longer wants to be in order to become a different, perhaps better, self. For the older woman, travelling twenty-five years later, the purpose of travelling does not seem to have changed immensely: she is still on a quest to find her self. Only after the last journey does the author realize that although travelling can have an impact on one’s identity, it cannot lead one to find one’s ultimate self. Identity and subjectivity are ever changing due to one’s experiences and perceptions. Revisiting Greece and the island of Crete triggered the process of remembering, but it also changed how Poirier-Bures remembers her previous journey. The space has changed to such an extent, and Greek society is so radically altered, that she questions if her earlier journey was ever really as she recollected it. In Greece for the second time, she thinks: “[…] how like a dream all this is. Except that it’s more like waking from a dream, a frightening,
complicated dream where the landscape is distorted, threatening; and you wake to find everything peaceful and orderly, to find that it has been all along. Did I imagine it, then, the danger? The suffering?” (76). The second trip provides Poirier-Bures with an occasion to revise her first trip. On a deeper level, it forces her to question her perception of things, her entire remembering process and her construction of experiences.

Both Dyane Léger and Simone Poirier-Bures have the desire to push the limits of telling – especially when it come to articulating their own experiences. As in the life-writing studied in the previous chapters in which the women create personas for their audiences, Léger and Poirier-Bures present travelling selves and authorial selves whose experiences are constructed through the limits of memory. Unlike the previous texts, however, Les anges en transit and That Shining Place consciously negotiate between reality and fiction, suggesting that the self is as much a work of fiction that one may shape to one’s liking as a tangible reality that is, nevertheless, subject to change. As in the previous chapters, everyday and local experiences provide the authors with unique standpoints that articulate a view of power structures that comes from the reality of lived lives, rather than from the top of a hierarchal system or through abstract theories generated by those in power. By being sensitive to other women’s experiences of the everyday and the local while on their journeys, Léger and Poirier-Bures come to a greater understanding of their own realities which, although different, share many similarities with women around the world.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to read Maritime women’s life writing as an important site of knowledge on the region and, more specifically, on Maritime women’s lives. By focusing on constructions of the everyday and the local within the texts, rather than on the aesthetics or on the texts as discourse, and by emphasizing their importance as epistemologies, I have attempted to recuperate works that are currently understudied and undervalued by academics in the field of Canadian literature. Contemporary Maritime women’s life writing, written between 1980 and 2005, offers readers the opportunity to explore how actual women represent their lives textually. It also allows readers to come to a greater, more comprehensive understanding of the women that live in the country’s eastern region.

For scholars, an interpretation of Maritime society as seen through the lens of everyday, local experiences reveals to what extent it is false to assume that all Maritime women necessarily share a regional, homogenous identity. By drawing on feminist standpoint theories, such as those articulated by Dorothy Smith and Joan Wallach Scott, for example, this study has been able to reflect the heterogeneous character of Maritime women’s experiences of the region as well as of foreign spaces. While standpoint theory may not be the most accurate methodology to analyse how Maritime society actually is, it has allowed me to discover how certain Maritime women see their world, and how they represent it in their life narratives.
As I have explored in the three chapters, as well as in the introductory overview, the knowledge articulated throughout the texts is mostly based on the women’s personal experiences of the home, of domesticity, of family life, of ethnicity and of travel. More specifically, this knowledge reveals that although local and intimate relationships provided women with many positive experiences, it remains that Maritime society limited women in terms of what life paths were seen as acceptable or not, what careers were permissible to ruling group and non-ruling group women, and what attitudes were suitable for women to maintain. These restrictions were even greater for women of visible minority groups, as they faced the additional challenges of segregation and racism.

