“Ah the [ˈratən] luck”: Dialect, Authenticity, and the Regional Stereotype in Donald Shebib’s *Goin’ Down the Road*

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Introduction

THIRTY-THREE MINUTES INTO *GOIN’ DOWN THE ROAD*, Donald Shebib’s classic 1970 film about two displaced Maritimers in Toronto, appears a short but pivotal scene. Nicole Morin, a seductive French-Canadian office girl at a Toronto bottling plant, approaches Pete McGraw, a bottler at the plant and one of the film’s two protagonists:

Nicole: Do you know where is Monsieur Laroche?  
Pete: Who?  
Nicole: Monsieur Laroche.  
Pete: Oh...uh, ya, Frenchy. Um, I tink ’e’s down dere at de udder end dere. (00:34-00:35)

Thanking him, Nicole walks away. As Pete stares after her longingly, he crashes the forklift he is driving—which his boss had previously forbidden him from driving—into a stack of crates, toppling the stack, shattering bottles onto the floor, and bringing the scene to an end. The scene is brief and the dialogue is terse, but the exchange marks a decisive moment in the film, encapsulating in less than two minutes the narrative’s central tropes. Pete’s unauthorized use of the forklift signals his aspirations for upward mobility and a fulfilling occupation; his obvious

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1 Throughout the paper, the quotations given are my own transcription of the film’s dialogue, with in-text citations referring to [hour: minute], or [hour: minute: second] where necessary. Transcribed quotations from the film have been checked against the script published in *Best Canadian Screenplays* (1992) as well as mimeographed copies of the original typescript held at the TIFF Film Reference Library. The dialogue in the film diverges substantially from both the original and published scripts. While the original typescript provides occasional indication for the speaker to deviate from standard English pronunciation — for instance “Hollow” for “Hello” (2) and “I dunno” for “I don’t know” (32) — they are generally written without clear direction for pronunciation or dialectal variation. All phonetic notations appearing in quotes are my own, as are the spelling of words (i.e. “dere” for “there”) to reflect the phonetic variation spoken by the actors in the film.
sexual longing for Nicole recalls the film’s broader concern with patriarchal male desire; and his utter failure to either impress Nicole or properly operate the forklift anticipates his final emasculation and the eventual dissolution of his hopes and ambitions.

Comprised of only a few short lines, the dialogue between Pete and Nicole appears unimportant. After all, it is Pete’s inability to ask her out, his inability to control the forklift, and, later on, his inability to dance and make love to Nicole that precipitate the erosion of the life he had envisioned for himself. Yet it is not the extra-dialogic aspects of the scene, but the characters’ use of language itself that establishes the discursive context in which the interaction plays out. The contrast between Pete’s hesitant, stumbling replies and Nicole’s casual and confident questions and the juxtaposition of Pete’s thick Cape Breton accent with Nicole’s strong French inflections appraise the viewer of much more than what the visual elements alone are capable of communicating. Of course, one’s response to the exchange will depend, to an extent, upon one’s familiarity with regional language and dialect variation in Canada. For most Canadian viewers, however, it becomes apparent from the patterns and pronunciation of their speech that both characters are émigré to Toronto, but while one is displaced, the other is accustomed to life in the urban metropolis.

Whereas Nicole’s language comes to project confidence and sensuality, Pete’s working-class Cape Breton accent becomes associated with a lack of sophistication and refinement. The scene thus evokes stereotypes by using linguistic features as signposts for the social identities of the two interlocutors, and therein lies its consequence: the scene captures the integral function of language within the film’s narrative logic. It is not Nicole’s French accent, however, but the dialect spoken by the film’s two protagonists—ostensibly, a working-class Cape Breton dialect—that is the most significant linguistic feature in the film’s discursive construction of authenticity. Situating the protagonist’s use of dialect within a broader critical discourse surrounding the film’s authenticity, this paper will explore the ways in which the use of working-class speech and Cape Breton accent serve to construct the protagonists as (ostensibly) authentic Maritimers, conflating their failures with their sociolinguistic identities. Pete and Joey aren’t simply the victims of circumstance—of underdevelopment and deindustrialization in the Maritimes, and of discrimination in Toronto; they are inherently flawed characters intended to represent broader cultural deficiencies. While the film depicts, often sympathetically, a sociocultural reality, that of economic decline and outmigration in the Maritime provinces, the protagonists themselves—poor, uneducated, lazy, and criminal—become symbols of Atlantic-Canadian backwardness. The protagonists embody regional stereotypes and their use of non-standard Canadian English is a central marker of their regional identity, connecting dialect, dialogically and thematically, to their deficiencies.

