Writing, Talking and Walking Québec’s Eastern Townships

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The Eccles Centre for American Studies

The Eleventh Eccles Centre for American Studies Plenary Lecture given at the British Association for Canadian Studies Annual Conference, 2016

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Ceri Morgan is a Senior Lecturer at Keele University, where she teaches classes on Canadian urban fiction and place writing. Research for her monograph, *Mindscapes of Montréal: Québec’s Urban Fiction, 1960–2005* (University of Wales Press, 2012) led her to work on a British Academy funded digital map of fictional Montreal, which she is doing in collaboration with sound artist, Philip Lichti. Morgan is also pursuing a second monograph project, entitled *Heartlands/Pays du cœur*, which looks at fictional representations of Québec’s ‘regions’. Other research interests include walking studies and participatory methodologies.
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In what follows, I shall look at some current research on Québec’s ‘regional’ fiction, whilst briefly considering the take up of participatory methodologies in literary studies and creative writing. ‘Heartlands/Pays du coeur’ can be seen as a sister project to my 2012 monograph, *Mindscapes of Montréal*.\(^1\) Whereas *Mindscapes* focuses on fictional representations (in French) of Québec’s major city, ‘Heartlands’ looks at novels and short stories – in French and English – of and on the ‘regions’. These are to be understood as spaces and places outside Montreal which are important within writers’ imaginaries, rather than areas which coincide precisely with administrative units like Mauricie or Outaouais.\(^2\) In the years leading up to and including the period of post-World War II nationalist assertion known as the Quiet Revolution, critics, writers, artists, politicians and others rejected the French-Canadian nationalist lynchpins of Catholicism, agriculturalism and the ‘revenge of the cradles’ (the maintaining of a high birth rate) to embrace a territorial nationalism which established Québec as the ‘home’ of Canada’s francophones. As the economic and cultural centre of the province and focus of much of the creative activity at the time, Montreal became the metonym for a Québec which sought to place itself on the world map. *Hors-Montréal*, or the Rest of Québec (ROQ), was relegated to a collective cultural oblivion whilst, somewhat paradoxically, also rendered the repository of an ‘authentic’ communal memory that could not be preserved within the resolutely modern space of the city. In literature and literary studies, the already nostalgic novel of the land, which had dominated since Canadian Confederation (1867), gave way to the urban novel. However, the last few years have seen a tendency in French-language Québécois fiction towards what Samuel Archibald identifies as ‘le néoterroir


\(^2\) Elements of this essay are published in Ceri Morgan, ‘Walking Studies, the Eastern Townships, and William S. Messier’s *Dixie*, *Nottingham French Studies*, 55.2 (2016), 224–38.
en littérature’, a trend to which *Arvida* (2011), his collection of short stories set in the Saguenay village of the same name, has contributed significantly. Other recent examples demonstrating what Archibald describes as ‘*une démontréalisation marquée* de la littérature québécoise’ (p. 17, Archibald’s italics) include Mélanie Vincelette’s novel on the Great North, *Polynie* (2011), Myriam Caron’s novel set in Sept-Îles, *Bleu* (2014) and Andréé A Michaud’s *Bondrée* (2014), a polar (thriller; murder mystery) set on the border with the United States. Writers’ reasons for moving away from the focus on Montreal may include motivations such as a desire on the part of individual authors to return to the areas of their youth; and the emergence of what Daniel Chartier calls ‘hipster’ writers. However, these go alongside a broader interest in challenging the fetishisation of the urban outside of the specifically Québécois context. The rise in studies on the rural, as well as on suburban, exurban and peri-urban spaces attests to this.

The focus of this essay is writing on and of Québec’s Eastern Townships, which lie to the south east of Montreal and border the United States. They tend to be represented in tourism and advertising as bucolic sites where visitors might engage in a little sport, wine-tasting or sampling of local food delicacies. The Eastern Townships – ‘les Cantons de l’Est’ in French – do not coincide exactly with l’Estrie, the administrative region created in 1981; as the latter does not include the districts of Granby-Bromont and Brome-Missisquoi. The popular imagination tends to link the Eastern Townships with Loyalist settlement – a connection frequently evoked in