While the knowledge articulated throughout the texts drew its sources from the self and the community, some aspects of personal and communal life were notably absent from the texts. For the elderly women, whose texts I examined in the two first chapters, the body was discussed very little or not at all. While both travelling women seemed more comfortable with describing their body’s functions and sexual desires, their elderly counterparts skimmed over pregnancies and disregarded their first menstruations or menopause. Eveline Chiasson went into some detail about personal illnesses, but, even then, she chose to focus on the psychological effects of her ailments rather than the physical attributes. For the older generation of autobiographers, the body remains an unspoken subject for what I assume are generational and social reasons. As a result, the following study demonstrated how these women define themselves textually as women through their roles as mother, wife or daughter and through gendered societal expectations of them rather than through their bodies. Among the studied texts, Dyane
Léger’s *Les anges en transit* was the only one in which the body was discussed; however, the focus was mostly on the female body as a site of patriarchal domination as opposed to Léger’s understanding of her own body.

Another surprising absence throughout the French-language texts was the lack of linguistic or cultural identity construction. All of the French-language texts, as well as the English-language travel narrative, were written by Acadian women; however, the women’s Acadian-ness is hardly referred to in their texts, except in Dyane Léger’s *Les anges en transit*. Contrary to their literary counterparts, Acadian autobiographers may not feel the same necessity to speak on behalf of the community. The absence may also be explained by the fact that, in the years in which most of the studied texts were published, from the late nineties to 2005, the Acadian people’s linguistic and cultural struggles were not as pressing as they had been in previous decades, when assimilation was a greater threat and cultural survival a more pressing issue.

In Chapter 1, in which I focused on two women’s recollections of their lives in the early and mid-twentieth century, I first realized to what extent the process of writing down one’s life narrative can lead not only to the creation of a text, but also to the creation of new selves: the self that is discovered by the audience and the authorly self that is transformed by the very process of writing. In Eveline Chiasson’s *Ma mère et moi au Cœur de notre famille acadienne* and Joan Archibald Colborne’s *Letters from the Manse*, both autobiographers draw attention to the private landscapes, the people and the local settings that defined how they came to see the self. What this knowledge teaches us is that everyday actions and interactions represent a greater portion of what the women articulate as their reality than do representations of the Maritimes brought forth by ruling
groups in the public sphere. This is not to say that women are not affected by their region’s economic, political and legal issues – because they certainly are. This is to say, however, that they may not necessarily relate to the economic, political and legal discourses that articulate a more homogenous interpretation of the Maritimes than do local discourses. As opposed to ruling discourses, the Maritime women’s constructions of the local have illustrated Dorothy Smith’s point that “knowledge [is] a practical matter [that] relates to practical experiences” (Campbell 10). “Ordinary” women may articulate valuable knowledge based in ordinary, “practical” actions.

It is even more difficult to find a place within regional discourse for women of visible minority. As the analyses of Verna Thomas’s Invisible Shadows: A Black Woman’s Life in Nova Scotia and Rita Joe’s Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi’kmag Poet revealed in Chapter 2, the local and the everyday are two sites in which these women of minority have voiced to what extent their peoples’ marginalizations have affected their own self and why their gender identity is second in importance to their racial identity. Although Joe and Thomas are proud of their Native and Afro-Nova Scotian heritages, their standpoints draw attention to the obstacles caused by their visible minority status.

As Colborne and Chiasson in the first chapter, the autobiographers in the second chapter emphasize their experiences of community as contributing largely to how they see the self and its worlds. However, in Joe and Thomas’ life narratives, the community is not only present in terms of providing a local environment, but it is also an important part of the narrative, as both women include community history as part of their own life experiences. As visible minorities in a predominantly white region, Joe and Thomas
both assume leadership positions within their communities, positions that include inscribing their communities within regional discourse, all the while correcting what they see as false representations of their peoples. For both Joe and Thomas, it is imperative that minority groups living in the Maritimes continue to speak out about their condition in order to avoid silencing.