Reception: Nationalism, Regionalism, Authenticity

Given that Goin’ Down the Road is widely regarded as having heralded “the beginning of the film industry in English Canada,” it is unsurprising that the film has garnered significant critical attention (McIntosh and Ramsay 2009). Upon its release the film met with widespread critical acclaim. Writing in the Chicago Sun-Times, Roger Ebert observed that “‘Goin’ Down the Road’ is about hard times here and now, and it’s the best movie to hit town in a long time”
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(“Goin Down the Road,” 1971). The by-line to Prat’s2 (1970, 20) review of the film in Variety was similarly indicative of the film’s critical and popular success: “Simple, affecting, vigorously told and acted tale of two Maritimers in the city; auspicious first film by Don Shebib. Going great at the Canadian box office.” Finally, Martin Knelman’s (1970, 24) review in The Globe and Mail effectively summed up the early critical consensus: “Goin’ Down the Road is a dazzling and almost miraculous beginning. It’s a likeable, original and uncorrupt little movie, deserving of a wider audience than it’s likely to get at the New Yorker and it should be a giant step forward for Canadian film”. Nevertheless, though early reviewers were almost unanimous in their praise for the film, criticism since has generally fallen into one of two camps.

Despite early consensus on the merit of the film, criticism has been divided between those who see the film expressing a quintessentially Maritime (and thus regional) experience, and those who identify the film’s protagonists, Pete and Joey, as essentially Canadian (and thus national) anti-heroes. In the nationalistic milieu of post-centennial Canada, criticism tended to tout the film’s capacity to express a Canadian cinematic idiom. Struggling against the Americanization of Canadian culture, a phenomenon bemoaned by such philosophers as George Grant in Lament for Nation (1965), these critics asserted the film’s Canadianness against the homogenizing power of American mass media. Indeed, early critics of the film implicitly accepted what Peter Harcourt (1977, 165) makes explicit in Movies and Mythologies: “If we are Nationalists and believe in ourselves as Canadians, the American product is really the enemy: Not because it is bad in itself [. . .] but because by monopolizing our screens it has colonized our imaginations.” It was in this vein that Margaret Atwood avowed the “pure” Canadianness of Goin’ Down the Road by rejecting the significance of regional disparity in the film, subjecting it to the then-vogue thematic criticism she had spearheaded in Survival: “The heroes survive, but just barely; they are born losers, and their failure to do anything but keep alive has nothing to do with the Maritime Provinces or ‘regionalism.’ It’s pure Canadian, from sea to sea” (Atwood 1972, 34). Robert Fothergill and John Hofsess also assert the film’s basic Canadianness,3 with Hofsess (1975, 69) lumping Pete and Joey in with Atwood’s other “losers” and echoing the film’s concern with masculinity: “good stories, fine acting, profoundly poignant moments, but nowhere a character with the brains, balls, will or gall to master life as it must be lived in the twentieth century. Instead we have a continuing stream of characters who cope, barely, and mope, plenty”. These moping characters, argues Hofsess, are definably Canadian characters, demonstrating a characteristically-Canadian “compulsion to fail” (76). Thus, in early criticism, regional disparity is rejected as a significant theme in favour of a nationalist interpretation that casts Pete and Joey as quintessentially Canadian characters.

More recently, however, critics have foregrounded the film’s regionalism, examining the way in which marginality and politics of the centre deeply inform the plight of the film’s protagonists. Dismissing the criticism of Atwood, Fothergill, and Hofsess as the product of a “totalizing, universalist, metaphoric type of reading”, Christine Ramsay (1993, 35) emphasizes intersectionality and the multiple inequalities, including regional disparities, that conspire to

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2 Reviews in Variety were signed with pen-names (e.g. Prat, Rich, Madd, etc.).

3 For a more detailed survey of extant criticism on the film and an analysis of the nationalistic tone that criticism takes, see Christine Ramsay’s “Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: ‘The Nation’ and Masculinity in Goin’ Down the Road.”
frustrate the protagonists. “Pete and Joey ‘fail,’ ‘rebel,’ and steal groceries for Christmas,” writes Ramsay, “not because of some abstract, flawed masculine ‘Canadian essence,’ but because of real regional, class, cultural, and gender differences in the structure of ‘the democratic nation’ called Canada” (38). Pointing toward the intersection between constructions of the nation and constructions of masculinity, Ramsay concludes that *Goin’ Down the Road* succeeds in conveying to “us, as English Canadians, from the position of the margins, the unique way we have historically faced the problems of social and personal identity through the Western concepts of ‘the nation’ and omnipotent masculinity” (47). For Ramsay, early nationalist criticism of the film fails to account for the film’s perceptive exploration of regional, class, and gender difference.