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6 Daniel Chartier, private conversation, October 2015.
7 Michael Woods claims that ‘the emergence of Rural Geography as a specific line of geographical enquiry spans only the past 30 years or so and might only be thought to have “taken off” during the 1980s’. Michael Woods, Foreword, *Rural Geography*, 3rd edn (London: Sage, 2011), pp. xi–xii (p. xi).
8 During the welcoming remarks at the A Suburban Revoluion? conference at York University, Ontario in 2013, Roger Keil claimed that if the twentieth century was identified with urbanisation, the twenty-first century would be associated with suburbanisation. Roger Keil, A Suburban Revolution? conference, York University, Ontario, September 27–8, 2013.
Louise Penny’s internationally bestselling Inspector Gamache series, which is largely set in the fictionalised village of Three Pines in the Townships.\(^9\)

However, historian Guy Laperrière informs us that this is only part of the story: not only were there Abenakis living in the region before the arrival of settlers, but those Americans who established themselves there in the first half of the nineteenth century can be seen to have done so as part of a more generalised colonialist drive towards the north.\(^10\) During the same time period, British and other Europeans settled in the region, often on former French holdings. The region has long been associated with farming – particularly dairy farming. Less acknowledged is its industrial history, with pulp and paper, textiles and asbestos being very important. Since the 1970s, however, these have all given way to third sector industries, notably tourism (p. 140). In terms of language, the Townships were predominantly English-speaking until the late nineteenth century (p. 56). Certain areas are more anglophone and others more francophone. Whilst there is a high degree of bilingualism in the Townships, particularly since Québec’s language laws of the 1970s, Laperrière’s description of them as they were in the 1860s as ‘un modèle de juxtaposition et non d’intégration des ethnies’ (p. 64) is described as remaining true in the present day by geographer and educationalist, John Canning.\(^11\)

The Eastern Townships are, and have been historically, associated with creative writing, with a number of authors living there or holidaying there regularly. They are best associated – particularly in terms of literature in English – with poetry. Indeed, we can talk of there having been an anglo-Québec literary ‘scene’ in the Townships, in the sense of one of the characteristics Will Straw identifies with this phenomenon; namely this being a ‘poin[t] of assembly’.\(^12\)

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\(^11\) John Canning, private conversation, August 2014.

\(^12\) Will Straw, ‘Some Things a Scene Might Be’, *Cultural Studies*, 29:3 (2015), 476–85 (p. 479).
According to poets Jason Camlot and Steve Luxton, this scene had its heyday in the 1960s or even earlier, with writers like Frank Scott and Ralph Gustafson being some of the names associated with the region. Indeed, Luxton’s description of the writers frequenting the Townships when he first arrived there to take up a post at Champlain College reads like a ‘who’s who’ of Canadian poets and authors:

When I arrived in the Townships from Vancouver – having been driven the last leg from Sherbrooke by Rob [Allen], he pointed out a chap strolling on the streets of North Hatley, and he said, “That’s Ralph Gustafson!” Ralph Gustafson had been the editor of the Penguin Anthology of Canadian Verse. I knew of him and, though I had little knowledge at that point, this was the first hint that there existed a whole kind of literary scene and history in the area. At that time, the participants were aging, but the writers who were living around North Hatley, close to where I presently live – 4 or 5 miles – or summering there, included Ralph Gustafson the poet and anthologist, D G Jones, who taught at the University of Sherbrooke and was both a poet and a significant critic regarding Canadian poetry, Louis Dudek the poet and critic and to some degree my own poetic mentor; Frank Scott, another major Canadian poet and also a distinguished constitutional expert; A J M Smith, the poet and another major anthologist of Canadian poetry, and to continue, more briefly, Hugh MacLennan, the novelist. So there was this kind of – I wouldn’t call it a community, exactly – but there was a whole group of major Canadian literary figures in the 50s, 60s, and 70s who lived there or visited during the summer.

The 1970s saw the prestigious creative writing and literary journals, *Matrix* and *Moosehead Review* founded in the Townships. More recently, the region has been associated amongst readers of English crime fiction in the original language and in translation with Penny’s Three Pines novels. Penny has a francophone counterpart in the form of Johanne Seymour, whose Kate MacDougall series has a darker feel than the Three Pines one. This

13 Jason Camlot, private conversation, April 2015; Steve Luxton, interview, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Concordia University, Montreal, April 20, 2015.
14 Luxton, interview, April 20, 2015.
crime fiction offers a contrast to the popular imaginings of the Townships as natural idylls, gardens or farms often taken up in leisure and tourist advertising. These latter kinds of representations are to be found in some examples of francophone fiction, as in Hélène Lapierre’s *Les Barricades* (2014) and Monique Lachapelle’s *L’Origine du monde* (2014). As far as literary fiction in English is concerned, Mordecai Richler’s *Joshua Then and Now* (1980) represents the Townships as playgrounds for an essentially Anglophone rich.

