Home-Work
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Now that the "linguistic turn" has been replaced by an "historical turn," it may seem unnecessary to argue for literary history as a mode of work. In recent years, English-Canadian literary criticism has been both deepened and enhanced by the wealth of writing (often by innovative junior scholars) on lesser-known authors and texts. (As a graduate student, I would have dated early Canadian literature as predating the Confederation poets; a student of today may well find Renaissance Canadian literature, or early Native discourses, a familiar terrain.) Literary work for English Canada is, by now, and by and large, historical in its orientation: in a wider time frame, and increasingly contextual. But the development has not been accompanied by a parallel dialogue on historical method. In this respect the situation of the 1990s and the new millennium differs markedly from the 1980s, when the importation of new literary theories to the Canadian critical scene occasioned energetic and extended debate over their suitability and applicability. To begin to generate a corresponding discourse on historical methods is part of my purpose here.

This essay presents a programmatic and somewhat polemical offering, which considers two related models for undertaking literary-historical work in English Canada. I am using the term *microhistory* to refer to both of these models, although this involves deploying the term in two different ways, one theoretical and technical and the other vernacular or common-
sensical. The first microhistory refers to a specific historiographic practice or methodology. The second refers to restrictions of the scope or size of examination. While the methodology called microhistory is rooted in the attempt to incorporate peripheral or marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture (thus the prefix micro, which has continued to adhere), microhistory as a method need not necessarily be confined to micro phenomena (or indeed, as I hope to show, need not be restricted solely to past phenomena at all).

While microhistory as a method and microhistory as a focus have a shared origin and a continuing compatibility (in fact the two senses are often conflated), there is some profit at least initially in prying apart the two microhistories as much as possible and arguing their merits separately. Indeed, this division has a precedent in the position taken by microhistorian Giovanni Levi, who argues that "microhistory cannot be defined in relation to the micro-dimensions of its subject-matter" (94). To effect this distinction, and to avoid confusion, where necessary I will refer to Microhistory 1 (method) and Microhistory 2 (dimension). But this essay will go on to consider the special affinity of Microhistory 1 to Microhistory 2, and will suggest that both together can provide new direction for the writing of literary history in English Canada.

Since microhistory has generally not been used for purposes of literary historiography, but rather has remained within the precincts of social history, the transferability of this method needs to be considered. This essay will begin by surveying some of the pros and cons of both microhistories for historical work generally and literary-historical work in particular. In the absence of readily available models of literary microhistory, presentation of what we might call (like a 1960s hem length) a mini-microhistory is intended to be suggestive. The conclusion will try to draw out more explicitly some of the implications of a conjoined literary microhistory for both literary analysis and pedagogy. This method may offer ways to undertake multicultural yet national literary-historical work on premises more congenial to a postcolonial perspective, and hold pedagogic possibilities for teachers and students to think about the narratives and counter-narratives of English-Canadian literary history.

What is microhistory? (We are beginning here with a consideration of Microhistory 1, or microhistory-as-method.) This is a term not always readily familiar since microhistory has yet to develop as a separate current
of historiography in North America, although its European legacy extends for a quarter of a century. Nonetheless, like Molière’s prose speaker, a historian may well be a microhistorian without knowing it. Even surveys devoted to historical methods—such as Georg Iggers’ *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*—define microhistory more easily by example than by its internal characteristics, referring invariably to the founding instance of Carlo Ginzburg’s 1976 work *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, a study of the heresy trial of Menocchio, a Friulian miller, whose strange cosmography evolved from an amalgam of eclectic reading, wayward religious contemplation, and ingrained peasant belief. (This example allows us to mark immediately two significant points: the rise of microhistory within the context of early Italian historiography, for dealing with communities within a non-national identity; and the initial interweaving of microhistory with questions of reading, writing, and textual access.) While Italy remains the centre of microhistorical studies, with other practitioners encountered principally in France and Spain, a North American readership may well be familiar with the other famous example of this mode, Natalie Zemon Davis’ tour de force of 1983, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