Christopher Gittings and Chris Byford also underscore the predominance of regionalism in the film, but are more skeptical than Ramsay about the film’s success at accurately depicting the socio-economic conditions that determine the lives of the protagonists. While acknowledging Shebib’s often sympathetic rendering of Joey and Pete, Gittings (2002, 161) notes that, at times, “his Central Canadian cinematic apparatus unwittingly reinscribes his cultural bias, limiting the bounds of a sympathetic, much less an empathetic, signification.” Byford (1998, 12) is even less forgiving, arguing against Ramsay that “Shebib’s film is so full of gross stereotypes and misinformation that it cannot be emblematic of any form of marginality, be it exiled Maritimers and/or emasculated working class men.” At times reductive, Byford’s assessment nevertheless highlights a crucial element of the discourse spawned by the film, namely, “a fundamental ontology that permeates the way the film is discussed in terms of its authentic representation of place” (12). Indeed, if there is one aspect of the film critics almost invariably agree on, it is the film’s “authenticity”.

For Ebert (1971), “Shebib achieves a documentary objectivity that touches us more deeply than tear jerking could”; for Fernando Croce (1970), the film “is chronicled by Donald Shebib with a documentarian’s eye for granular verity”; and for Knelman (1970, 24), “authentic human details are caught at almost every turn.” McIntosh and Ramsay (2009) praise Shebib’s “documentary authenticity” and George Melnyk (2004, 109) writes that “its authenticity is almost painful.” From whence does this authenticity derive? While nearly all critics applaud the film’s authenticity, noting the naturalistic performances of Doug McGrath (Pete) and Paul Bradley (Joey), none have paid significant attention to the actors’ use of working-class Cape Breton accents in the discursive construction of the film’s authenticity. This is especially striking given recent critics’ preoccupation with the film’s regionalism. The only explicit mention of accent comes from Tomáš Pospíšil’s brief commentary on the film, when he notes that “the feeling of authenticity is further underlined by the actors’ colloquial, unschooled accents” (Pospíšil 2011, 19). In his full-length monograph, *Donald Shebib’s Goin’ Down the Road*, Geoff Pevere (2012, 32) only implies the importance of accent, by way of contrast, when he notes that the actors’ success derived partially from the fact that they “didn’t enunciate in the plummy tones of the mid-Atlantic.” Yet neither Pospíšil nor Pevere venture to characterize the colloquial, not-so-plummy tones of Pete and Joey, tones that underpin their supposed “authenticity” and which are characterized by prominent geographical and class markers.
For reviewers and critics like Pospíšil and Pevere, the authenticity of the dialogue spoken by Pete and Joey appears to derive from what Nikolas Coupland\(^4\) (2003, 427, 421) deems “primary authenticities” —namely, the belief that an authentic language is a “naturally occurring language” and that authentic language indexes “authentic cultural membership.” Pete and Joey are deemed authentic speakers insofar as their language is both naturally occurring (“unschooled,” not derivative or imitative) and indexes their authentic cultural membership as Maritimers (“colloquial,” defined against “mid-Atlantic” speech patterns). Both of these criteria for linguistic authenticity are closely connected to geography. In “Sociolinguistics and Authenticity: An Elephant in the Room,” Penelope Eckert contends that “authenticity is constructed in relation to particular locations such as the traditional peasant in an isolated community (Holmquist 1985), the street kid in the inner city (Labov 1972a), and the burned out burn-out in a midwestern high school” (Eckert 2003, 392). Thus, belief in the authentic speaker, the “spontaneous speaker of pure vernacular,” is dependent upon notions of geographical situatedness — on being “locally located and oriented” (393). Accordingly, the less the speaker is perceived to have “strayed” from their “natural habitat,” the more “natural” and more authentic they are presumed to be (392). What then of the migrant labourer displaced from industrial Cape Breton to the urban metropolis?

“Discovering” the Maritimer: Dialect, Difference, and the Appearance of Authenticity

Pete and Joey are “locally located and oriented” only at the beginning of the film, but they never stray from the dialect assigned to them at the outset. Within the context of urban Toronto, however, their dialect obtains new associations and becomes a marker of their otherness. Authenticity in the film, then, is less a question of verisimilitude between the protagonists’ speech and actual Cape Breton English, and more an issue of their linguistic difference from speakers of standard Canadian English and English speakers in Toronto. Ultimately, then, it does not much matter whether there is a high degree of verisimilitude between the dialect used by Pete and Joey and the dialect spoken in Cape Breton. Rather, what matters is that viewers perceive Pete and Joey’s dialect as being a marker of their regional identity, whether as Atlantic Canadian, Maritimer, or Cape Bretoner.

