

Article

Pogey Beach: Work and Leisure in *Just Passing Through*

Peter Thompson, University of New Brunswick

Abstract

Work is a complicated topic in Atlantic Canadian literature and popular culture. Atlantic Canada is a land of many stereotypes, and received images of the region are often wrapped up in ideas about work. The tourism industry brands Atlantic Canada as a space of leisure at the same time as the media shorthand “have-not” region reinforces a narrative of decline and the idea that work is scarce on the East Coast. This essay suggests that the Prince Edward Island-based web-series *Just Passing Through* (dir. Jeremy Larter 2013-2016) provides a radical perspective on the symbolic place of work in the culture of Atlantic Canada. *Just Passing Through* operates in a different cultural sphere than literature and even television and film; it demonstrates no allegiance to received images of Atlantic Canada and makes no attempt to counter regressive stereotypes. Instead, it satirically glorifies pogey (Employment Insurance) fraud and presents tourism, the marketing of Maritime culture, and outmigration to the oil patch as scams that should be ridiculed and exploited.

Keywords: Atlantic Canadian popular culture; Canadian web-series; work; leisure studies; Prince Edward Island.

pogey /'pōgē/n. Canadian slang for Employment Insurance. A program designed to support hardworking people who have lost their job through no fault of their own. The system has two cardinal rules ... To search diligently each day for new work and to report any money earned while receiving “pogey.”

- Opening credits, *Pogey Beach* (Dir. Jeremy Larter, 2019)

During the summer take me sailing out on the Atlantic
 I won't set my sights on other seas, there is no need to panic
 - Always, "Archie, Marry Me"

Introduction

Work is a complicated topic in Atlantic Canadian literature and popular culture. Atlantic Canada is a land of many stereotypes, and received images of the region are often wrapped up in ideas about work: this ranges from folksy (postcards with gap-toothed fishermen); to welcoming (stories about friendly staff who greet tourists at hotels and restaurants); to homesick Maritimers who leave the region in search of work (for example, Kate Beaton's *Ducks*); to work as a symbol of continuity and tradition (for example, Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischiefs*); to the dangers of work in the region's extractive projects (for example, the fiction of Lisa Moore and Leo McKay). But images of work reveal other things about how Atlantic Canada is perceived both internally and externally. Waves of deindustrialization and the media shorthand "have-not region" reinforce a persistent sense of decline and scarcity of work throughout Atlantic Canada. And all of this plays out against the backdrop of a stubborn perception of the region as backwards, resistant to change, and even lazy (Wylie 2011, Mazer 2022). The constant movement of people from Atlantic Canada to other places in search of work contributes to the overriding sense that, for people from the region, "any job is a good job ... even a bad job is a good job" (Beaton 2022, 12) and that workers should be prepared to sacrifice their bodies and their attachment to home to make a living. The symbolic place of work in the culture of Atlantic Canada is further complicated by the importance of tourism within the region: under this system, the region comes to be branded as a space of leisure rather than a space for work and decommissioned factories and coal mines form part of the region's tourism infrastructure, reinforcing the idea that work is rare and maybe even a thing of the past.

This essay suggests that the Prince Edward Island-based web-series *Just Passing Through* (dir. Jeremy Larter 2013-2016¹) provides a radical perspective on the symbolic place of work in the culture of Atlantic Canada. *Just Passing Through* operates in a different cultural sphere than literature and even television and film; it demonstrates no allegiance to received images of Atlantic Canada and makes no attempt to counter

¹ *Just Passing Through* features a show-within-a-show called *Pogey Beach*, which subsequently appeared in 2019 as a feature-length film directed by Larter. I talk about the film in some detail towards the end of the essay, but my focus is mainly the original web-series.

regressive stereotypes. Instead, it satirically glorifies poge (employment insurance) fraud and presents tourism, the marketing of Maritime culture, and outmigration to the oil patch as scams that should be ridiculed and exploited.

In particular, *Just Passing Through* targets the region's transition from an economy based on resource extraction and industry to one based on tourism and the marketing of cultural products and experiences. Like *Trailer Park Boys*, *Just Passing Through* depicts a world in which Atlantic Canada has not sorted out what men who are surrounded by material and cultural reminders of the importance of resource extraction and industrial labour are supposed to do in a deindustrialized economy. At the same time, the series both identifies and skewers a tendency in Atlantic Canada to treat the region's culture as just another resource to be extracted and over-exploited. This impulse is summed up, for example, in a 2015 interview about the Prince Edward Island-shot film *Kooperman*, where director Harmony Wagner is surprisingly candid about this dynamic:

We don't have oil. We don't have forests. What we have is people. I hope that we can grow this industry because I want to keep all these amazing people here. Anne of Green Gables will not last forever. She's becoming less and less pertinent and we need to create new intellectual property that makes people attracted to come visit us. (CBC News 2015)

Wagner made these comments in the course of arguing for continued and increased funding for filmmaking on PEI. It is interesting that she makes a direct connection between the resource industry and cultural industries and that she speaks about *Anne of Green Gables* like a fossil fuel that is dwindling, almost as if we have reached peak-Anne. *Just Passing Through* explores the logical extremes of selling images of PEI as an economic and cultural strategy, leaving us with Terry and Parnell instead of Anne and Marilla. In particular, the series focuses on anxieties about the concept of "idleness" or the idea of a post-work world (see, for example, Strangleman 2007). But ultimately, *Just Passing Through* and its characters opt out of all of this and present moving west for work, staying home to work, selling Maritime culture in Toronto, selling Maritime culture on PEI, and cultural tourism all as variations of the same racket. *Just Passing Through* rejects the prevailing economic forces at work in Atlantic Canada, including the idea that any job is a good job and the idea that tourism is a sustainable response to the economic transformation brought on by disinvestment in the region's industrial capacity.

