

# Not Folking Around: Towards a Political-Aesthetic Economy of Folk Art

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Erin Morton, *For Folk's Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 405 pp.

Aislie Walsh's recent biopic *Maudie* (2017) charts the rough life of Maud Lewis, the self-taught artist whose idyllic, brightly coloured paintings of daily existence in rural Nova Scotia garnered both national and international acclaim, which has only grown since her death in 1970. The film fictionalizes the relationship between Maud and her husband, Everett Lewis, with whom she shared life in their one-room house in Digby County. However, in narrating this story, *Maudie* also presents an image of the authentic "folk" artist for whom creativity is a spontaneous and natural power. "Maudie" cannot help but paint, first on the walls of their small home, and then for the consumers and patrons who begin to knock, enchanted, on their door; yet these exchanges and encounters seem not to fundamentally alter the art itself. The art springs directly from her sensitive, ancient soul and from the craggy Atlantic landscape (Newfoundland standing in for Nova Scotia), apparently in equal measure.

Where do such ideals of "folk" purity come from? What kinds of social, cultural, and economic work have they done? Erin Morton's *For Folk's Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* asks and seeks to answer these questions. Morton offers a rigorous genealogy of the discourses of folk art in Nova Scotia from the mid to late twentieth century, theorizing throughout the ways in which this category has been articulated and rearticulated across the complex interplay of artists, critics, curators, collectors, institutions, policies, media, and economic forces. Of course, "the folk" is not a real thing out in the world; it is rather an idea that has been socially constructed within historical contexts, which a growing body of literature in cultural studies, popular music studies, and folklore studies (to name just a few) has sought to show.<sup>1</sup> Morton's book contributes to this trans-disciplinary field by analyzing the

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Benjamin Filene's *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*, Regina Bendix's *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*, and Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*.

desires and determinations that have both sustained and modulated the category of “folk art” in one particular historical context, Nova Scotia “under late capitalism” (5-8).

According to Morton, the concept of the folk has been both product and producer. Most broadly, Morton describes the construction of folk art in Nova Scotia as an exercise in “historical presentism,” which she defines as “a framework that defines folk art in the present according to past changes in the cultural cycles of capitalism” (3). This temporal optic allows for a consideration of folk art discourse in the province, not just as a static essentialization, but as situated within the vagaries of local modern art institutions and broader socio-economic transformations. “Folk art operates relationally as a structure of modernist change” (18), she writes.

After two introductory chapters in which the theoretical lens is set out and historical connections between folk art and North American modernism(s) are sketched, the remainder of the book is divided into two parts. In Part One, we circle around key players in the legitimation (and exploitation) of folk art in the province. Chapter 3 focuses on Chris Huntington, who first travelled from the U.S. to the Maritimes in the 1970s and who “took up the cause” (45) by staying to become a significant collector and interpreter of Nova Scotian folk art, both independently and in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS). As Morton explains, Huntington was not simply a transparent channel, because “where he did not find or did not think he could find what he was looking for, he encouraged artists to create it according to his particular vision of what ‘good’ contemporary folk art should look like” (57). Chapter 4 moves to a provocative analysis of the role of the Nova Scotia College of Art + Design. Although NSCAD is nationally famous for fostering conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s, Morton considers how various NSCAD leaders and professors, in dialogue with actual self-taught artists such as Collins Eisenhauer, “played up existing notions of the province’s folkloric past to solidify their claims to determining its artistic future under shifting late capitalist developments that transformed art-world economies” (88). And Chapter 5 retraces some of this territory from a more political-economic perspective. Morton argues here that changes to arts and culture funding also contributed to a re-articulation of “folk art” from the late 1960s to the 1980s: “[T]he folk art category appealed to many of the cultural tenets of neoliberal ideology itself (among them self-sufficiency, the reduction of professionalized work practice, and the branding of art and culture in the service of the transnational economy as opposed to the local community” (136).

Part Two of the book zooms in on Maud Lewis. In Chapter 6, Morton introduces affect theory to closely analyze the public discourse around Lewis, considering film and television broadcasts and other forms of publicity, which rendered Lewis’s work

as “a source of optimism for Nova Scotians in the sense that it provided them with a cultural object upon which they might affix their desire for an organized daily life despite the disorganized and despondent realities of late capitalism” (178). Chapter 7 considers Lewis’s house, her “largest artwork” (218), which was acquired by the AGNS as part of its permanent collection in 1996 in partnership with Scotiabank. As Morton observes,

Neoliberal economic restructuring created the conditions necessary to harden folk art as a cultural concept by turning the most important material site of Lewis’s cultural legacy into an object of museum display, which advanced the notion that hers was a traditional, poor, isolated, and community-bounded life that no longer existed in contemporary society. [...] Turning folk art in to a museum category in this way provided public history makers with a means to understand the material and ideological consequences of a rapidly changing late capitalist landscape across Nova Scotia, and indeed all of North America, that witnessed deregulation and privatization on a broad scale. (219)

Finally, in Chapter 8 Morton again takes on a more political-economic register as she considers how the rising importance of copyrights and patents in the 1980s and 1990s have affected the field of Maud Lewis-branded consumer items. “[I]t was the neoliberal context itself that created the ‘need’ for the turning of art production into intellectual property that could be managed for profit—in this case, the provincial gallery’s not Lewis’s” (292), she concludes.

*For Folk’s Sake* builds on a tradition of critical approaches to the concept of “the folk” in the cultural history of Nova Scotia—in particular on the work of Ian McKay, whose books *The Quest of the Folk* and *In the Province of History* (the latter co-authored with Robin Bates) deploy ideological analysis to unpack the connotations and socio-economic functioning of “folk” authenticity in Nova Scotia in the domains of folklore, craftwork, and tourism. Morton draws on McKay’s landmark researches by extending some of his claims into the adjacent field of art history, and into the second half of the twentieth century (4). And yet, Morton also makes use of fresh methodological approaches to the study of culture, which further distinguishes her contribution. For McKay, “the folk” is veiling discourse, a relatively coherent mythology transplanted from European Romanticism that conceals socio-economic forces.<sup>2</sup> Morton, drawing on affect theory and critical museology, charts a more messy and materialist terrain, wherein “the folk” is as complicated and as varied as the diverse

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<sup>2</sup> For the most direct discussion of the theoretical and methodological aspects of McKay’s argument, see *The Quest of the Folk*, pp. 3-42 and pp. 274-312.

agents and institutions that have contributed to its production.

One possible weakness of the book is its length and aspects of its structure; Morton's careful attention to detail occasionally pulled this reader slightly away from the larger arguments, and it seems to me that there are two closely related yet distinguishable monographs in this volume (one, perhaps, on NSCAD and folk art, one on Maud Lewis and the AGNS). However, this shortcoming could more generously be viewed as a testament to Morton's archival ambitions and to the subtlety of her interpretations. Exhaustively researched, theoretically innovative, and featuring over seventy colour images, *For Folk's Sake* should be required reading for scholars of Atlantic Canadian art and culture, but also for artists, arts administrators, and even activists, working in and against discourses of "the folk." As audiences (myself included) continue to be pulled in by quaint, nostalgic images offered by films such as *Maudie*, Morton offers critical tools with which we might better understand, and maybe even dismantle, the historical sources of that fascination—if not the art itself, which (and Morton never loses sight of this) was made by real people, struggling, working.

### Works Cited

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