Surveys of historical methodology define microhistory not only by example but by negative definition, by what it is not and what it opposes. It stands, as the name would signify, against the grand macro methods, whether that macro is great personages and grand episodes (thus microhistory counters the exempla and *événement* school of European historiography), or the macro of overarching historical metanarratives. Microhistory aims to work in opposition to the teleological narratives of both social science (liberal-progressive) and Marxist (dialectical) historiographies, while continuing to share some of the techniques of the first and much of the politics of the latter. Initially conceived as a development in the functionalist-structuralist school of history (as epitomized by Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school), microhistory eventually developed in opposition to it, stressing qualitative (documentary or discursive) analysis over the quantitative work of the *Annales* historians, and denying the structuralist’s postulate of a networked unity of social systems. In addition, in its concern with the historical event or moment, microhistory differs markedly from the *Annales*ists’ interest in large historical or geopolitical arcs, the *long durée*. 
Let me continue this series of negative definitions by comparing microhistory to two other analytic modes with which it would seem to have strong resemblances. First, what is the difference between microhistory (often focused on the lives and times, or more properly, life in times, of an individual) and biography? The distinction, one could say, is that while microhistory does not see the subject as purely symptomatic (indeed, as with the Friulian miller, it may be strikingly eccentric), the goal is to understand an historically situated mentality; while biography, on the other hand, traditionally postulates the subject as more free-standing or differentiated and (in the case of literary biography) as the prime mover behind the texts he or she produces.1

New historicism would also seem to have significant similarities, and indeed originated as an attempt to graft onto literary studies various branches of European new historiography. As they have both developed, however, new historicism seems to have diverged from microhistory in several important respects. It retains an oddly optimistic faith in the evidentiary nature of texts, insofar as analyses tend to be “grounded” in them; and, following from this, the textual instances are read as representative. New historicism is more concerned with the dominant episteme, even if it is tracking the contradictions and complexities within it, and is as a result both more text-centric, and less eccentric, than its microhistorical cousin.

Even when the microhistorical method is described by one of its practitioners, the principles may be laid out somewhat elliptically. In his much-translated essay “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” Ginzburg provides a sort of microhistory of microhistory, from which methodological mimesis the following principles may be drawn:

• microhistory works on the “margin” and not in the centre
• it deals with the anomalous and not the representative
• it takes a single personage (usually), or event or circumstance (less usually), and relates this to networks of community, commodity, knowledge, and force, in ways that show both connection and exception
• it is narrative rather than reconstructive
• it stresses both ruptures and connections, narrating (in Ginzburg’s words) while resisting the temptation to “fill[ ] the gaps in the
documentation to form a polished surface" ("Microhistory" 23). Or, as Davis informs her readers in the opening to *The Return of Martin Guerre*: "This book grew out of a historian's adventure with a different way of telling about the past" (vii).

That historiographers have approached microhistory by exempla, negative definition, and demonstration is not surprising. "It is no accident," states Levi in his essay "On Microhistory,"

that the debate over microhistory has not been based on theoretical texts or manifestos. Microhistory is essentially a historiographical practice whereas its theoretical references are varied and, in a sense, eclectic. The method is in fact concerned first and foremost with the actual detailed procedures which constitute the historian's work, so microhistory cannot be defined in relation to the micro-dimensions of its subject-matter. (93)

While "experimental" and lacking a "mode of established orthodoxy," microhistory does have a set of "crucial" common elements or principles, which Levi traces to the microhistorians' effort to develop new forms of Marxist historiography. In the resulting formulation,

all social action is seen to be the result of an individual's constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms. . . . In this type of enquiry the historian is not simply concerned with the interpretation of meanings but rather with defining the ambiguities of the symbolic world, the plurality of possible interpretations of it, and the struggle which takes place over symbolic as much as over material resources. (94-95)

This "struggle" over the symbolic, far from being the object of the historian's retrospective gaze alone, occurs in the practice of contemporary historiography itself: it is a question of developing methods of interpretation and description in keeping with the microhistorians' world-view, of "both acknowledging the limits of knowledge and reason whilst at the same time constructing a historiography capable of organizing and explaining the world of the past" (95).
While the method outlined by Ginzburg and Levi appears to involve a cautious treatment of texts, a strong evidentiary base, and a healthy dose of critical self-consciousness, microhistory has had voluble critics, whose principal objections have been summarized by Iggers:

(1) that their methods, with their concentration on small-scale history, have reduced history to anecdotal antiquarianism; (2) that they have romanticized past cultures; (3) that because . . . they purportedly work with relatively stable cultures, they are incapable of working with the modern and contemporary worlds marked by rapid change; and (4) in this connection that they are incapable of dealing with politics. (113)