The Margin of the Margin

One of the key problematics for Atlantic Canadian literature and popular culture is contending with what Herb Wyile calls the “folk paradigm,” the idea that the region is defined according to a set of externally and internally imposed images that accentuate its pleasing landscape, welcoming people, and removal from the rest of the modern world. Wyile points out, though, that the folk paradigm also has a darker edge and that the region is dogged by “constructions of the East Coast as Canada’s social, economic, and cultural basket case, populated by alcoholic deadbeats, welfare mothers, and rockbound trailer trash” (Wyile 2011, 138; see also Polley 2020 and Hayes and MacKinnon 2018). Many of these negative stereotypes are rooted in ideas about work, including EI fraud, seasonal work, and men who need to leave the region in search of manual labour but who lose their connection to community in the bargain (see, for example, Gary Burrill’s 1992 book *Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario, and Alberta*). There is a strain of pop culture on the East Coast that unapologetically leans into these pejorative stereotypes, making them even more excessive and drawing as much comic potential out of them as possible. If the project of commercially successful and critically acclaimed writers and filmmakers is to complicate the romantic version of the folk – by stressing the contemporary and cosmopolitan elements of the region or calling attention to the cultural politics of tourism and the environmental problems that pastoral portraits of the region often obscure – a more radical and subversive attack on the folk paradigm has formed on the fringes of the region’s cultural sphere. The most mainstream example is *Trailer Park Boys*, but on YouTube, there is Gazeebow Unit, Denim Dugay, Cape Breton Chats, and Donnie Dumphy (which gained mainstream success on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*); on Facebook, there is the popular parody feed The Newfoundland Turnip; and, as this paper will explore, there is *Just Passing Through*.

In her 2019 article, “The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production,” Lillian Boxman-Shabati argues that platforms such as YouTube break down traditional media’s barriers to publication and expression, providing a venue for cultural producers to both engage with and subvert mainstream culture. For example, she argues that parody music videos form a “genre of textual commentary” that allows for social observation that is decipherable to audiences (because the target is familiar) and subversive, stemming from “YouTube’s fluid structure and parody’s polysemy, which together create a hybrid field characterized by a unique blend of autonomy and commercialism, individuality and collectivism, and hegemony and

subversion” (Boxman-Shabati 2019, 4). Among other things, *Just Passing Through* parodies tourist commercials from PEI, *Anne of Green Gables*, stereotypes about EI fraud, patterns of speech and rural culture on PEI, and many popular North American television shows and movies. The series uses parody at once to undercut the power imbalance between Atlantic Canada and urban parts of the country and to sort those who are in on the joke out from those who are not.

Like many of the texts Boxman-Shabati examines, *Just Passing Through* occupies an ambivalent space between amateur and professional: the series has decent production values, is shot with commercial equipment, and has credible actors. *Just Passing Through* also received funding from the Independent Production Fund and Innovation PEI and had a product placement deal with Alpine Lager (Larter claims that this came along *after* they had written a scene where Terry and Parnell meet the “Alpine Oracle” in Toronto). In her article on the series in the *Japanese Review of Canadian Literature*, Yoko Araki argues that because *Just Passing Through* appeared on the web, it could be “more aggressive in its criticism of construction of Atlantic Canadian images, not just by others but also by Atlantic Canadians themselves” (Araki 2016, 33-34). At the same time, the tone and subject matter of *Just Passing Through* sets it apart from more mainstream cultural texts (with the possible exception of *Trailer Park Boys*²) and its position on the margins of the region’s cultural infrastructure allows it to explore topics that might be out of bounds for others. Crucially, user-generated platforms like YouTube, and the ease with which they facilitate parody, appeal to members of marginalized cultures. In an interview about the first season, Larter talked about the difficulties with getting a show on broadcast or cable, especially a raunchy show that derives most of its humour from obscure in-jokes about rural PEI and how producing it as a web-series gave him and his team “complete creative control” (Beer 2014). The series appearing on the web and this lack of accountability to the mainstream Canadian cultural apparatus that normally governs the kinds of images of Atlantic Canada that appear on television and in books allows *Just Passing Through* to present an unvarnished portrait of PEI and stereotypes about work in the region.

Pogey Summer: Thinking Through Work and Leisure

As its title might suggest, *Just Passing Through* is concerned with the idea of movement and the transient nature of work and identity in PEI. *Just Passing Through* taps into a

² See Varga 2009, McCullough 2009, Byers 2011, Phillips 2021.

very familiar story for residents of Atlantic Canada, as the opening scenes feature Terry and Parnell leaving rural PEI in search of good jobs in Alberta. The movement of workers from Atlantic Canada to places like Ontario and Alberta is often interpreted through a nostalgic lens focusing on the intense connection people from the region feel to home, but it is important to point out that outmigration is part of a larger economic structure that sustains Canadian extractive projects. As Fred Burrill has written: “the Maritimes more generally have far too long served as the reserve army of labour in a Canadian economy bent on squeezing profit out of the most marginalized” (Burrill 2015). For the purposes of Atlantic Canada, the persistent real or perceived sense that work is scarce in the region manifests as a narrative of decline (Cowie and Heathcott 2003, Linkon 2018, High and Lewis 2007, Wylie 2011, Scott 2010). Public discourse in contemporary Atlantic Canada often underlines that people are lucky to land even dangerous and precarious jobs, reinforcing the idea that outmigration and risky work are natural and permanent features of the region’s economy³.

