

## Introduction: A Manifesto for Materialism

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Hasn't the time arrived to draw out all the epistemological consequences of discovering that the spirit of the age is as much in its objects as in its literary works, as much in our own hands as in our heads? There is a kind of spirit and intelligence in our vacuum cleaners, our automobiles, our telephones and our toothbrushes; and materiality in our symbolic goods.

— Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos* (75)

Rather than conceiving of materialism as a systematic philosophy, it would seem possible and perhaps more desirable to think of it as a polemic stance, designed to organize various anti-idealist campaigns, a procedure of demystification and de-idealization; or else a permanent linguistic reflexivity.

— Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter" (84)

THE VERY IDEA of an explicitly *materialist* literary and cultural criticism seems inevitably to provoke misunderstandings about what such a practice proposes to do and how it proposes to do it.<sup>1</sup> This confusion does not arise merely because of the multiplicity of critical practices that might be termed materialist — a multiplicity reflected in the critical and topical range of the essays included in this special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing*. Rather, misunderstandings about materialist criticism seem to arise from the fact that "materialism" is all too often taken to mean what it literally says. It doesn't get us very far to imagine "postmodernism" as simply what comes after modernism or, for that matter, to think of "modernism" as simply having something to do with the modern. But materialism: what else could this be but a critical practice that focuses on matter, on everything that is solid, concrete, fundamental, and in some sense basic? What else but an attention to the site(s) at which it

might be claimed that everything else ("in the last instance," of course) is produced and from which everything else originates? The project of materialist criticism is thus most often envisioned paradoxically in the terms of Edmund Husserl's battle cry for phenomenology: "To the things themselves!" And when it is not simply identified with the glum vocabulary of an older, parodic version of Marxist criticism — in which concepts such as class struggle and alienation are dutifully trotted out in ways that now seem to be not only reductive but also, well, boring — materialist analysis is imagined as proceeding with all the bluntness of Samuel Johnson's "refutation" of Berkeley: I kick, therefore it is.

By bringing together examples of materialist criticism on Canadian topics and themes, I hope to be able to banish some of these persistent images of materialism and materialist criticism. In doing so, I also want to claim for materialism a central place in Canadian criticism, a more important place than might be suggested by an understanding of it either as the study of the extraliterary dynamics of literary production (for who doesn't pay attention to context today?) or as the movement beyond the "superstructure" of aesthetic and cultural production to the reality of the "base" (for who now accepts this division of culture from the materiality of history)?<sup>2</sup> Materialist criticism *is* interested in the study of context or of historical situation or situatedness, though perhaps not in the same way as New Historicism, a critical practice that has wanted recently to claim the idea of "cultural materialism" for itself (see Ryan; and Wilson). It also attends to the ways in which institutions, concepts, and historical formations that are nonliterary (or, in a certain sense, noncultural) nevertheless structure literary and cultural criticism just as much as they structure the production of the typical objects of critical analysis (novels, poems, etc.). But the aim of materialist criticism, finally, is not to discover the meaning, significance, or logic of a literary or cultural text elsewhere — to suggest, as Pierre Bourdieu has commented, that "this is *only* that" (xix) — in the manner of the sociological study of literature or, again, in certain versions of "vulgar" Marxist criticism (which are harder to find than one might expect) or in a New Historicism that is always vulgar. The aim of materialist criticism, rather, is to effect a fundamental reorientation of our approach to texts that challenges this very way of understanding culture. To engage in materialist criticism does not mean to fill an airy substance (e.g., literature) with the full weight of its social, historical, and political determinations; it is to

probe the material production of this very relationship between the lightness of writing and the heaviness of everything else, a relationship that has long captivated our imaginations and that has remained an important part of the “spontaneous ideology” of cultural and literary criticism to this day. In other words, to undertake materialist criticism is to try to understand the processes of literary and cultural transubstantiation: the processes by which an *object* composed of glue, paper, and ink, the product of printing presses, literary circles, and social machines of influence and reputation, all organized in particular ways given the social, historical, and political weightiness of every epoch, is mystically transformed from a state of material solidity into the *spirit* of the text with which criticism has alone typically wanted to commune.