Of course, microhistory does have its own politics, and these may generate some internal contradictions, at least according to Dominick La Capra in his critique of The Cheese and the Worms (subtitled "The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian"). For La Capra, Ginzburg's insistence on the primacy of an oral and oppositional peasant culture to Menocchio's thought reinforces exactly the distinction between "low" and "high" cultures to which microhistorians are supposedly opposed. (And La Capra's subtitle further implies that Ginzburg may share with Menocchio an inventive, even wilful, rendition of texts in the interests of a particular world-view.) A critique may also be made of microhistory's lack of theoretical transparency: as historian Peter Burke has suggested, in common with other new histories, microhistory has failed to elaborate the premises upon which its own forms of textual interpretation take place, the methods used for reading texts and reading between the lines (9-12). This is in part what Levi alludes to when he refers to a lack of theoretical centralism, in other words, that microhistory is defined by its practices rather than its principles.

To the critiques noted by Iggers, La Capra, and Burke, one might add some other reservations: that microhistory appears to have abandoned diachronic analyses in favour of the deeply synchronic; that the history remains oddly, perhaps even contradictorily, individualizing in its focus on the particularities of discrete subjects; and that the narrativizing bent may lead the microhistorian to make connections on the basis of adjacency or speculation, as much as it permits her or him to self-critically or self-consciously foreground the modus operandi.
However, the advantages of the microhistoric method are apparent to anyone who has read The Cheese and the Worms or The Return of Martin Guerre. This is, as it is often termed, history with a human face: and that face is the face of the daily, the ordinary, the subaltern. Microhistory tells a story, often structured as the attempt to solve an interpretational puzzle or epistemic mystery of some kind. As fellow historians, document readers, and textual explicators, we appreciate being let in on the trade craft, through the foregrounding of the procedures of research and interpretation. These are the charms of microhistory: there are more serious merits. Most fundamentally, this is a method suited to the writing of history on the margins, where documentation may be scant. It assumes that the lives and activities of the subaltern classes need not be told in the aggregate, but can be seen (at least some of them) in the particular; and that these features can emerge even through dominant documentation. Microhistorians see this particular focus—the individual, event, or text—as a uniquely situated nodal point of social, political, economic, and ideational forces. In this way, and perhaps most radically, microhistory undermines the model of historical “centres” and “margins” in the first place.

The potential of microhistory becomes further evident if we take the initial term, micro, under advisement. This prefix should not be seen as demanding a necessary limitation of analyses to individuals or to small-scale phenomena. (One could have a microhistory of an institution, or a city, or a war, for example.) Rather, the subject or event (of whatever magnitude) is seen as micro in the sense of being situated at a particular point or conjuncture, and as located within larger webs or networks. Just as microhistory need not be confined to the small-scale, nor need it deal necessarily with the marginal: figures at the (so-called) centre could be successfully treated with a microhistorical approach, which would have a sort of reverse effect of de-authorizing events seen to have been set in motion by unique individuals, and of discharging the charismatic accumulation of those personalities and their motivations. So, too, we may expand the base term history. Since it permits an analysis of figures and phenomena within contexts contemporary to it—and draws meaning from that analysis rather than from retrospective evaluation based on the knowledge of later results or consequences—there is no need for microhistory to be confined to the events of the past, although that has in fact been the tendency so far.
Micro, then, is a question not of size but of scale or of proportionality. And yet it appears to me that local phenomena, events, and formations are in fact the most promising foci for a new literary-historical analysis. I have arrived at this assessment primarily through my own work in the areas of literary and cultural history, although it must be admitted at the outset that this has been restricted to the nineteenth century primarily and Ontario almost solely. But from this necessarily limited perspective, I would like to turn to consideration of Microhistory 2, the question of the dimension or scope of examination.

What is the most promising focus (we might call it the centre of gravity) for renewed literary-historical work in English Canada? Would it be the author, especially if we saw the project of such microhistory as bringing to light lesser-known authors, or those from under-examined constituencies? Or should it be the reader? In the bush, on the farm, even in the new cities, we must have had our own Menocchios, idiosyncratic autodidacts in a print-hungry culture. Or should the focus be texts themselves? A microhistorical examination would place the text, as both message and artifact, in its web of historical, literary, and productive relations. There is merit to all of these: but my own sense is that the answer lies in none of the above—none of the author, reader, or text conceived in isolation—but rather the community, circle, or cultural formation. Four reasons may be offered in support of this choice.