It is worth pausing on the cultural phenomenon of Atlantic Canadians travelling to the oil patch in search of work, which provides the basic structure of *Just Passing Through*. As Kate Beaton explores in her 2022 graphic memoir, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, scores of people who grew up on the East Coast routinely travel to Alberta to look for work in the oil patch — often maintaining homes and families in Atlantic Canada and going back and forth for two-week shifts. The prevalence of this movement back and forth has many impacts culturally and economically: to name a few, it may reinforce patriarchal gender roles, as women increasingly take on the role of organizing and maintaining the household in the absence of their partner; it makes Atlantic Canada’s economy subject to the boom and bust cycle of the oil patch; it sustains local housing markets in areas where there is little work otherwise; it puts distance between workers and the environmental effects of their labour; and it creates a sense of transience for workers who travel, in some ways mirroring the experience of people coming to Atlantic Canada for tourist experiences.

³ Treatments of changing patterns of work, the relationship between tourism and changes in work, the relationship between neoliberalism and the fall of the resource economy, and the rise of the service sector have appeared frequently in Atlantic Canadian literary criticism (Creelman 2003, Hodd 2008, Mason 2013, Ivison 2011, Tremblay 2008, Delisle 2013, Thompson 2019). There is also a great deal of scholarship on the history of work and deindustrialization, outmigration, the relationship between work and gender, and tensions between various kinds of work in Atlantic Canadian sociology and historiography (Beaton and Muise 2008, McKay 1994, Overton 1996, Muise 1998, Summerby Murray 2015, Gibbs and Leech 2009, Foster 2017).

All of this contributes to the idea that work is something that happens outside of the region. In her 2020 article “Dump Truck Destiny: Alberta Oil, ‘East Coast’ Workers, and Attachment to Extraction,” Katie Mazer outlines the strange contours of the job market on the East Coast. She visits an EI office in PEI, which is almost completely focused on matching men with jobs in the Alberta oil patch. Mazer describes a labour market that functions as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: there are no jobs in the region, so men need to move west to find work; but the desperate nature of the situation in their home region means that they will accept working conditions that are exploitative, disruptive, and dangerous. Mazer argues that the disfunction of the labour market in Atlantic Canada and the choice to take these jobs goes beyond the immediate financial concerns of the men who are doing this; for her, the precarity of work on the East Coast, the historical tradition of jobs in the extractive industries, and the constraints placed around the possibilities for the white working class in Atlantic Canada are all part of a larger cultural phenomenon:

this backdrop of failure and dependency has helped produce a new working subject: the mobile east coast worker who is celebrated as a “natural fit” for the physical work, remote outdoor locations, periodic layoffs, seasonal rhythms, and undefined periods away from home ... the naturalization of this “fit” by workers, employers, and others is conditioned by a longstanding state of precarity, narratives of regional pathology and deficiency, and the white, rural, masculine working subjectivities that have developed in this context. (Mazer 2020, 1924)

Mazer’s article is an excellent companion piece to Wylie’s *Anne of Tim Hortons* and it specifically ties the precarious nature of work on the East Coast and these patterns of mobility to issues around gender but also race in Atlantic Canada. The second half of her article also details many examples of depictions of Atlantic Canada as a backwards welfare recipient in the mainstream media. *Just Passing Through* highlights many of these media stereotypes and leans into them instead of countering them. The series is not interested in, for example, reclaiming the dignity of work; instead, it harnesses these stereotypes and explores the cultural impacts of this narrative of decline.

Just as the movement of workers between Atlantic Canada and extractive mega-projects in Alberta reinforces a dynamic in which work is something that takes place elsewhere, the region’s tourism strategy brands the East Coast as a space of leisure. In his classic 1990 study *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry argues that understanding

the phenomenon of tourism is important because it sheds light not only on the act of taking a break from one's regular routine but more importantly on everyday life itself. For Urry, there is a key distinction between the space of work (the mundane space where we all spend most of our lives earning money and keeping our family and community obligations afloat) and the space of leisure (which is different from home and work: it represents a break from established routines, offering a chance to recharge). Thus, the difference between work and leisure is spatial (one needs to travel away from work to truly get away from it), temporal (the break from work is temporary and is ultimately taken in order to make one even more productive in their "real" life), and behavioural (the activity should be significantly different from what one does in regular life. Urry notes:

Tourism is a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely regulated and organised work. It is one manifestation of how work and leisure are organised as separate and regulated spheres of social practice in 'modern' societies. Indeed, acting as a tourist is one of the defining characteristics of being 'modern' and is bound up with major transformations in paid work. This has come to be organised within particular places and to occur for regularised periods of time. (Urry 1990, 4)

Of course, there are many studies that have examined the impact of the tourism industry on Atlantic Canada and on Atlantic Canadian cultural texts (McKay 1994, Overton 1996, Wylie 2011).