Of course, Pete and Joey are characters within a film and the contexts in which they use language are delineated by the parameters set by the filmmakers—the script, setting, etc.—as well as by the linguistic choices made by the actors themselves. Building on the work of Eckert and Coupland, Jane Hodson (2014, 235, 228) argues that “authenticity is constructed through

\(^4\) It is important to note here that Coupland (2003, 427) is critical of these “primary authenticities,” “the old, consolidated, structured authenticities of modernity whose idealised and romanticized nature are increasingly apparent.” Coupland maintains that authenticity offers sociolinguists a valuable theoretical concept, but he argues for conceiving authenticity as discursively constructed, as a “relativized,” “second-order phenomena” (427). I contend that value claims regarding the authenticity of the film, and in particular the authenticity of Pete and Joey, are as much predicated on primary authenticities as they are on second-order authenticities; and that, furthermore, this reliance on an essentialist criterion of authenticity results in the conflation of regional stereotypes and cultural authenticity.
the discourses that surround dialect representation” and “filmmakers and writers work hard to position their work as authentic.” Shebib, the director, and William Fruet, the screenwriter, did indeed work hard to construct the protagonists of Goin’ Down the Road as authentically Maritime. According to Pevere (2012, 26), “fodder” for the film came from “Shebib’s family history [in Nova Scotia], Fruet’s early Toronto experience, and the overwhelming fact of the mass migration of unemployed easterners to Toronto during the 1960s. Fruet’s description of the process by which he and Shebib developed dialogue for the film, “[catching] the lingo” of Maritimers drinking in Toronto taverns (qtd. in Pevere 2012, 25), further reflects this desire for authenticity:

I went around in pubs and talked to Maritimers, and once I found these two guys, and I realized halfway through our conversation that I was talking to Joey and Pete. The real McCoy. I listened to these guys for two hours, describing the flop houses they’d stayed in, and the bugs. Priceless stuff. It came so easy to write after that I didn’t have to add much. (Fruet 1975, 122)

Having found “the real McCoy,” Fruet and Shebib had only to find actors who could perform the roles and, once again, Fruet’s desire for authenticity contributed to their decision: “I remember when Bradley and McGrath first walked in. I couldn’t believe it. It was them. Then they said they both had experience in the Maritimes. I remember thinking ‘These are the guys [. . .] They’re perfect’” (qtd. in Pevere 2012, 27). Having “had experience in the Maritimes,” McGrath and Bradley were supposedly well-positioned to portray authentic Maritimers, and if the critics’ reviews provide any indication, then they succeeded resoundingly. However, a closer examination of the dialect spoken by Pete and Joey, and of the linguistic and behavioural traits that indexically signal their identity as Maritimers, reveals that it is not linguistic authenticity per se that the filmmakers achieve, but the appearance of authenticity for an external (non-Maritime) audience.

Phonology: Th-stopping, H-dropping, Fronting the Low Back Vowel, and G-dropping
The speech of Pete and Joey evinces neither all of the distinguishing features of Cape Breton English nor an unwavering commitment to using those features of Cape Breton English they do adopt. Nevertheless, there are a few distinct phonological features the actors use to achieve the appearance of linguistic authenticity. Bearing strong similarities to the speech of nearby Newfoundland, the speech of Cape Breton has not been studied extensively. Michael Kiefte and Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird, however, have noted several distinguishing features, two of which can be observed in Pete’s brief mid-film exchange with Nicole, when he replies “I ‘tink ‘e’s down at de udder end dere.” Th-stopping—the realization of the dental fricatives [θ, ð] as alveolar stops [t, d]—and, to a lesser extent, h-dropping—the deletion of the word-initial [h]—are both prominent phonological features of Cape Breton English (Kiefte and Bird 2010, 69; Wells 1982, 178, 253). In Pete’s brief reply to Nicole, four instances of th-stopping occur, in the words “think,” “the,” “other,” and “there,” and one instance of h-dropping, in the word “he’s.” The effect of these deviations from Standard Canadian English, which mark half of the ten
words in Pete’s reply, is to emphasize his accent, reinforcing the contrast between his speech and Nicole’s.

Another prominent phonological feature of Cape Breton English that recurs throughout the film is the fronting of the low back vowel, with the LOT vowel often “as far forward as [a]” (Kiefte and Bird 2010, 69). The fronting of the low back vowel in the film is highly variable, but often surfaces at key moments. Sitting dejected on a bunk in the Salvation Army soon after having arrived in Toronto, Pete reassures Joey: “we just gotta figure [t̪]ings out better that’s all, no more hang-ups like today,” to which Pete replies “ah the rotten luck” (00:08). Slow and clear, Joey’s pronunciation of “rotten” as [ˈrat.ən] provides a marked example of the fronting of the low back vowel, serving to emphasize his accent as he expresses his mounting alienation. At other times, however, Joey and Pete speak without fronting the low back vowels, while other prominent features5 of Cape Breton speech, such as the monophthongization6 of the FACE and GOAT vowels, the absence of the KIT-DRESS distinction, and the use of the slit fricative [t̪], are almost entirely absent from the protagonists’ speech. The absence of these features, however, is inconsequential. For Canadian audiences outside the Maritimes,7 the use of th-fronting, h-dropping, and fronting the low back vowel are sufficient to convey the identity of Pete and Joey as Maritimers and, by extension, outsiders in the Central Canadian metropolis. The perception of linguistic authenticity is thus achieved via the strategic use of a few prominent features of Cape Breton English rather than the rigorous adoption of all features that distinguish the dialect of Cape Breton.