The first reason is a simple one: other methods of organization have proven to be limited in their utility. Construction of a national literary history is rendered impossible by the simple fact that “state” and “nation” are in such a complex correspondence here. Other more general critiques may be made, which have been ably argued in the context of postcolonial studies: that “national” cultural histories are frequently the history of the urban centres and even more often of the dominant social groups; and that such macro structures seem inevitably accompanied by macro narratives of national progress and individuation. But histories organized along regional, provincial, sub-regional, and even bioregional grounds are unsatisfactory because (arguably) these do not mark corresponding cultural boundaries. At any rate, in the period with which I am most familiar—prior to 1900—the primary unit of cultural organization was the town, the small city, or the community defined on ethnic (and sometimes political or religious) principles. It may well be that the construction of a
“national” literary history for pre-twentieth century Canada is an anachronism, not only because the time period is largely pre-national but, more significantly, because this does not represent the primary point of influence or identification for the figures and texts we might wish to study.

A second reason comes from a somewhat different consideration. While literary-historical work has often attempted a national narrative arc, literary-critical analysis, on the other hand, to date tends to be focused on single authors (in the form of biographical or bio-bibliographical studies) and single texts (in critical work that is largely elucidative or explicative). It is almost impossible to link this in any coherent way to a literary history constructed “nationally”; or, conversely, to use that national scale as a meaningful context for author and text studies. A more inflected sense of cultural formations is needed for work on authors and texts that is not solipsistic.

A third reason for choosing the community as a focus for examination—whether we define community as a geographic or demographic unit—is that this permits examination of literary institutions while keeping in view the participating individuals as distinctive agents. Unlike higher-level examinations, this focus allows audiences, amateurs, and intermittent cultural workers a place in the picture; unlike more specialized author or critical studies, it provides a ground for integrated studies of textual production, distribution, and reception. It permits micro examination that is not atomized.

A fourth reason for choosing this level of examination is that (as far as I can determine) it is the one most suited to the available resources. That point applies whether we are talking about communities defined as geographic areas or as elective networks. Small-town Canada is rich in print, archival, material, and oral resources dealing with cultural life past and present: diaries, letters, collections of memorabilia, association minute books, library records, newspaper accounts, local histories, personal memories, and family recollections. It must be admitted, however, that such material is sometimes hard to locate and identify, often dispersed, and usually uneven in its depth and quality. While the level of documentation may be insufficient to form a sharply focused portrait of an individual, and may be too particular or ephemeral to contribute substantially to the understanding of a national scene, it does allow exactly the sort of documentary bricolage suited to assembling collective or composite portraits.
When materials are varied or scattered, the historian's hand is forced: the
discernment of patterns and connections, the accounting for documentary
largesse and lacunae, are fundamental to the task and require inscription
into it.

While it may seem that this argument has been converging toward a
natural affinity or marriage between Microhistory 2 and Microhistory 1,
more work needs to be done before the confetti starts to fly. The above has
in some respects begged the question of how well microhistory can func-
tion in the interests of a specifically literary history; the previous points
might be equally applicable to work in the areas of education history,
religious history, and so on. Do we have already-available models of
literary microhistoriography? I would argue not, and will take the quickest
route through this issue by considering whether the work of book histo-
rarian Robert Darnton is microhistorical or not. Or, more specifically, while
it may be microhistorical in the sense of analyzing discrete events and
practices, does it evidence microhistory-as-method?

Darnton is definitely a "new historian," often mentioned in the
same context as Davis, Ginzburg, and Levi. His work has evident similarities
to theirs, frequently focusing on a social curiosity or on displays of a
dramatically different mentality: why would apprentices kill cats? what
underlies the particular taxonomies of the Diderot encyclopedia? His work
operates on the margins insofar as it traces the "street life" of texts,
narratives, and—more recently—gossip. In his much-debated diagram of
the production-distribution-consumption circuit, in the field-forming es-
say "What Is the History of Books?" he schematizes the place of economic
and legal factors in the print communication circuit. But this model is
somewhat at odds with the interests of microhistorians in several ways. It is
intensely bibliocentric, rather than focused on human agents; and it shows
a cause-and-effect wheel of ideational generation (from author to pub-
lisher/distributor to reader, with other forces relegated to an exteriorized
contextual space) rather than the more complex (and multidirectional)
system of determinations evidenced by a Carlo Ginzburg, for example.