In their recent history of tourism in Prince Edward Island, Alan MacEachern and Edward MacDonald note that "Tourism has been the province's second leading industry for the past half-century, trailing only agriculture" (MacEachern and MacDonald 2022, 4). MacEachern and MacDonald focus on both the symbolic and practical implications of Prince Edward Island's emphasis on tourism: on the one hand, the province genuinely offers idyllic landscapes and a rich history, but on the other, tourism in the province relies on professional bureaucracy and state support in order to succeed: "From 1900 onward, both private enterprise and the state have been increasingly involved in organizing for tourism: creating government agencies and associations of private operators; building infrastructure; supporting accommodations, attractions, and activities; developing licensing and rating systems; and relentlessly refining the Island's imaging and messaging. A diversion became true industry" (MacEachern and MacDonald 2022, 9). MacEachern and MacDonald point to the ambivalent relationship Prince Edward Islanders often have with tourism: the

economic benefits of tourism need to be weighed against the resentment locals often feel towards visitors and we need to understand that there is a kind of subservient relationship that emerges between tourist and visitor in this encounter (Wylie 2008).

MacEachern and MacDonald also stress the role that popular culture plays in the sustained success of PEI's tourism strategy. Tourists have come to the island since the 1920s in search of the fictional world of L.M. Montgomery, and this search gained further popularity in the 1980s and 1990s because of the work of Kevin Sullivan, including a made-for-television film version of *Anne of Green Gables* and shows such as *Road to Avonlea*. In their section on *Anne*, they note that surveys had demonstrated by the early 2000s that PEI was running the risk of leaning too heavily on these images in selling the province, noting the Tourism Industry Association reported, in language similar to Harmony Wagner's, that "' limits should be placed on further development in relation to the Anne of Green Gables theme which is well-exploited'" (MacEachern and MacDonald 2022, 239). Furthermore, in the epilogue, they talk about how the landscape is disappearing or being altered because of the effects of climate change. In other words, tourism suffers from many of the same vulnerabilities as Atlantic Canada's earlier industrial and extractive ventures, including a boom and bust cycle, overuse, and the vagaries of global capital flow: "The industry's intangible terrain, its culture and spirit of place, is no less fragile in this epoch of mass tourism, where even 'authenticity' is a product that is bought and sold, and the tipping point between success and excess can only be identified once it is passed" (MacEachern and MacDonald 2022, 254). *Just Passing Through*, for its part, does everything in its power to ensure that they pass this tipping point; Terry and Parnell exploit images of PEI for their own gain in the same way that the series pushes stereotypes about the province and the region to their extreme. In this sense, *Just Passing Through* is a meditation on the transition from an industrial/extractive economy to one based on selling culture, but the series insists that both systems are marked by exploitation and humiliation, making it an easy choice to opt out.

Just Passing Through

Just Passing Through is about two cousins, Terry and Parnell Gallant, who leave PEI (their hometown is called Bumblefuck) to travel to Alberta to work in the oil patch. Drawing liberally on the visual and thematic framework of the classic Canadian film *Goin' Down the Road* (1970, dir Donald Shebib), *Just Passing Through* establishes a familiar fish out of water structure in the first season when Terry and Parnell's car

breaks down and they get stranded in Toronto. Once there, they move in with their hipster Ontario-born cousin, Owen, and wait (more or less on his couch) for a ride to Alberta. The second season reverses the fish out of water dynamic and lampoons both the idea of scarce work in Atlantic Canada and the idea of Toronto as a land of opportunity, as Owen and his friends, Vanessa and Alex, lose their jobs in Toronto and move to PEI for a “pogey summer” bolstered by the money Terry and Parnell made in the potash mines in Saskatchewan (they never actually make it to Alberta). *Just Passing Through* oscillates between straight-ahead popular culture references and parodic references to substance abuse and employment insurance scams.

In its exploration of the relationship between PEI and Alberta and PEI and Toronto, the series briefly delves into issues around masculinity (although Terry and Parnell do their best to avoid ever working, they do make up lies about their dangerous jobs to impress women), race (they are terrified of Toronto’s diverse ethnic makeup and make stereotypically racist comments about Chinatown in particular), and sexuality (the entire Gallant family teases Owen about being gay, presumably because he dresses well and lives in Toronto). The implied distinction between rural PEI and the urban setting of Toronto is reinforced by class (Terry and Parnell dress in hoodies and old leather jackets and Owen works for a dog yoga studio), although the series turns this on its head when, after making sarcastic comments about how he has a job, unlike his lazy cousins, Owen is forced to apply for employment insurance at the end of the first season. *Just Passing Through* is extremely raunchy and satirical and yet it relies on nostalgic musical interludes (by PEI band Raccoon Bandit) and shifts between lingering views of the beautiful PEI landscape, the alienating urban landscape of Toronto, and bland shots of swamps on the island (and swarms of mosquitos). The series has a broad range of targets for its satire: it sends up patterns of speech in PEI, Toronto hipster culture (Terry turns himself into “Toronto Terrance” in one episode where he wears scarves and complains about Toronto’s buffoon mayor), Catholicism (Parnell orders communion wafers to eat as a snack while he watches TV), and the Calgary Stampede. But the most frequent object of ridicule is the Atlantic Canadian cultural apparatus itself and earnest anxieties around work and idleness in the region. In this section, I will focus on three aspects of *Just Passing Through*: its treatment of work, its treatment of popular culture and tourism, and its construction of an internal popular culture universe.