Perhaps the most salient feature of Pete and Joey’s speech, save perhaps th-fronting, is their use of “g-dropping”—the use of the alveolar nasal [n] is used in place of the velar nasal [ŋ] to realize the –ing unstressed ending (Wells 1982, 17). G-dropping is not at all peculiar or exclusive to Cape Breton English. According to J.C. Wells (1982, 262), “almost every English-speaking community exhibits social or stylistic alternation between the two possibilities.” Nevertheless, the variation has strong class-based associations, with frequent g-dropping being perceived as a characteristic of speakers from low socio-economic and working-class backgrounds. As Mark Liberman (2004) observes, “while nearly all English speakers drop g’s sometimes, the proportion varies systematically depending on formality, social class, sex, and other variables as well.” William Labov’s 1969 study in New York City reveals that the most significant variables in this regard are social class and formality.8 According to Labov, the frequency of g-dropping is highest among lower-class speakers in casual speech and lowest

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5 For a discussion of these features of Cape Breton English, see Kiefte and Bird (2010, 68–9).
6 Monophthongization is a type of vowel shift whereby a diphthong becomes a monophthong, as in the realization of the FACE diphthong [eɪ] as [e].
7 Arguably, the partial representation of Cape Breton English is sufficient not only for Canadians outside the Maritimes, but also for Maritimers outside Cape Breton who may recognize the dialect as entirely different from their own, but who may readily accept Pete and Joey as authentic speakers of Cape Breton English. To my knowledge, there exists no scholarship or information concerning the reception of the film in Cape Breton.
8 Labov found that in casual conversation, g-dropping occurs at the following rates according to the social class of the speaker: lower class, 80%; working class, 49%; lower middle class, 32%; and upper middle class, 5%. The frequency of g-dropping across class lines similarly varies according to formality: 80% in casual speech; 53% in careful speech; and 22% when reading aloud (Liberman 2004).
among upper-middle-class speakers in formal speech. Accordingly, in *Goin’ Down the Road*, the protagonists’ ubiquitous g-dropping implies their working-class background. However, Pete and Joey are not simply representative of working-class Maritimers. Instead, the aggregate of Maritime speakers, whose *only* representations in the film are Pete and Joey, come to be associated with the working-class.9 Nowhere is this association more clearly indicated than in the film’s opening sequence, beginning with the title of the film itself. Indeed, Shebib’s decision to change the title of the film from *The Maritimers* to *Goin’ Down the Road* at once indicates how crucial the experience of outmigration is in the Maritimes and suggests the pervasiveness of working-class phonology in the region, the latter of which manifests itself in Pete’s and Joey’s use of working-class Cape Breton English.

### Hittin’ the Road: Dialect and the Regional Stereotype

As the film opens, the opening chords of Bruce Cockburn’s “Goin’ Down the Road” (1970) can be heard and the title appears in white, justified on the left hand of the screen on a blue background:

Goin’
Down
The Road

The striking placement of “Goin’,” without the g at the upper left, is the first thing to catch the viewer’s attention, and it anticipates the sequence to follow. Language is thus aligned with subject in the first few seconds of the film. With only the twangy chords and title to go by, the viewer’s preconceived notions regarding language and music begin to condition their perception of the film’s protagonists before they even appear: the atmosphere is rural, colloquial, folksy. The screen then cuts to stock footage of an aerial view of Nova Scotia as Cockburn’s soft melody announces, “In the Isle of Cape Breton / My father did stay” (00:00:25). Shebib’s Cape Breton is desperately impoverished. Shots of overgrown railroad tracks, abandoned houses, and rusting cars in a junk yard give way to littered streets and children in rags. Rusting farm equipment, a deserted mine, and a derelict, half-sunken fishing vessel suggest industrial decline. After two minutes of such shots, Joey emerges from a dilapidated house, kisses his mother goodbye, and takes off in an old, rusting Chevrolet with flames and “My Nova Scotia Home” painted on the side.