In the absence of models ready to hand, I would like to offer, not an
example (for this does not claim to be a fully achieved microhistorical
reading) but a prospectus, which is nonetheless intended to be illustrative
of how an event (and a circle of participants) could be approached from the
point of view of a literary microhistorian. I call this episode "Murder in the
Debating Society," and it comes from work I’ve done elsewhere on the literary societies of mid-nineteenth-century African Canadians.2 Researching this literary culture is challenging, given the paucity of records and the extremely complex webs of ideas, influences, mandates, and allegiances to be found in any text produced by or about the Fugitive community. It is difficult to study this particular cultural community without employing two of the primary techniques of the microhistorian: the thrifty habits of the bricoleur, and an attention to gaps and absences. In this instance, the metaphor of reading between the lines can be literalized: to read the cultural history of the African Canadians can sometimes involve reading, quite literally, in the “white” spaces.

I was not the first person to note this episode (it is mentioned in Rosemary Sadlier’s book on Mary Ann Shadd, for example, and discussed in the more recent biography of Shadd by Jane Rhodes); but it still demanded elucidation. In Sandwich, Ontario (now Windsor), in 1853, there was a meeting of a debating society for young men of the Fugitive community, under the sponsorship of teacher and newspaperwoman Mary Ann Shadd, and the abolitionist and orator Samuel Ringgold Ward. At one meeting, a young man was murdered. What happened? And why, even more puzzlingly, did the Black community newspaper The Voice of the Fugitive accuse both Shadd and Ward of being “accessories to a murder”? (This charge, one should add, was never formally made.) This was the only literary society murder I had encountered in the course of my research, so my interest was doubly piqued.

Why take this episode as a focus for examination? It is to all appearances exceptional and therefore could not be presumed to be representative. We may pause here to highlight a fundamental and sometimes misunderstood aspect of the microhistorical method: its focus on the anomalous rather than the typical. It is counter-intuitive that such choices should have a scholarly validity. But one could explain the seeming contradiction in the microhistorical method in this way: what is exceptional to a modern viewer may not have been particularly so in its own day, and the seeming exceptionality may lie in a later lack of understanding of the frame within which a phenomenon (like sacrificed cats) may have been normalized. Thus what we would learn from examination of such an event would be its fittedness. On the other hand, if we are working on an incident which was considered exceptional or strange in its own day, we
may very well find that the anomaly, the burst into prominence, was a sign that the episode was deeply ordinary in the sense of having been symptomatically revealing of its own time, at least to its contemporaries.

In the case of the murder in the debating society, there is little evidence of how this episode was viewed by the European-descent settlers (in part because area newspapers from the time period have not survived), but one can assume that this was judged by many to be normative rather than exceptional, taken as further evidence of the perceived lawlessness of the Fugitive community. (That this perception buttressed the mid-century backlash against the Fugitives is attested to by informants to Benjamin Drew’s *The Refugee*, who complained that thefts in the district were invariably laid to their account.) In narrating and assessing this event and the response, a microhistorian would begin by wanting to know more about the incident and its consequences, including the primary personages involved: the society’s sexton or order keeper, and the interloping heckler who felled him with a blow. How was the trial conducted, and what was the fate of the murderer? (Court records, as any reader of Davis, Ginzburg, or Levi will know, are an important source for microhistorians, not only for the density of the transcriptions but also because they are rare records of voices.) Did the society continue to meet, and what other responses were evidenced by the local communities, both Fugitive and European-descent? What forms of defence were required on the part of the Black inhabitants of Sandwich; and were the opponents of assisted settlement, or the groups advocating resettlement of this “surplus” population to the Caribbean, able to add this event to their arsenal? How can this episode, its consequences, and its coverage, open for us the complex politics of Black settlement in the Western District and indeed in Canada West more generally?