Work

For Terry and Parnell, work is a vague set of ideas: they talk about going to Alberta and “getting loaded rich,” they promise to buy their mothers and girlfriends trucks and sea-do’s, and when they leave Toronto they tell Owen and his friends that they will send them a postcard from “Fort McMoney.” The series plays up and makes fun of the economic gulf between PEI and Alberta, as Terry and Parnell boast that “Alberta money” will make them rich beyond their wildest dreams and allow them to have a lavish lifestyle when they return to PEI. Alberta itself functions as an indeterminate signifier rather than a real place for them: it represents money, opportunity, jobs, and a set of annoying cultural symbols that they resent like cowboy hats.

Rather than nostalgically calling back to a time when work provided coherence and identity, *Just Passing Through* makes fun of the concept of work altogether. Work is a completely abstract and almost absurd concept and instead of bragging about how much they work, characters tell stories about legendary pogeys, about how they learned to fill out their EI forms from their fathers and grandfathers, and watch television shows about heroic pogeys (I will come back to this below). The characters on *Just Passing Through* are well-versed in filling out EI reports: in the second episode, Terry goes over his with his grandmother, telling her to write “No. No. No. Yes. No” always, prompting Parnell to remind them that the fourth question is always tricky. Owen is horrified to learn that Terry and Parnell are drawing EI in Toronto and the lengths to which they will go to fraudulently qualify. Parnell talks with pride about collecting pogeys, telling his cousin that “collecting pogeys ain’t a glamorous lifestyle” before complaining that Stephen Harper changed the maximum amount, calling the former Prime Minister a “pogey-changing prick.” Elsewhere, Terry says that the best thing about being on pogeys is that “the drinks are on Harper” and in the film version of *Pogey Beach*, people drawing EI cheques tell their friends that they work for the government. In the first episode of the second season, the Gallant family gathers around the table for dinner. Instead of saying grace, they give thanks to RB Bennett for instituting the EI program and to Pierre Elliott Trudeau for coming up with the idea of 10/42 — working for ten weeks of the year and drawing EI for the rest.

Cultural texts making fun of PEI’s patterns of seasonal work and the stereotype around EI fraud are not new. For example, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* ran a series called “PEI EI PI,” which itself is partially inspired by the 1982 John Candy *SCTV* sketch, “Magnum PEI.” In “PEI EI PI,” which appeared on the national broadcaster, Shaun

Majumder plays an EI investigator who audits farms and runs raids on rural PEI residents, accusing them of fraudulently filling out their claim forms. The embrace of stereotypes about EI fraud in *Just Passing Through* also engages with the political history of the Atlantic Canada. In the fourth episode of Season 2, the premiers of the Maritime provinces come to an agreement on Maritime Union, a proposal the Gallants and others in PEI reject because it results in PEI's employment insurance guidelines being changed to be in line with Nova Scotia's, leaving everyone on the island 80 hours short of qualifying for the year. In a scene that clearly parodies both the history of labour organizing in the Maritimes and the debates over Confederation, the Gallants organize a boycott of the Liquor Commission and demonstrate in front of Province House against Maritime Union.

If Terry and Parnell are outsized caricatures of rural PEI, their cousin Owen and his friends are exaggerated versions of Toronto hipsters. Owen goes between being furious about their scam — calling them two “living, breathing stereotypes” — and furious about the fact that they make more money than him even though they consider the idea of “looking for work” to be a hilarious joke.

Just Passing Through specifically targets a persistent stereotype about “idleness” in Atlantic Canada: the idea that residents of the region are workshy, that the region is a welfare recipient within the framework of Confederation, and that Atlantic Canadians manipulate seasonal work and employment insurance to get by. In a recent article examining representations of work in the fiction of Alistair MacLeod and Michael Winter, Cheryl Lousley notes that “idleness has a long cultural history with both pejorative and positive connotations” and goes on to suggest that this is particularly loaded in Atlantic Canada, as one “stereotyped image of Atlantic Canada ... is as a ‘backward’ region of idle adults, parasitic on the nation for employment insurance and transfer payments” (Lousley 2020, 233; see also Wyile 2011, 1-21). Lousley argues that we need to better understand idleness in the context of Atlantic Canada since patterns of work and extraction play such an important role in expressions of the region's culture. She suggests that there is value in paying attention to the idea of “idleness as a directionless other-time for Neo-liberal lives and places situated within a *long-durée* of ecological ruination” and argues that putting MacLeod's and Winter's work into conversation reveals that “these writers' depictions of idleness foreground the complex socio-ecological reverberations of extraction economies” (Lousley 2020, 230). For Lousley, “To be ‘after’ extraction then is to be living through the loss of the appearance of a shared social vision of resource extraction as the

historic, legitimizing basis for a stable social democracy offering prosperity to its hard-working immigrant settler-citizens” (Lousley 2020, 232). As Lousley points out, the post-extraction era in Atlantic Canada calls our attention to a suite of problems, including “Indigenous critiques of colonial land grabs and ecological destruction,” the shift to an equally exploitative and capricious service-based economy, and dealing with the environmental and social fallout of extractive and industrial projects that have moved on. Lousley suggests that the work of Alistair MacLeod and Michael Winter offer complementary meditations on the end of the extractive era and the prospects for the region. Lousley frames the issue identified by Wyile and Mazer — the idea of a surplus pool of labour in Atlantic Canada, the persistent narrative of the region’s decline, and material reminders of its bygone economic system — in slightly different terms, examining how the cultural and economic framework of extraction persists in contemporary Atlantic Canada, even at a symbolic level. *Just Passing Through* is an even more extreme example on the continuum that Lousley identifies with respect to MacLeod and Winter, and it replaces any vestige of the nobility and sacrifice of work with a universe in which scamming pogeys is glorified and symbols of regional identity are to be mocked and sold for scraps.