Apartment from Cockburn’s lyrics, no dialogue appears until four minutes into the film. After a lively minute-long montage of Pete and Joey driving through the countryside, the camera cuts to Joey changing the car’s tire as Pete sits back on the side of the road drinking a beer. The scene at once establishes the plot of the film and introduces Joey and Pete. Out of work, the two men are moving to Toronto in search of gainful employment, a higher standard of living, and good times. Joey is the first to speak, expressing his doubts about their trip to

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9 This same sense of an homogenous, monolithic regional identity is reinforced by stage direction in Fruet’s original screenplay, which describes the “gloom and depression spread across the Maritimes” with its “countless towns all alike with their rundown buildings and listless people” (Fruet 1969, 2).
Toronto and mentioning job openings at the cannery in Cape Breton. His strong accent, characterized by g-dropping, th-fronting, word final [t,d] deletion, elision, and some fronting of the low back vowels, is especially accentuated in this initial scene, as is Pete’s accent: “I just keep [a]n [t][inkin’ about Jerry, Murph, an’ Freddy, [d]ey didn’ do too good. [d]ey were back in [t][ree mon[t][s]” (00:04). “[t][ree dummies” replies Pete (00:04). More confident than Joey, Pete, beer in hand, describes his vision for their lives in Toronto: “Aww listen Joey, it’s gonna be so different. [d]ere you can get all kinds a jobs. Not just sweat and dirt all [d]e time. And [d]e places you’ll go—we’re gonna hit some nice spots . . . Aw Joey, [d]ere’s gonna be so much [d]ere” (00:04). What should be the exciting beginning to their trip towards prosperity takes on a melancholy hue as the viewer becomes aware of Joey’s pessimism, Pete’s naïveté, and the improbability of their vision. With little by way of plans and only enough money to get them to Toronto, the beginning of their trip is the beginning of their decline.

Ostensibly, the film’s opening sequence is free of stereotyping. The portrait Shebib paints of Cape Breton is an exceptionally dismal one, but it is by no means implausible, and while the accents of the protagonists are stronger in their initial exchange than in later scenes, they appear neither affected nor particularly clichéd. Yet the viewer receives crucial information about the protagonists in this opening scene, and the film’s use of dialect integrates these characteristics into their identities as Cape Bretoners. The scene establishes a close connection between language and character, foreshadowing the film’s use of language to draw attention to the protagonists’ most undesirable traits. Indeed, the protagonists’ Cape Breton accents, particularly prominent in the opening dialogue, seem to complement Joey’s defeatism and Pete’s naïveté. Moreover, Joey’s reference to similar Maritimers (“Jerry, Murph, an’ Freddy”) who failed to make lives for themselves in Toronto both reinforces the impracticality of their trip and suggests that simplicity and guilelessness are not only characteristics of Pete, but of Maritimers more broadly. Pete and Joey, it is suggested, are not exceptions; they are the rule. For non-Maritimers and Maritimers unaccustomed to seeing themselves on screen, the opening sequence thus effectively establishes the protagonists’ dialect as a marker of their regional identity. It is once they have arrived in Toronto, however, that their accents become markers of their regional identity within the discursive context of the film itself.

Pete, Joey, and the Politics of the Centre

Within the film, regional dialect is used not only to articulate difference, but also to construct a power dynamic predicted on a centre/periphery relationship. According to Christine Ramsay (1993, 40), “Pete’s origins are used by Shebib to indicate the differences between the Maritimes and Canada’s imperial centre, Toronto.” This centre/periphery relationship figures in the film as a subject/object relationship. In Toronto, Pete and Joey become the objects of the imperial (i.e. Central Canadian) subjects’ gaze, and the “difference” separating centrality and marginality manifests itself in their use of language. After arriving in Toronto, Pete and Joey drive to the home of Pete’s middle-class aunt and uncle. As they stand on the doorstep knocking, the camera cuts to the aunt and uncle peering out the front window from behind closed curtains. “They’ve been knocking for five minutes now,” Pete’s aunt exclaims, “Anyone with any sense would’ve given up long ago—just look at that dreadful car!” (00:05). In the next scene, Pete has unsuccessfully phoned an acquaintance looking for a place to crash and Joey berates him for not
having guaranteed a place to stay: “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus boy, we’re fifteen hundred miles from home and only got dirty bucks between us. How long do you think that’s gonna last?” (00:07). Once again, accent is used to cast the protagonists as displaced others; the aunt’s indignant, mid-Atlantic accent contrasts sharply with the Cape Breton English of Joey and Pete who, unbeknownst to them, are scrutinized by the aunt from inside the house. The subject/object relationship, fixed via the aunt’s gaze, is thus coupled with dialectical difference from the moment Pete and Joey arrive in Toronto.