We can turn to a number of places for examples of materialist criticism: from the “socioanalysis” of Pierre Bourdieu and his work on the genesis and structure of various literary and cultural fields; to the cultural criticism of Fredric Jameson, whose extended reflections on the character of our age have become increasingly sophisticated even as they have been shifted, like the concept of postmodernity itself, away from the centre of current critical debates; to the genealogical work of Michel Foucault and the work that it has in some sense “inspired,” particularly Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. For that matter, there is clearly a materialist strain in much of the thinking about the postcolonial and in the investigation of the historical and cultural construction of various institutions and identities more generally, as in the materialist feminism of Rosemary Hennessy, Toril Moi, Jan Rodway, and others. Cultural studies, which has remained largely at the margins of literary study in Canada, has also emphasized the materiality of institutions and production without having thereby reduced its attention to the cultural or aesthetic (for lack of a better word) plane on which cultural objects do much of their work.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is probably possible to go on almost indefinitely with such a catalogue of the materialist aspects of all contemporary forms of theory and criticism. The risk in doing so, of course, is to render materialism superfluous by its very ubiquity: yet another catchphrase in the marketplace of a contemporary criticism that is as interested as any other branch of capitalist enterprise in the creation of new products.<sup>4</sup> Without wishing to claim a kind of theoretical purity for materialist criticism, I think that it is important to emphasize that it has commitments — theoretical and otherwise — that are not compatible with any and every form of

theoretical investigation and reflection. While there may be numerous materialisms in name, few are *materialist in spirit* — a phrase that is perfectly comprehensible if we understand materialist criticism correctly.

By way of an introduction, then, I want to offer here both an abstract and a concrete account of what materialist criticism is and what it intends to accomplish. This should be understood less as an act of definition than as the establishment of the broad outlines of a *mode of inquiry* — that is, an orientation toward texts and the knowledge to be gained by an investigation of them. Materialism as method: this is already a much different way of conceiving of materialist criticism than as a practice that patiently and laboriously reassembles the hard facts of existence from the seismic charts of social life whose every tremor is opportunely and magically recorded in literary and cultural texts. If materialism is better understood as a polemic stance than as a philosophy, as Jameson suggests in one of the epigraphs with which I began, then it is also essential to point out right away that it is not simply yet another approach to literary and cultural texts, one that can be easily ignored if one's interests tend toward, say, psychoanalysis or deconstruction. On the contrary, materialist criticism is in many respects singular, for what materialism is polemical about is not this or that interpretation of a particular text or set of texts but the unacknowledged framework that guides interpretation itself. In the marketplace of theoretical approaches dutifully assembled in classroom anthologies in the spirit of a liberal pedagogy that would want to render them all equal, it is only materialism that manages to push the operations of criticism beyond its most typical process: the allegorical recoding of one text in the terms of some other discourse (e.g., reader-response, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, etc.) in a manner that suggests that something formerly obscured has now become apparent, that the meanings "buried" in the text have been brought to the surface and to light. Materialist criticism differs fundamentally from other critical approaches not because it has an identifiably different "master code" or "ultimately determining instance" (Jameson, *Political* 58) that serves as the basis for this kind of allegorical recoding (class, for instance) but because it attends to the historical and material conditions that have limited interpretation to one dominant mode of reading shared across a number of apparently different critical approaches to texts. To put this more bluntly: in an age of instant communication and deterritorialized

spaces, materialist criticism investigates the mystery of why we continue to read texts in largely the same way as Aquinas and Dante, for whom, after all, our concept of "literature" was as foreign as fibre-optic cables and satellite relay towers.

All of this is not meant to deny Peter Hitchcock's claim that "it is axiomatic that materialism begins from an understanding of socio-economic determination in the production and reproduction of human existence" (22). It is precisely because materialist criticism *is* governed by such an axiom that it is able to avoid what remains the chief deficiency of even those forms of contemporary criticism that *have* embraced politics and history. Integral to materialist criticism are a politics and epistemology that arise out of "an understanding of socioeconomic determination." When we look at the politics of other critical discourses — those infused with discussions of seemingly political concepts such as "agency," "identity," "subjectivity," "resistance," and so forth — it is clear that few of them operate with any real, determinate sense of the relationship between specific cultural objects, "culture" more generally, and the operations of politics and economics. For the most part, these connections are simply intuited, and descriptions of the mechanisms by which texts "influence" contexts (and vice versa) are left comfortably vague and imprecise. Only materialist criticism thinks about these relationships and connections all at once: culture is never a sphere imagined as operating autonomously, outside the determinations and influences of all the other practices and forces involved in the production and reproduction of human life. Even so, it is important that the axiom that governs the direction of materialist criticism not be taken as evidence of just the kind of socioeconomic reductiveness that I have suggested inadequately characterizes its practice. The orientation of materialist criticism toward the socioeconomic does not preclude it from being vigilant about the limits of its operations. In his extended analysis of the metaphor of "oscillation" in materialism, Hitchcock identifies a second aspect of the mode of inquiry or polemic stance that characterizes materialist criticism. Oscillation describes the function of "materialist politics in theory" (2); it expresses the way in which a practice committed to socioeconomic determination can nevertheless remain "autocritical regarding its own formulations" (2). "On the one hand," Hitchcock writes,

oscillation describes the pendulous movement between extremes that marks the "being" of capitalism, in all its

contradictions; on the other, oscillation is a form of hesitation, a vacillation about what to do, a movement that is actually about a pause. . . . Oscillation occurs under determinate, concrete conditions; it is its own philosophy of the limit. (25)

Materialism is concrete without being reductive, determinate without being determining; it is its oscillation that guarantees this, an oscillation already announced long ago in Karl Marx's materialist dictum: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it . . . under circumstances chosen by themselves" (595).