As a literary microhistorian, these considerations would not be irrelevant. But one would wish to situate this episode more specifically in the context of literary societies; in the practice and teaching of public rhetoric; in the history of newspaper publication in the Canadas; and in African-Canadian literary and cultural history: in other words, as a particular intersection of literary, rhetorical, educational, political, and racialized forces and factors. The incident was immediately framed in the African-Canadian press, not as exceptional but as expected, indeed predictable: what was being mobilized was a long-running set of cautions about the
dangers of unfettered public discourse and its ability to inflame the passions beyond control. These arguments, I had found, surfaced whenever debating societies operated in contentious times (in Upper Canada prior to the Rebellion of 1837 for example), and easily could be dusted off 15 years later. In the hastily launched Provincial Freeman, rushed prematurely into print in order to mount the defence of both Shadd and Ringgold Ward (indeed, it is possible that one of the debating society's mandates was to generate support for this alternative to The Voice of the Fugitive), Shadd would draw on equally time-tested counter-propositions, about the role of such organizations in training and tempering public discourse. Evidenced here, as well, may be differing attitudes within the African-Canadian community as to what model of literary society should best be implemented: whether a society focused on self and mutual intellectual improvement, or whether (taking the powerful model of the literary-abolitionist societies established in the freed Black community of Philadelphia) such literary and rhetorical study should inevitably be accompanied by forms of community uplift and material assistance. But which way did the suspicion work: was the debating society suspect because it was devoted to words alone? or because it was operating in tandem with a political agenda which the (more separatist) editors viewed as assimilationist?

We can go some way to understanding the discrepancies between The Voice of the Fugitive editors, Henry Bibb and Mary Bibb, on the one hand, and Shadd and Ringgold Ward, on the other, from following out other chains of available information. Henry Bibb had escaped from slavery while Mary Bibb was modestly schooled; Shadd was well educated and Ringgold Ward attended Knox College at Toronto after fleeing the United States. To what degree did their different backgrounds account for their respective attitudes to rhetorical training? How much is this attitude in turn embedded in contemporary debates within the Black community as to whether their own schools should be constructed along American or British curricular lines? (That Mary Bibb and Mary Ann Shadd had been competing for the franchise of the same community school would not be extraneous here.)³ We can follow, in addition, some of the more specifically rhetorical implications, most profitably (I would imagine) by examining the rhetorical theories and practices of Ringgold Ward (considered by some, in his day, an orator second only to the great Frederick Douglass) but also the rhetorical modes of Shadd, Mary Bibb, and Henry Bibb, in
their newspaper and monographic publications. Lest we regress too far along this battle of words, about a battle of words, we may bring ourselves back to the realities of newspaper publishing in the perilous economic conditions of the 1850s: the attack on Shadd and Ringgold Ward may have been, as much as anything, a pre-emptive strike in a subscription war. Considering this can lead us into questions of serial and journalistic publication, distribution, and readership in the mid-nineteenth century.

While this is more a prospectus than an example, it is intended to illustrate how the two forms of microhistory are operating together: a small-scale phenomenon viewed as a node for the intersection of discourses, of institutions, and of economic, social, and cultural relations, many of which extended beyond the borders of Canada West. From this may be drawn six points in favour of a conjoined microhistorical approach in Canadian literary historiography.

First—and alluding to a distinction that has become increasingly common in recent years—a microhistorical approach allows us to look at literature in Canada rather than Canadian literature. (This distinction is already employed in the title of the History of the Book in Canada project, for example.) We need to understand how a variety of oral and written forms, from many nations and cultures, have been imported, circulated, understood, and used in Canadian contexts.

Second, this approach allows us to deal with different ethnic, racial, and elective communities both discretely and in their connections to other Canadian social units and to their home or country-of-origin communities: in other words, to develop a multicultural national literary history in an international frame.

Third, and this is an important contribution, it allows us to escape from the problem of “representation” and “representativeness,” which seems invariably to vex examinations of (so-called) minority communities. The subject of microhistorical examination, whether an individual, a cultural formation, or a community, is not placed in a synecdochic or “standing for” figural relationship, but rather in a network of material and ideational conditions.

A fourth point is that microhistory allows the development of literary histories that are less bibliocentric than those developed under other models, and it considers the placement of print publication in relation to scribal and oral formulations.
Fifth, and perhaps most significantly, while providing the context for authors and texts known to us today, this approach will also “decentre” the literary system by bringing to light amateurs and autodidacts, revealing the reliance of seemingly more major authors on these local and social contacts.