Popular Culture and Tourism

Just Passing Through connects Atlantic Canadian culture, often assumed to be conservative and set apart from the rest of the world⁴, to North American popular culture, thus deepening its own satirical treatment of symbols of the region. One strategy for achieving this is frequent and parodic pop culture references: the series is clearly influenced by *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and in one episode, members of what they call the “Maritime Mafia” crib lines from *Breaking Bad*. Elsewhere, they make fun of celebrity chefs, especially Chef Michael Smith, and Terry and Parnell talk about how celebrities like Bruce Willis and Sean Connery have cottages on PEI (which Owen disputes, telling them that they want famous people on the island to make themselves feel important).

Just Passing Through also makes frequent references to a burgeoning web-based Atlantic Canadian popular culture universe (of which it is, of course, a key part). In the first season, a woman Terry meets in Toronto is interested in him because she

⁴ It is worth noting, of course, that this idea is contested. See, for example, Ivison 2011 and Marshall 2008.

believes that he's from Newfoundland, mistakenly telling him that she loves "Danny Dumphrey," "Havin' a good time" and "The Trailer Park Brothers." Terry declines to correct her, but makes fun of this exoticization of Atlantic Canadian culture by complaining that in the eyes of people from Toronto, Newfoundlanders are the "funny islanders" and Cape Bretoners are the "depressed islanders" and PEI is in-between, half-funny and half-depressed. *Just Passing Through* also mercilessly mocks commodified symbols of Atlantic Canadian identity. In the first season, they open a makeshift store in Toronto called "Charlottetown-town," which sells real PEI dirt, potatoes, moonshine and even pornographic videos based on *Anne of Green Gables* called "Goin' Down the Red Dirt Road." The target here is stores and restaurants that sell Atlantic Canadian trinkets and food outside of the region (several restaurants in Ontario sell "authentic" Halifax donairs, for example) and of course the venerable symbol of PEI tourism itself, the work of L.M. Montgomery. In the second season, Owen is arrested on PEI for defecating on a piping plover, another popular symbol for the tourism industry, and his lawyer tells him to "get nice and cozy on our gentle island" while he awaits trial for the incident⁵.

At the end of the first season, Terry and Parnell finally get a call from their friend Wendell offering them jobs in Alberta. At the same time, Owen gets laid off at his job (he finds out that he doesn't qualify for employment insurance, even though he has worked more hours than both of his cousins combined) and Alex's coffee shop goes under. They use the money from Charlottetown-town to re-open the restaurant, turning it into a Maritime-themed bar. For Larter, the trappings of the Maritime diaspora (serving Alpine, East Coast music) and the symbols of Atlantic Canadian identity that seem to be saleable are not so much tacky misrepresentations; they are simply hustles akin to cheating the EI system or pretending to be from Newfoundland to impress women.

Just Passing Through satirizes Atlantic Canada's reliance on tourism but also specifically examines the way in which work activities come to be part of the tourist experience. Urry notes that this is connected to the search for "authenticity" that often accompanies the tourist experience; citing Dean MacCannell, he suggests, "Tourists show particular fascination in the 'real lives' of others that somehow possess a reality

⁵ *Just Passing Through*, of course, pre-dates the hit musical, "Come From Away," but it still manages to mock this concept as well: Owen is charged extra for food and services because he is from Toronto when he is on PEI, and they come across an activist group dedicated to ridding the island of people who treat outsiders poorly called "awaycists."

that is hard to discover in their own experiences ... Almost any sort of work, even the backbreaking toil of the Welsh miner or the unenviable work of those employed in the Parisian sewer, can be the object of the tourist gaze” (Urry 1990, 10). This observation goes a long way toward understanding the tourist experience in Atlantic Canada, as much of the region’s tourism infrastructure is centred on work.

The series consistently makes fun of people who pander to tourists and the impulse to make Maritime culture exotic. When Terry finds out about agricultural tours on PEI, which he describes as “a bunch of stunned pricks paying you to pick strawberries,” he and Parnell get into the action by starting a cultural experience business that basically consists of tourists paying them to work in the potato fields for a week. Putting an extra fine point on it, Terry describes tourists paying money to work on their vacations as “reverse pogey.” Of course, tourism is an element of mass culture, and it is no surprise that *Just Passing Through* would make fun of both the tourist encounter and the role of literary and cultural symbols — it is worth mentioning that they advertise their business on L.M. Montgomery’s tombstone — in promoting that encounter.