It is because it oscillates that materialist criticism has paid attention to those issues most commonly associated with it: matter and politics. As a mode of inquiry organized around socioeconomic determination and characterized by oscillation — a permanent, productive critical vacillation — materialist criticism turns understandably toward those structuring elements of texts that literary and cultural criticism most often fails to examine. If materialist criticism is thus often concerned with matter, the materiality of social and cultural forces, and with political economy, it is not just because it is "materialist" but also because these are the elements most commonly "left out" of typical examinations of cultural objects, especially in the case of literary texts. And this is true in terms of not only the "content" of critical analysis but also the "form" in and through which literary objects are typically examined. As Jameson has pointed out, "our habit of studying individual writers one by one, in a kind of respectful stylistic isolation, [is] a very useful strategy in preventing genuinely social and historical problems from intruding into literary study" (*Syntax* 119). Studying writers one by one: this is a form of textual inquiry that has had a particularly important place in Canadian criticism, which is all the more reason why Canadian criticism needs to become more materialist now if it hopes to address the real problems and issues of its time.

To what has been thus far a more or less theoretical discussion of materialist criticism, I want to add a more concrete description of its operations — though this division between concrete and abstract must, of course, be carefully monitored. What materialist criticism reveals by focusing on the structures that form the conditions of possibility of literature and culture in any given historical moment can be perhaps seen most explicitly in the recent work of French

philosopher Régis Debray. Whatever the merits of the practice that Debray refers to as “mediology,” his attention to the fundamental materiality of culture makes his work particularly useful to consider here.<sup>5</sup> Critical of both semiology and communication studies as practices that have considered the sign only in a disembodied manner, Debray focuses on the specific historical processes and practices that enable various forms of signification and these particular modes of interpretation themselves. There are two “turns” that he takes toward an investigation of culture that are invested with the imperatives of materialist criticism. The first turn is his aim to discern “the structure of bones from which depends an era’s symbolic flesh, hidden beneath the finish of its literary, aesthetic, or legal monuments” (33). No work of literature or culture is produced outside those bodies and institutions of knowledge and power that define every age. Understood from the side of institutions instead of from the side of ideas or concepts — that is, what would normally be thought of as “in reverse” — the Enlightenment, for example, becomes “not a corpus of doctrines, a totality of discourses of principles that a textual analysis could comprehend and restore,” but “a change in the system of manufacture/circulation/storage of signs” (19). Debray suggests that it is “bodies that think and not minds” (6) and, correspondingly, that cultural products should be considered as “personified social organizations, historically structured” (45). The point is not simply to make critics and theorists pay more attention to historical context but also to show how much is left out of interpretive accounts that pay attention only to a text’s “meaning,” even when or if this meaning is enhanced by historical (i.e., extraliterary) research. As Debray points out,

When we read the missives of Voltaire, or of Madame de Sévigné, do we think about the services for delivering correspondence and messages they suppose? Namely: 1) a strong central power, capable of maintaining a network of roads, postal relay stations, an organization of paid permanent employees, and 2) horses to ride, thus stud farms to produce them, and thus, in the end, a military cavalry. This bucolic, pacific and so widely scattered literature required armed forces and a centralized State. (33)

In one of its iterations, then, materialist criticism would focus not on a decoding of the letters of Madame de Sévigné, or even, as a

necessary counterpart to literary decoding, on a consideration of her life and times, but on “the study of the postal relays between Grignan and Paris, of the goose quill pens used by this letter-writer and the mills where her stationery was manufactured” (65).