In the final chapter, the attention turned away from the region, to see how travelling Maritime women represent the self in their negotiations between the everyday and the local at home and away. Explorations of Dyane Léger’s Les anges en transit and Simone Poirier-Bures’ That Shining Place, revealed many instances in which constructions of foreign spaces were thin veils for the travellers’ re-interpretations of their local, home spaces. By focusing on gender restrictions, poverty or discrimination in Russia, New Orleans and Greece – always in comparison with home – both women illustrated to what extent their experiences of the everyday and the local in the Maritimes followed them throughout their journeys and, consequently, altered their perception of the encountered lands and peoples. While I chose to focus somewhat on the aesthetics of these texts because of the authors’ literary backgrounds, their standpoints uncovered how both women see their travels as having deepened their understanding of their own, local realities.

The texts studied within this project were as diverse as its authors. Autobiographies, an epistolary text and travel writing all provide different angles from which to construct the everyday. These texts do not, however, represent all forms of Maritime women’s life writing. While preparing for this project, I soon realized that the breadth of life writing is quite vast. In order to maintain a certain level of coherence
within this work, many interesting texts, such as those mentioned in the overview, were put aside, not without much regret. What these other texts revealed and also confirmed is the unique character of individual women’s lives. By reading all these texts as a corpus, one unveils a “history of difference” (Wallach Scott 379), a history that looks at the past and the present through the unique voices of women articulating their daily experiences. The corpus also highlights the need to inscribe one’s life into a community’s narrative. In other words, it shows to what extent the process of remembering is privileged in a local setting, and how these memories engage the self and others with the past.

There are still more life narratives written by women in the Maritimes to be discovered. For one, I was particularly drawn to texts written by religious women. In recent years, many nuns and former nuns have begun writing about their life behind the walls of the convent, as we saw to a certain extent in Eveline Chiasson’s autobiography. One text in particular, Andréa Richard’s *Femme après le cloître*, co-published by Editions d’Acadie and Editions du Méridien in 1995, is particularly revelatory of the repressive nature of the Catholic Church on its female servants. Andréa Richard was born in Sainte-Anne-de-Kent, in New Brunswick, in 1934. One of eight children, Richard grew up in a prominent, Acadian family in a time when poverty was especially present. After twenty-two years as a nun, Richard left the cloister in order to devote herself as a laywoman. In the seventies, she founded the Alliance de Trois-Rivières and the Arche d’Alliance de Shawinigan. She has also given conferences and talks throughout Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, France and the United-States. Richard has published four books on women’s role in the Church with Editions Bellarmin, and *Femme après le cloître* is her first autobiographical work.
In her text, Richard focuses on her spiritual evolution from when she was a child, to when she became a nun, and through her decision to leave the cloister to become a layperson. This highly introspective work reveals the harsh reality of being a part of a religious order. Throughout the text, Richard reveals the physical and psychological effects of the constant self-denial demanded by the Church of its servants. As she relates her everyday experiences within the cloister, Richard becomes increasingly frustrated with the Church’s patriarchal structure. Although she remains profoundly religious, Richard articulates an alternative vision for the Church, in which women have a place as religious leaders, and in which members of the clergy need not deny their human nature in order to serve God.

According to Richard, the purpose of this work is to reveal the tragedies that may occur within the limits of organized religious orders. The revelations are sometimes shocking, yet they are not constructed in sensationalist terms. Richard presents an honest, unveiled picture of what life was like for many women in her position. Like the texts studied within this project, works such as Richard’s reveal the hidden structures of power by providing knowledge from the standpoint of those who have been most oppressed by it in their everyday lives.

Two more forms of women’s life writing present in the Maritimes are testimonials of illness and community histories. The former raises the issue of the body in the construction of subjectivity and identity, and especially focuses on the effects of battling illness on a daily bases. The latter, which is often undertaken by an individual or a group of women highlights the importance of the community in an individual’s life.
There remains much research to be done in this field. As women occupy a greater role in public life within the region, proper attention has yet to be paid to the intricacies and realities of women's private, everyday lives. Retrospectives written by elderly women, women of visible minority status and travelling women only begin to reveal the complexities of women's experiences in and of the region.
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