Pogey Beach

In addition to placing its satire within broader sphere of North American popular culture and specifically targeting the commodified mass culture of Prince Edward Island and Atlantic Canada, *Just Passing Through* constructs its own internal popular culture universe. Terry and Parnell watch fictional television shows like “Maritimers in Space” in the evening⁶. They also watch a program about pogey fraud modelled on *Crimestoppers* and go to the drive-in to see a horror movie called *Two-Four*. But the most effective show-within-a-show sequence is *Pogey Beach*, an 80s-style cop show about a crusty old “pogey narc” whose daughter gets involved with an EI-cheat named Gary Gallant, the self-proclaimed “King Top-Stamp.” In the first episode in which *Pogey Beach* appears, there is a parallel sequence in the story proper in which Owen finds out that his cousins are drawing employment insurance in PEI even though they have been living in Toronto. He hires a local actress to pose as an officer for the EI program (in the parlance of *Just Passing Through*, a “pogey narc”) to scare Terry and Parnell into moving back to PEI. Many episodes of *Just Passing Through* have chunks of *Pogey Beach* interspersed in the main story. In 2019, Larter released a film-length version of

⁶ “Maritimers in Space” appears to be a dormant web production as of December 2022.

Pogey Beach, which has many of the same actors as *Just Passing Through*. The film tells the story of a wealthy man who moves from Toronto and buys a fish plant in Pogey Beach. The characters refer to working at the plant as serving time in pogey jail and the Gallant family ostracize their son Trent because he has a job at the plant. Overall, the film is less successful than the series in its satire, but there are interesting moments, including the final scenes, where the two heroes of the movie (Gary Gallant and Lyle MacDonald) manage to get the plant shut down by poisoning all the fish in the harbour, and the film's inclusion of an elaborate history of legendary pogey scammers on the island. Within the web-series itself, characters consume popular culture that reinforces the themes of *Just Passing Through*, allowing for a layered parodic treatment of images and stereotypes about PEI. The construction of an internal popular culture universe that mirrors and intensifies the themes of the series itself is an integral part of *Just Passing Through's* narrative strategy. All of this allows *Just Passing Through* to explain the connection between seasonal work and EI (Parnell and Terry worked on summer road crews before they qualified) at the same time as it parodies specific stereotypes about Atlantic Canada.

Conclusion

Cultural texts that embrace stereotypes about Atlantic Canada are somewhat complicated to analyze. On the one hand, there is a question of how seriously one should take this kind of series. Even writing about *Just Passing Through* in an academic journal seems to deflate it in unsatisfying ways, almost like explaining a joke after you tell it. Of course, this is the point of the satire: the series is preoccupied with external and internal perceptions of Prince Edward Island and uses humour to explore tensions between them. Part of the appeal of *Just Passing Through* comes from its raunchy presentation of life on the East Coast and the shock that accompanies some of its depictions of this world. Instead of contesting stereotypes associated with the region or embracing a kind of *Anne of Green Gables*-style pastoral vision of Atlantic Canada, *Just Passing Through* leans into the most derogatory and over-the-top representations of life in the region, including incest, homophobia, laziness, and a kind of backwards culture stalled in the 1970s.

Just Passing Through seems to embrace and even ironically commodify the worst assumptions outsiders have about Atlantic Canada, but at the same time it might model "taking back" the derogatory version of the folk and disrupting narratives of progress and definitions of productivity. In his 2010 article "The Performing Hillbilly:

Redeeming Acts of a Regional Stereotype,” Mark Roberts argues that literature and popular culture that embraces pejorative aspects of the hillbilly stereotype – the lack of teeth, sexual promiscuity and incest, racism and ignorance, feuding, and so on – does so for a dual purpose. In reclaiming the hillbilly stereotype and “performing” such negative stereotypes, these authors and artists at once assert a kind of authenticity or familiarity to people within, for example, the American South, and undermine or parody the assumptions that outsiders hold about that culture. He argues that when these “acts are viewed critically, audiences see the performances as a conscious play that works to loosen rather than tighten the hold of the negative meanings associated with the hillbilly stereotype” (Roberts 2010, 86). In the case of *Just Passing Through*, the conscious performance of stereotypes is bolstered at the formal level by the series’ construction of an internal popular culture universe and at the level of reception by its appearance on the web instead of on television. While *Just Passing Through* is obviously deeply enmeshed in the very specific setting of PEI and concerns stereotypes about a marginal region, the broader commentary the series makes on the commodification of local cultures, governmental and corporate responses to deindustrialization, and the social impact of changing patterns of work speaks to issues that cut across the political and economic climate of contemporary North America.

As I have suggested, representations of work in Atlantic Canada are entangled with long held assumptions about the region: ideas about masculine pride and sacrifice; the disappearance of work that comes along with industrial restructuring, the closure of the mines, and the cod moratorium; stereotypes about EI fraud and seasonal work; and the long history of labour organizing and violence in parts of the region, especially industrial Cape Breton. Whatever else the series is, *Just Passing Through* disrupts the idea that tourism and selling culture are reasonable antidotes to the region’s experience of deindustrialization and unapologetically examines the circulation of stereotypes about Atlantic Canada in ways that are markedly different than what we see in the region’s mainstream literature and popular culture.

References

Araki, Yoko (2016). “Parodying Stereotypes: Atlantic Canadian Representations in *Trailer Park Boys* Series and *Just Passing Through* Series.” *Japanese Review of Canadian Literature* 24, 33-25.

Beaton, Kate (2022). *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*. (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly).

Beaton, Meaghan, and Del Muiise (2008). "The Canso Causeway, Tartan Tourism, Industrial Development, and the Promise of Progress for Cape Breton." *Acadiensis* 37(2), 39–69.

Beer, Jeff (2014). "No More Mr. Nice Guy: This Raunchy Web Series Puts Canadians in a Whole New (Hilarious) Light." <https://www.fastcompany.com/3025627/no-more-mr-nice-guy-this-raunchy-web-series-puts-canadians-in-a-whole-new-hilarious-light>

Boxman-Shabati, Lillian (2019). "The Practice of Parodying: YouTube as a Hybrid Field of Cultural Production." *Media, Culture, and Society* 41(1), 3-20.