In this essay, I shall be exploring 3 of the main – and, for me, the most interesting – ways in which the Townships are represented in contemporary fiction in English and French; namely as sites of crime, as border territory, and as cottage country. When I began this research, one of the most surprising discoveries was that the Townships are often portrayed in literature as sites of violence, criminality and murder. In addition to many examples of Penny’s Inspector Gamache novels and Seymour’s Kate MacDougall series, there is an annual crime fiction literary festival in lac-Brome called Les printemps meurtriers which was founded 5 years ago by the francophone author. We get a sense of criminality in one of the stories from Liane Keightley’s collection, *Seven Openings of the Head* (2007), which is set in an amalgamation of the Townships. We rarely get a direct reference to a named place, but the landscapes – comprising woodlands, farms and tea rooms (p. 35), the noise of passing trains – which other writers have cited as a feature of the region’s soundscape – and for-sale signs advertising ‘live worms and fresh eggs’ (p. 34) – contribute to a sense that the Townships are the setting. This is confirmed in the blurb on the back of the book, and by Keightley herself in an interview. The stories deal with the minutiae of social relationships – romantic, sexual, familial, amicable and business. What is especially interesting is their dark undercurrent. There is something about them – an often minute skewing of what otherwise appears as a recognisable day-to-day – which suggests anamorphosis; a distorted object which appears normal when viewed from

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20 Liane Keightley, interview, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, August 14, 2014.
a particular perspective. In his novel, *Trou de mémoire* (1967), Hubert Aquin famously references Hans Holbein the Younger’s portrait, *The Ambassadors* (1533), in which the apparent harmony of the double portrait is undercut by various objects within the setting; notably an anamorphic skull. The tone of Keightley’s collection suggests that a slight shift in eye-line would reveal the lie to the apparent ordinariness of the lives portrayed within them. There are many unusual or striking elements within the stories; from the woman masturbating a man in the public bathrooms on the otherwise empty seafront in the Southampton-Portsmouth region (p. 49), to the immobile squirrel blocking the alleyway in Montreal (p. 37). Our attention is arrested by these, but the stories’ strangeness is often located in a less conspicuous detail elsewhere, which point to a gradual separation from domestic realities.

In this way, in ‘No one tells you’, a young couple, Kit and Levy, get lost whilst on their way to view a house for Levy’s recently divorced brother and end up visiting an isolated place surrounded by forest which may or may not be the right one. There, they meet a middle-aged woman called Susan, whom they assume to be the realtor. By the time the couple leave, however, it is revealed that Susan believes she is being assessed as to her suitability for adoption or fostering. In some ways, the story reads as a reworking of Hansel and Gretel, with Levy in particular seeming somewhat child-like due to his rejection of one of the markers of adulthood. During the drive, it is revealed that whilst Kit wants a child, Levy has recently revealed that he does not share that desire. His refusal to discuss the possibility of parenthood point to a machismo that is, with some irony, figured as being further drawn out by the rural surroundings; causing him to insist the couple take a particular route off the highway: ‘looking out at the trees he’d started to feel a pioneering masculinity’ (p. 11). When the couple arrive at a house, Levy’s response to it is the following: ‘it looked to him like the scene of a future crime’ (p. 15). The sight of a woman crying at the stove seems to confirm this premonition: however, it is almost immediately revealed that Susan is weeping as she has been chopping and frying onions (p. 18). The visit seems rather surreal, with the three carrying on a conversation at cross-purposes. Throughout, Susan makes references to the ways in which the house might be an ideal place in which to settle with a baby or child. Until the reveal at the end of the visit, when we get her anxious question to a departing Kit and Levy, ‘May I ask what kind of report you’re

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planning to file?’ (p. 24), we interpret her comments as being directed at what she imagines to be the plans of the young couple before her. In some ways, however, it is the architecture of the house – mentioned only briefly – that is the off-angle detail. The house is a ‘sprawling bungalow’ (p. 15) – a form of housing more usually associated with the suburb than with a rural setting; adding to the sense of an unravelling of reality within the story.\textsuperscript{22} The visit seems to prompt a change of heart in Levy, and he offers to have intercourse with Kit on their way home, despite their not having any condoms. However, something about him – the smell of his unwashed hair – seems to touch off an emotional shift in Kit, too, and she is left suspended in a moment of uncertainty as to whether or not to go ahead.