The scene at Pete’s aunt and uncle’s home sets up a subject/object relationship in which the origin of the imperial gaze is situated safely within the centre, while its object, barred access, remains at the margin. The scene thus dramatizes the way in which “the disciplining cultural and social norms of Central Canada [. . .] lock them—and, allegorically, Eastern Canadian labour—out of equitable belonging to the nation” (Gittings 2002, 160). This relationship, in which Pete and Joey become the object of the subject’s gaze, is played out several times in the film, and in each case, dialect forms the initial signification of their otherness. After finding jobs in a pop bottling plant, Pete and Joey decide to go out on the town. Entering a record shop, Joey and other workers from the plant head for the country-western section as Pete follows an attractive young woman upstairs to the classical music section. As Pete browses through the albums nearby, he glances over at the woman, who is looking at him, and she smiles. Encouraged by her smile Pete approaches her: “Hey, um, you kinda like stuff, huh?” Upon hearing Pete’s accent, she offers a brief reply, “well, I better go now,” and walks away (00:17-00:18). Pete’s response to this rejection is to retreat into what Shebib depicts as the staples of Maritime subculture in Toronto: getting drunk at a nearby tavern where he square dances to folk songs about Nova Scotia.

The scene in the record store demonstrates how yet another character flaw is indexed as a marker of Maritime identity via language. Pospišil (2011, 20) sees the record store scene as indicative of the way that Shebib depicts “Canada as a country where social identity is permanently fixed, where upward mobility is impossible.” Yet it is also indicative of the way in which regional identity is fixed in the film. While there is no immediate indication that the woman in the record store rejects Pete because of his Cape Breton English, Pete’s response—indulging to excess in an unmistakably “Maritime” tavern scene—suggests that it is not only his working-class background, but also his identity as a Maritimer that he is unable to transcend. What is more, this is an identity defined in the film by way of stereotypes: alcoholism, country music, and a lack of verbal dexterity. It is not simply discrimination on the woman’s part, but Pete’s simplicity and uncouthness that leads to his emasculation. The scene thus suggests that, as an ostensibly authentic Maritimer, Pete is unable to adapt to different contexts and is at home only when drinking beer at a pub.

Pete’s failure to identify and adapt to his environment is taken to absurd lengths when he goes for an interview with an executive at a downtown advertising firm. The scene opens

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10 It should be noted here that Pete also objectifies the woman, making her the object of his sexual desire, and he does so frequently with other women throughout the film. As Christine Ramsay (1993, 44) observes, “The woman in the classical record store and the woman reading the book in the picnic scene on Toronto Island are further signs of Pete’s emasculation. Not only can he not dominate the woman he sexually objectifies, he cannot get near the women he idolizes.”
with the executive looking over Pete’s résumé, glancing occasionally at Pete. Pete sits blithely with a smile on his face, oblivious to the interviewer’s condescending gaze. “Whatever possessed you to come here looking for a job?” asks the interviewer, “there’s nothing in your background to suggest even an interest in advertising” (00:10). Pete, undaunted by the interviewer’s bluntness, replies, almost pathetically: “Oh . . . well, you know, I used to watch alotta commercials down home [a]n the TV. I mean, I really enjoyed ‘em. You know, like some of [d]ose car commercials—a GGO comes over [d]e hill and it shoots acr[a]ss the desert” (00:11). After telling Pete “it’s obvious you’ve been influenced by [advertisements],” the interviewer dismisses Pete, advising him to return to the Maritimes and obtain an education (00:11). Byford identifies this scene as the most blatant example of the film’s stereotyping:

To posit that a Maritimer with Pete’s background would be so gullible as to travel to Toronto in search of such a position [. . .] to posit that [Pete and Joey] would apply for a position that they are woefully unqualified for, as Shebib’s film does, is to simply prop up a massive stereotype for ridicule, suggesting that a Nova Scotian labourer is either rather dense or quite delusional. (Byford 1998, 12)

For Byford, the scene not only lacks verity, it perpetuates gross stereotypes that negate any attempt on the part of the filmmakers to accurately and sympathetically depict the consequences of regional disparity. Christopher Gittings (2002, 161) similarly maintains that Shebib’s caricature of Pete undermines the film’s sympathetic portrayal of the protagonists: “Clearly Shebib is irretrievably inside, is a subject of, the dominant ideology he seeks to critique and ends up re-producing and re-circulating images which reify the social and economic subject positions of Eastern Canadian labour from the perspective of Central Canadian capital.” Byford and Gittings make a perceptive point. While it is Shebib’s intention to make the advertising executive representative of a Central Canadian society that keeps Pete and Joey poor and marginalized, he unwittingly casts Pete in the role of the oblivious, unsophisticated Maritimer, forever ignorant of the world around him. Significantly, the use of dialect in the scene reinforces this construction.