Burrill, Fred (2015). "Arguing the State with My Dad: Thoughts on Settler Colonialism in Nova Scotia." *Halifax Media Co-op*. <https://halifax.mediacoop.ca/fromsonofather.html>

Burrill, Gary (1992). *Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario, and Alberta*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Byers, Michele (2011). "Speaking about the Nation: Critiques from the Canadian Margins." *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 6 (2), 131–53.

CBC News (2015). "Kooperman, PEI shot film, debuts at Atlantic Film Festival." <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/kooperman-p-e-i-shot-film-debuts-at-atlantic-film-festival-1.3235233>

Cowie, Jefferson, and Joseph Heathcott, eds (2003). *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*. (Ithaca: ILR Press).

Creelman, David (2003). *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Delisle, Jennifer Bowering (2013). *The Newfoundland Diaspora: Mapping the Literature of Outmigration* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press).

Foster, Karen (2017). "Work Ethic and Degrowth in a Changing Atlantic Canada." *Journal of Political Ecology* 24(1), 633-643.

Gibbs, Terry, and Garry Leech (2009). *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond*. (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press).

Hayes, Matthew and Lachlan MacKinnon (2018). "Social Media, the Folk and Bizarre Stories of Nova Scotia." *Canadian Journal of Media Studies* 16(1), 76-98.

High, Steven, and David Lewis (2007). *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*. (Ithaca: ILR Press).

Hodd, Thomas (2008). "Shoring against Our Ruin: Sheldon Currie, Alistair MacLeod, and the Heritage Preservation Narrative." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33(2), 191-209.

Iverson, Douglas (2011). "'It's no different than anywhere else': Regionalism, Place, and Popular Culture in Lynn Coady's *Saints of Big Harbour*." *Canadian Literature* 208, 109-25.

Larter, Jeremy (2013-2016). *Just Passing Through*. (PEI: Rear Gear Productions).

Larter, Jeremy (2019). *Pogey Beach*. (PEI: Rear Gear Productions).

Linkon, Sherry Lee (2013). "Narrating the Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources." *International Labor and Working Class History* 84, 38-54.

Linkon, Sherry Lee (2018). *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

Lousley, Cheryl (2020). "After Extraction: Idling in the Ruins in Michael Winter's and Alistair MacLeod's Neoliberal Fictions." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 45(2), 229-253.

MacEachern, Alan and Edward MacDonald (2022). *The Summer Trade: A History of Tourism on Prince Edward Island*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Marshall, Susanne (2008). "'As if there were just the two choices': Region and Cosmopolis in Lisa Moore's Short Fiction." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33(2): 80-95.

Mason, Jody (2013). "A Family of Migrant Workers: Region and the Rise of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Alistair MacLeod." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 38(1), 151–69.

Mazer, Katie (2022). "Dump Truck Destiny: Alberta Oil, 'East Coast' Workers, and Attachment to Extraction." *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 54(6), 1923–1943.

McCullough, John (2009). "Imperialism, Regionalism, Humanism: *Gullage's, Trailer Park Boys*, and Representations of Canadian Space in Global Hollywood." In *Rain/Drizzle/Fog: Film and Television in Atlantic Canada*, edited by Darrell Varga, 151–70. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press).

McKay, Ian (1994). *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Muise, Del (1998). "Who Owns History Anyway? Reinventing Atlantic Canada for Pleasure and Profit." *Acadiensis* 27(2), 124–34.

Overton, James (1996). *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture, and Development in Newfoundland*. (St John's: ISER Books).

Phillips, Ryan (2021). "Trailer Park Boys and the Promotional Cultures of Cannabis in Canada: Audiences, Influences, and Imminent Commodities." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 55(2), 419-35.

Polley, Jason (2020). "Oh Canadiana? Atlantic Canada, Joel Thomas Hynes, and Heroin Realism." *Studia Angelica Posnaniensia* 55, 403-426.

Roberts, Mark (2010). "The Performing Hillbilly: Redeeming Acts of a Regional Stereotype." *Appalachian Journal* 38(1), 78-90.

Scott, Rebecca (2010). *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

Strangleman, Tim (2007). "The Nostalgia for Permanence at Work? The End of Work and its Commentators." *The Sociological Review* 55(1): 81-103.

Summerby-Murray, Robert (2015). "Regenerating Cultural Identity through Industrial Heritage Tourism: Visitor Attitudes, Entertainment and the Search for Authenticity at Mills, Mines and Museums of Maritime Canada." *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 30(1), 64–89.

Thompson, Peter (2019). *Nights Below Foord Street: Literature and Popular Culture in Postindustrial Nova Scotia*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

Tremblay, Tony (2008). "'Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion': The Politics of the Centre in 'Reading Maritime.'" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 33(2), 23–39.

Urry, John (1990). *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. (London: Sage).

Varga, Darrell, ed (2009). *Rain/Drizzle/Fog: Film and Television in Atlantic Canada*. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press).

Wyle, Herb (2008). "Going out of their way: Tourism, Authenticity, and Resistance in Contemporary Atlantic-Canadian Literature." *English Studies in Canada* 34(2-3), 159-180.

Wyle, Herb (2011). *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press).