In ‘Ten-cent packs’, an unnamed female protagonist-narrator stays on at her grandmother’s house after the old lady dies. She plants corn from an old packet of seeds she finds in a drawer, ostensibly enjoys her solitude and interacts a little with her neighbours: a young man called Sender and an older woman, Mrs Goody. However, the calm of the situation is called into question by the ‘late-August mowers scream[ing] up and down the lawns’ (p. 73), as well as the corn, which ‘looms large’ (p. 75) and gives off a smell the protagonist finds choking. There is a suggestion of impending catastrophe in the way the protagonist stockpiles food (pp. 73-4), begins to sleep on a rug on the floor as she cannot face going into her bedroom (p. 79), and the intensifying smell of Sender’s body odour (p. 75). Sender has recently separated from his partner, Mona, and is left with their dog, Milo, for company. As the story goes on, Mona calls Sender to demand custody of the dog, which disappears shortly afterwards. The improbability of Milo returning is foreshadowed by Mrs Goody’s budgie escaping when the woman cleans its cage. Although Mrs Goody leaves her back door open at night, the chances of the bird returning diminish daily, with the narrator reflecting: ‘I suspect it won’t be coming back. The nights are growing cold and already smell heavily of autumn’ (p. 78). The unsettling wilderness is suggested in the ‘anemic tomatoes’ (p. 81) and the apple trees, which are ‘dropping fruit’ (p. 83). Towards the end of the story, the narrator is woken by the smell of

\textsuperscript{22} Pierre Turgeon’s postmodern novel on the October Crisis contains a similar representation of the banality of the bungalow as suggesting a kind of hyper-real simulacrum, in its allusion to the house in which Pierre Laporte was kept prisoner by the Chénier cell of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) on a suburban street which has subsequently been renamed. Pierre Turgeon, Prochainement sur cet écran (Montreal: Éditions du Jour, 1973), pp. 99–100. See Mindscapes, p. 46.
the corn to find that it has been cut down (pp. 81-2). Shortly afterwards, at Sender’s request, she goes with him to see Milo’s body, which he claims to have found. It is clear that the protagonist understands Sender to have killed the dog to prevent his wife having her; as suggested by the description of his imprint on her body after he has touched the decaying corpse: ‘the evidence is there, and he has left his fingerprints all over the back of my knee’ (p. 84). What adds to the unsettling feeling is the eroticism of the description of the protagonist and Sender ‘lean[ing] back on slow-rotting apples’ (pp. 83–4); implying a complicity in an uncertain crime.

In the interview, Keightley attributed the tension within her stories to her feeling of being out of place – in the Townships, and in Québec more generally – as an anglophone:

When I was a kid, my father bought a piece of land in the Townships, in an area called Eastman; about a 10 minute drive from Magog. And… he built a house there. So I grew up spending my summers – there were 60 acres of land, so it was basically a little farm that he built. So I would spend my summers on this farm. […] Lake Orford was about a mile down the road from the house, and so we would walk to the tiny little public space and swim in the lake… It was a very strange experience, because it was 60 acres of land. And there was really no-one around. So I would spend the entire summer – just me and […] one of my brothers – just running through the woods. It was wonderful, in some ways. And it was utterly isolating in other ways! […] So that’s my […] background with the Eastern Townships. But I’ve always gone back there – I love it there. […] It’s beautiful and it feels sort of like home, as much as anything feels like home to me. But the weird thing about it is that it’s… That area of the Eastern Townships is very francophone. And… so I feel doubly isolated. But I guess I’ve come to like that isolation. […] I speak French, but I’m not a francophone, right? […] So the Eastern Townships… I guess I feel similarly there to how I feel in Montreal, which is a little bit like… Being an anglophone in Montreal is… a strange thing, because I feel like a stranger in my own home, a little bit….

Keightley, interview, August 14, 2014.
This is a fascinating flipside to representations of Montreal as unhomely, which we see time and again in the Montreal novel in French. The interviews with Keightley and Luxton were carried out as part of ‘discipline hopping’ training I received at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Concordia University, thanks to a Leverhulme International Academic Fellowship (2014–15). The aim was to enable me to move towards more participatory modes of research than the disciplinary training I had received up to that time as a literary scholar. In Summer 2014, and Spring 2015, I carried out a small numbers of interviews in English and in French, in a variety of settings and formats: controlled, in situ, walking, individual and group.