In the interview scene Pete’s played-up Cape Breton accent not only emphasizes the contrast between Pete and the well-spoken interviewer, but also suggests Pete’s ignorance through his inability to style-shift. According to Jane Hodson (2014, 3), “All speakers command a range of different varieties of English which they will employ as appropriate, depending upon factors such as: who they are interacting with, what the purpose of the interaction is, and where the interaction takes place.” In effect, all speakers have the capacity to style-shift, to adapt their language to specific contexts by switching from one style or dialect to another. “[I]n literature and films,” writes Hodson, “where issues of identity, power, and prestige are particularly salient, writers and filmmakers will often find ways to highlight interpersonal style-shifts” (178). It is precisely Pete’s failure to style-shift, however, his utter failure to adjust his speech in any way to conform to the formality of the interview, which reinforces the ignorance implied by his having applied for the position in the first place. Indeed, throughout most of the film, Pete and Joey are largely ignorant of their difference. Toward the end of the film, however, this ignorance is momentarily cast off in a scene in which their “language” draws the ire of a barman.
Having lost their jobs at the bottling plant, Pete and Joey are forced to move into a dingy boarding house with Joey's pregnant wife Betsy. With Joey lethargic, depressed, and unwilling to find work, Pete is forced to support all three by working menial, short-lived jobs. Following a now predictable pattern, Pete and Joey decide to alleviate their stress by going to a tavern to drink and dance. The scene opens with a shot of feet shuffling and stomping across the dance floor to the tune of the traditional Newfoundland folk song “I’s the B’ye.” After a brief jig with back-slapping, hollering, and whooping, Pete and Joey, noticeably drunk, stumble over to a table. “L[a]rd [t]under’ Jesus I know how t’ do ‘er” Joey hollers to Pete, “By [d]e Jesus I can go I tell ya” (00:42). Soon, they are approached by a barman who tells them to “keep the language down” (00:42). Joey, unaware that his hollering is disturbing other patrons, asks, “What language?” (00:42). Of course, the barman is referring to their use of foul language, but Joey's momentary perplexity alerts the viewer to a play on the word “language”: the language for which they are being castigated is not only marked by frequent cursing, it is also heavily inflected with the phonological features of Cape Breton English. As if they have for the first time recognized their otherness, Joey tells Pete “c’mon, everybody’s lookin’ at us” and they duck into the washroom to drink alone from a pint of rum (00:43). Precipitated by the protagonists' sudden realization of their own sociolinguistic identities, the scene marks a crucial point in the film. It is the final scene in which Joey and Pete are noticeably happy; henceforward their lives only get worse and their fantasies deteriorate, culminating in the robbery attempt that forces them to flee Toronto.

The End of the Road

The depiction of Pete and Joey in Goin’ Down the Road and the film’s perpetuation of regional stereotypes reflects the broader social discourse surrounding Maritime migrants to Toronto in the 1960s and 70s. In a 1968 Globe and Mail article titled “Drunks Trapped in Revolving Door,”11 Michael Valpy describes the rampant alcoholism affecting Toronto’s “Skid Row”. Taking a progressive social welfare approach to the problem, Valpy stresses that “the Skid Row alcoholic has to become the responsibility of the whole society, a responsibility that does not mean maintaining the present band-aid system, but means working for the establishment of effective alternatives” (5). Valpy’s solution is reasonable, but his analysis of the issue is problematic. Concluding the article, Valpy points toward the source of the problem: “Toronto has been subjected to a heavy influx of Maritimers, many of them young, who have left their depressed homeland only to find themselves incapable of coping, financially and emotionally, with the frustrations of high-gear urban life” (5). Sympathetic to the plight of these young men, Valpy nevertheless pathologizes Maritimers in Toronto, attributing their poverty and alcoholism to an innate “incapacity” to “emotionally” “cope” with urban life. Apparently without any agency, the young Maritimers of Valpy’s article are trapped in “a revolving door,” “a cage with a cycle: from street to jail to street to jail” (5). It is precisely such an innate inability

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to cope that traps Pete and Joey in the depressing cycle of poverty and alcoholism Shebib depicts in *Goin’ Down the Road*.

In the penultimate scene of the film, Pete stands over the bloody, unconscious grocer he has just robbed and beaten. “You stupid dumb kid,” says Pete, “what do you care about a couple a lousy groceries?” (01:19). It is an expression of regret and remorse, but it is also a question posed to the society that has denied Pete and Joey the possibility for better, more meaningful lives. And yet, as much as Shebib tries to portray Pete and Joey as the victims of a flawed society, it is their own character flaws that repeatedly undermine their attempts to improve their dismal circumstances. Their lack of sophistication, their laziness, their propensity for alcohol, their willingness to commit crimes, their thick Cape Breton accents—all of these characteristics are subsumed under the identity of the “authentic” Maritimer. The final scene sees the completion of the cycle: Pete’s naiveté finds ultimate expression in the revival of his delusion as he and Pete take to the road again, headed West, to the tune of Cockburn’s “Goin’ Down the Road”. Ultimately, the film suggests, it is not merely “[ˈrætən] luck” that keeps Joey and Pete in a position of marginality, it is their inability to overcome deeply ingrained inadequacies—their failure to transcend the regional stereotype, of which their dialect is a central marker.
References


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