To these theoretical benefits may be added a sixth, practical, consideration: the narrative (rather than reconstructive) tendency of the microhistorical method not only encourages self-reflexive work but allows for historical bricolage in areas where records are scattered or scanty. The working outwards from the texts to greater economic, political, and ideational systems means that the researcher is not confined solely by the state of the available archive.

I conclude with two questions about undertaking literary-historical work in this way. Most of us would not be willing to give over entirely the idea of history constructed on a diachronic model, no matter how suspicious we may be of triumphalist national sagas or crude models of causation and effect. But the microhistorical method appears to have a limited capacity for diachronic analysis. At the completion of a series of such examinations, would we really have a history of literature in Canada, or the materials on which a history could be based? The answer to that question would depend in part, I imagine, on our evolving sense of what we expect from literary histories in the first place. We may never again have over-arching national narratives within which all figures and texts are consonant—and we may never wish to. The question of how to interrelate microhistorical examinations still remains: historians Florike Egmond and Peter Mason use a morphological metaphor, suggesting that what is to be detected are points of similarity or “family resemblances” (in Wittgenstein’s term) between features revealed by microhistorical examinations for different points in time and varying cultures. While this—as illustrated by Egmond and Mason’s own analyses—does not yield a diachronic progression, it does allow microhistory to take on some of the mandates of traditional historiography and particularly the delineation of processes and patterns. The extension of microhistory into morphology is an attempt to answer the question of whether microhistorical research projects need always be discrete rather than comparative, and whether “there is any way to connect microhistory and the long durée” (3). Another avenue would be to pursue the assertion that microhistory need not be micro in
scope in its most radical dimension: how macro in scale can the microhistorical method be?

There is a second point regarding the overall applicability of this method for English-Canadian literary history. The pairing of the microhistorical method with the micro level of the rural region, town, or community may be better suited to the period prior to the First World War, and less appropriate to the literary culture of the mid- or late-twentieth century. Or perhaps not, for where the cultural significance of the geographic community (and especially the small town) may have declined in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, urban subcultures or the elective communities based on nation, race, gender, politics, or aesthetics may have assumed a proportionately greater importance. As mentioned before, one of the strengths of the microhistorical method is that it need not be confined to historical phenomena strictly speaking. It is best left to people who work more intensely in the writing cultures of modern and contemporary Canada to determine how useful this method might be for their purposes.

We may conclude on a somewhat speculative note, with some consideration of the pedagogic application of microhistory. In my own teaching I have come to focus more and more on literary works taught in relationship to their social and political formations (the literature of nineteenth-century African Canadians, for example, as in the example given above, or the rhetoric of reform writers in the Rebellion years). Students seem to enjoy the opportunity to work on literary cultures on a small scale, especially when this involves learning about an author from their home town, their neighbourhood, or their cultural background. Such geographic or community connections help to give immediacy to writing that is otherwise temporally or experientially very remote to these students. It appears that many other Canadian literature teachers are also deploying the more restricted focus of Microhistory 2 in the classroom or lecture hall. But Microhistory 1, the microhistorical method, also has pedagogic potential, insofar as it will move students away from textual explications to cultural implications, and will encourage them to reflect on the procedures and paradigms through which the story of Canadian literature has normally been told.

Indeed, while microhistory offers well-elaborated models for specific and sophisticated literary-historical studies, its main benefit may lie,
paradoxically, in what it cannot provide. It asks—even as it does not answer—for a fundamental redefinition of the possibilities and purposes, methods and frameworks, of literary macro history.

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NOTES

1. One extended attempt to compare biography to microhistory is made by United States historian Jill Lepore. However, I believe that Lepore misreads the intended figurative relationship of the microhistorical subject when she compares the biographer’s “belief in the singularity and significance of an individual’s life” to the microhistorian’s interest in that life’s “exemplariness, in how the individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues effecting the culture as a whole” (133). The subjects examined by Davis or Ginzburg, for example, could not be said to be standing in a synecdochic or even allegorical relationship to their culture, although their lives are deeply revelatory of it.

2. For a more extensive account of the episode, see Murray 64–70.

3. These curricular debates have been traced by Afua Cooper, particularly in “Black Teachers in Canada West, 1850–1870: A History.”

WORKS CITED