If the interviews cited in the first half of this essay were carried out under controlled conditions at COHDS, the ones in the second half were in situ and walking interviews I undertook during visits to the Eastern Townships in Spring 2015. During these, I met and spoke with William S. Messier, Hélène Guy, Michèle Plomer and Anne-Brigitte Renaud. The first took the form of a walking interview with Messier to discuss his novel, Dixie (2013). Like a number of examples of fiction on and of the region, Dixie is fascinated by the border; which is the second of the three representational modes I am exploring here. The novel is set in and around Saint-Armand in the Brome-Missisquoi region, and Eccles Hill, on the border with the United States. As its title suggests, Dixie transposes the atmosphere of the U.S. South to Québec. It centres around a group of ‘Bromisquois’ (p. 52) – most of whom are farmers, farmworkers and their children – who gather in Léo Swanson’s garage after the discovery of an escaped U.S. convict hiding out on a nearby farm (p. 15). The police are called and arrest the man, but he manages to escape a second time when the patrol car crashes on its way to the penitentiary at Cowansville. After swerving to avoid a coyote, the car ends up in la rivière aux Brochets (p.44). The convict, who is unnamed throughout and referred to only by the descriptor ‘le colosse’ (p. 44), goes on the run. In the meantime, we learn more about the lives of a seven year-old boy, Gervais Huot, and his family. The two narratives come together again by the end, when Gervais takes his sister Dorothée and her friend Ida to a hideout, where they come across the dead body of the convict. We learn that Gervais’s older brother Euchariste

24 See Mindscape, p. 11.
had discovered that ‘le colosse’ had protected Gervais against the coyote; becoming seriously wounded in the process (pp. 144–5). The brothers supplied the convict with food to last long enough for him to recover or die from his injuries (p. 146). The close of the novel sees a New Orleans style cortege effect an unsanctioned delivery of the body to the dead man’s associates on the U.S. side of the border.

The interview I did with Messier was a walking one; informed by James Evans’s and Phil Jones’s piece on this method: ‘it is argued that walking interviews generate richer data, because interviewees are prompted by meanings and connections to the surrounding environment and are less likely to try and give the ‘right’ answer’. On April 27, 2015, Messier met me at the bus stop at l’autoparc 747, situated at a gas and service station at the side of the highway outside Bromont. Accompanying me through an area which has been important within the life narrative of his family – his uncle has a farm outside Bromont; his parents got married at the church in Saint-Armand – Messier recounted how he drew on some of its physical features to bring together the U.S. South and Southern Québec: ‘en me promenant dans les rues, j’ai eu vite un sentiment de me promener dans les rangs du Mississippi, des chemins d’asphalte, mais pas de trottoirs, en campagne’. Dixie gives a sense of the palimpsest in its representation of the village of Saint-Armand and the surrounding region, with a major theme being the uncovering, or recovery, of elements from the past. There are two key historical elements featured within the novel. The first is the attempted Fenian invasion of 1870 (p. 59). Walking to take a look at the monument to the invasion on Eccles Hill, Messier explains how he was struck by the small scale of its memorialisation: ‘c’est sûr qu’ici, il y a bel et bien un monument, mais tu sais, on s’entend que si on enlevait le tas de roches, puis qu’on rasait un peu les structures, ça paraîtrait comme un champ ou une pâturage, là, on pourrait mettre nos vaches ou nos brebis ici, puis ils détonneraient pas’. The second key historical moment refers to traces of an African-American or African-Canadian cemetery in the village (p. 55).

28 Ibid.
With the possible exception of the Great North, many popular imaginings of Québec’s hors-Montréal cast this as an essentially white space. This is typical of Western understandings of the rural which, as Tim Edensor highlights, are frequently associated with whiteness. In contrast, Dixie draws attention to the current and past presence of people of colour in this particular area.

Phil Jones describes the kinds of work he and his colleagues did with walking interviews in and around Birmingham’s Digbeth in terms of ‘rescue geography’: ‘rescue geography [can] capture some of [the] understanding of the different spaces of the city, before the things which prompt people to recall things about those spaces disappear’. In some ways, Dixie can be thought of in terms of a ‘rescue literature’ – as revealing traces of the past in a kind of Benjaminean way. A similar description can be made of Michèle Plomer’s trilogy, Dragonville (2011–13). This is set in a Magog which is very much tied to an elsewhere. Unusually, Magog and Lake Memphrémagog are not in tension with Montreal, but rather, with Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The novels have a parallel plot, with the two narrative strands taking place a century apart, beginning with 1910 and 2010. In the early twentieth century, Li, a young man from a poor background, finds himself having to escape his native Hong Kong after he kills a British man who was abusive towards his opium-addicted mother. He is assisted by his fantastical lover, Li – a shape-shifting immortal –, and Patterson, a colonial policeman of Scots origin, who is nearing the end of his career. Patterson has seen Li in the shape of a dragon – an occurrence attributed to his sensitivity towards such phenomena, which is also evidenced by his having seen the Loch Ness monster in his native Scotland as a boy. Patterson hits on the idea of sending Li to Canada as he has a nephew

29 For example, most representations of Québec City identify this with whiteness, as Bill Marshall highlights. Bill Marshall, The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), p. 170. This is despite the fact that the city has historically been one of the poles of immigration to North America.


31 Formerly a residential and industrial neighbourhood adjacent to the city centre, Digbeth is now largely non-residential and home to car-fitters as well as art galleries and other cultural spaces.

who works as a captain of a paddle boat there. In the twenty-first century, Matthews’s grand-daughter, Sylvie, has returned to her native Estrie after living in China for a number of years. Following the death of her mother, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, and the break-up of a difficult relationship with a Chinese man, she decides to return to Magog and set up a store selling high quality Chinese goods. As the trilogy goes on, the two plots increasingly overlap; notably as they share a setting in the final novel.

*Dragonville* is analysed here as an example of the third trend in representing the Townships; namely as cottage country. As with Keightley’s fiction, which is set in the same area, Lake Memphrémagog is a ‘heavy presence’. Described as ‘un lac majestueux’ (p. 21), it serves as a connector between Matthews’s native Sotland, his adopted home in Québec, and his uncle’s place of residence in turn of the century Hong Kong. Dragonville makes a parallel between lac Memphrémagog and Loch Ness, and the mythical monsters which inhabit them; namely Memphré and Niseag/Nessie. These are associated with Lung, who can assume dragon or sea monster form if required, in order to protect her beloved city. Plomer talked about the importance of the Lake in her personal history in a group interview I did with her, Hélène Guy and Anne Brigitte Renaud on Guy’s balcony near Mont Orford. In it, she recounted how her Montreal-based parents had a chalet on Petit Lac Magog; the small lake at Deauville, in the municipality of Sherbrooke:

> Mes parents avaient un chalet—un shack—trois saisons, mais on venait quand même l’hiver – à Deauville, sur le Petit Lac Magog. Toutes mes fins de semaine [...] de jeunesse, [...], tous mes étés, ont été passés là, puis mon rêve le plus cher, depuis que je suis petite, c’est de ne pas être obligée de rembarquer dans l’auto le dimanche soir pour retourner en ville. C’était mon but dans la vie. Et j’ai fait mes études à l’Université de Sherbrooke, puis quand j’ai commencé l’université, je ne suis jamais retournée vivre à Montréal. J’ai vécu ailleurs – notamment en Chine – mais je ne suis jamais retournée vivre à Montréal.

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Fascinatingly, Guy revealed that her family also had a chalet nearby, even though they were living in the region. The question of the Townships as having become very much associated with leisure and holiday tourism is a motif of Plomer’s trilogy, which is politicised in its critique of the treatment of the Lake in the present day. There are descriptions of the many new condo developments which are built along the lake front. These, with their postmodern architecture, represent a mish-mash of styles in cheap materials (p. 103). They have no relationship to the environment in which they are built; rendering them a kind of everyplace of global capital, as suggested in Sylvie’s comments, ‘j’avais vu des quartiers identiques en banlieue de Montréal, en Floride et dans les banlieues cossues en Chine du Sud’ (p. 104). Not only have the property developers cleared all the native and cultivated trees to make room for these buildings (p. 103), but they have blocked access to the Lake itself (p. 105). In so doing, they have put an end to a whole set of local everyday rituals (p. 105). To make matters worse, the condos remain empty, despite having been sold (p. 104); with the implication that they are bought as holiday properties or investments. Porcelaine – the first volume in the trilogy – offers a view of a community split between Estriens and weekenders, with the latter’s secondary homes or chalets remaining empty for several weeks between trips (p. 131). In this context, the large historic houses are demolished and replaced by new buildings (p. 167). Sylvie is under pressure to sell her family home so as to make way for a marina, with her estate agent, Madeleine, repeatedly reminding her of the cost of running one of the heritage houses. Consequently, whilst colonialism is, doubtless, a key theme in Plomer’s trilogy, the economic neocolonialism of the present comes up for censure as much as the colonialist practices of the past.

The pairing of China and Québec is striking, as it is not common in Québec fiction outside of the writing of former resident, Ying Chen. Plomer’s trilogy reminds us of the historic presence of the Chinese in Québec and the rest of Canada. This is recalled by M. Théoret, who, in passing on a message to Sylvie that her shop had once been a Chinese laundry, reminds her that at one time, there had been a Chinese laundry in every village in Canada (p. 127). At the same time, Plomer does not romanticise the communities living around the Lake. M. Théoret refers to the fact that his parents would not allow his sisters to pick up their father’s collars from the laundry and that he and his brothers were scared of the men working there (p. 127). Another

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character, M. Lapointe, owner of the store Sylvie rents, is an out-and-out racist. He makes derogatory comments about the goods sold in the store, as well as jibes against the young boy Louis and his 18 year-old sister Ping Ping, whose family owns the Chinese restaurant on the edge of town, and whom Sylvie befriends.

In the last section of this essay, I shall give a brief account of another participatory method prompted by this research – the pop-up literary café. I devised the litcafé to accompany an exhibition that was put on as part of an international symposium organised by Keele University’s Community Animation and Social Innovation Centre (CASIC) in October 2015. Some of the materials from my research on the Eastern Townships were on display, such as photographs, extracts from literary texts, extracts from interview transcripts, and audio recordings. Viewers of the exhibition could, if they so wished, sign up for a session in which they listened to readings on the Townships, took part in a creative writing workshop led by ‘emergency poet’ Deborah Alma, and sampled maple ice cream. Participants wrote 5 line poems about travel and place on cardboard luggage labels, which they could then choose to add to the exhibition or keep for themselves.

I began with writing – although, perhaps, it should more properly have been reading – so it seems appropriate to end with memories of the same. In an interview in Westmount Library, spoken word poet, Kathy Fisher told me of the significance of going there as a child, in that it prompted her subsequently to travel and to write. She suggested, ‘just coming to a library, you travel in the books’.38 ‘There are a number of imaginative, material and disciplinary journeys in this essay; with more to come as I reflect further on the methodologies I learned – and am continuing to learn – and their impacts on the researcher as well as the researched.39 Bringing together interviews and close literary analyses does not offer a simple response to the question of how we are to understand the relation between material and imagined geographies. However, the processes underline the ways in which the two are always in tension: with dream and imagination playing key roles in our bodily experiencing of the world through which we move.

39 For example, I can attest to the fact that walking through a landscape prompts the interviewer to ask place-related questions, as well as inspiring the interviewee to offer place-specific reflections.
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The Eastern Townships (French: Cantons de l'Est) is a tourist region and a former administrative region in southeastern Quebec, Canada, situated between the former seigneuries south of the Saint Lawrence River and the United States border. Its northern boundary roughly followed Logan's Line (or Logan's Fault) the geologic boundary between the St. Lawrence Lowlands and the Appalachian Mountains. EASTERN TOWNSHIPS, QUE. During our road trip in the Eastern Townships, an Eden-like vacationland an hour’s drive southeast of Montreal, I managed to learn only two French terms: d’accord (meaning OK) and ooh la la (an expression of surprise). Turns out, it was the only French I really needed to know. Vineyards in the townships began in 1980 as pioneers planted cuttings from Ontario. Quebec’s first wine producing region now thrives with more than 25 wine producers. At Vignoble de l’Orpailleur in Dunham, near the American border, we walked past white buckets of newly harvested purple-blue grapes, then sampled the l’Orpalleur — I’m gonna say it, inspiring — ice wine. In Québec, we ski from sunrise to well beyond sunset. And that’s just the beginning. With our festivals and outdoor activities, cozy lodging and delicious food, we almost wish winter lasted all year long. Oui ski, do you? Located walking distance from Mount Orford and 5 minutes from Magog, the Espace 4 Saisons invites you to experience an unforgettable stay in the magnificent Eastern Townships region. The hotel has many amenities, an enchanting décor and a unique design. It also offers customised services to meet all your needs to make sure your stay exceeds your expectations.