The second materialist turn is Debray’s consideration of the material connections between text and world. This has become an increasingly important issue to consider, especially in terms of the examination of the power — both negative and positive — of representation(s) to produce identities, to enable or disable agency, and so on. Even so, as I suggested earlier, it is precisely here that contemporary approaches to the study of literature and culture are at their weakest. To give flesh to the ethereal, untheorized concept of “influence” (as in the influence of one text on another, of an event on an author, of a text on an event, and so on) usually introduced to account for this passage from text to world and back again, Debray pays attention to the *power* of signs rather than to their meaning:

the social use or actual career of reception of a text exceeds the alternative of persons and statements. . . . [I]ts users are not reduced to readers, and still less to exegetes. . . . One can in extreme cases use an author without knowing him, just as one undergoes the influence of a text without having read one line of it. That is even the most frequent case. How many of those who lived in the Communist world had read Karl Marx in his textual form? Or in the medieval world, Aristotle and Saint Thomas? Or from our politically liberal world, Adam Smith or Montesquieu? How many, even today, subjects of the Freudian empire have read the works of Freud? (68)

To understand what texts “mean,” in the broadest sense of this word, materialist criticism therefore pays attention to the “processes of advance, diffusion, propagation” by which signs become material and take effect (8). In other words, materialist criticism pays attention to what might be described as the “Churchification of the prophet’s word” (8), a process that it also understands as having a more primary explanatory value regarding the significance of the prophet’s word than any hermeneutic (and they are all, in the end, biblical) devised to undertake a literary interpretation of the prophet’s words.



But to these “turns” of interpretation we still need to add materialism’s oscillation. As with materialist criticism more generally, Debray’s work is clearly, at some deep level, influenced by the discourse that Marx inaugurated. Even so — or perhaps precisely because of this fact — Debray is especially critical of Marx’s (and Marxism’s) failure to be sufficiently materialist. In other words, Debray oscillates. He suggests that Marxism failed to theorize adequately what should have been of utmost importance to a theory intended to change the world: a theory of “symbolic efficacy,” of the means by which ideas might produce revolutions. In place of such a theory, there is in Marxism only what Debray describes as various forms of “idealist predestination,” which manifest themselves in

an infinity of materialist tautologies: “Marxist-Leninist philosophy *represents* the proletarian class struggle in theory, and the theory and the proletarian class struggle *represent* philosophy within theory.” Or even more, this: “According to principle, true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the people’s enemies” — which are words not from Saint Thomas nor Saint Theresa, but from Althusser. (88–89)

In Marxism, Debray claims, the connections between text and world, between doctrine and organization, are asserted rather than examined. In this respect at least, materialism was left out of historical materialism, with consequences that are perhaps only being felt now that Marxism has experienced a decline in whatever symbolic efficacy it may once have had.

For Marxism to have been more materialist, it would have had to learn to “oscillate” so that it could have considered more adequately its own conditions of possibility. Debray argues that Marxism’s defect as a materialist practice was that it never came to grips with its specific relationship to the modes of symbolic transmission historically available to it. He berates Marxism for not taking the necessary materialist step of

placing in relation the birth of the First International (1864) and the invention of rotary presses (1860). Or beyond that, by relation, in France, the Teaching League (1866), the surge in circulation of the *Petit Journal*, furthered by the rotary

press of Marinoni (from 50,000 copies in 1859 to 600,000 in 1869), and the laying of the transatlantic cable (1866). (92-93)

The world of the newspaper and the printing press acted as a seemingly "natural" meeting place for the political avant-garde of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however, subsequent technological developments (photography, phonography, film, radio, TV, etc.) "decommunitarize" knowledge and science even as they atomize and delocalize the collectives of knowledge. . . . [T]he library's crossover/expansion into a media center marks a change of 'element' Marxist culture has been no more able to survive than the 'industrial proletariat' has survived the shift from steel to polymers" (93-94). "Like the Aristotelian who Benveniste tells us confused certain categories of language for categories of thought," Debray writes,

the Marxist was unaware that he sublimated the blast furnace into a Proletariat; sublimated into a "vanguard element of the working class" the reader of a daily or the subscriber to the monthly review *Les Cahiers du Communisme*; into the "coming into consciousness about exploitation" a certain competence for deciphering a bookish common knowledge; and into the "union of theory and practice" certain channels of contact within an organization that rested on the dominance of print culture of an inscription system based in paper (including the popular university, the commonly consulted handbook, the communist cell library, the discussion in party congresses of theses and printed platforms, the Marxist Week of the Book, the newspaper advancing the interests of a certain class as "collective organizer," etc.). (92)

As Debray so effectively and polemically shows here, what might have been thought to be key "concepts" in Marxist philosophy, concepts with a relationship to the fundamental aims and orientations of this philosophy and seemingly developed organically out of a certain initial philosophical problematic, are related to conditions, limitations, and possibilities that are *material* rather than intellectual. It is only by understanding the full implications of the fact that, as Marx himself said, "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (155), that we can hope to come to an

adequate understanding of not only Marx and Marxism but also other practices, modes of interpretation, and the real significance of literary and cultural objects.

What does all this have to do with writing and criticism in Canada?

When I first proposed a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* on materialist criticism in Canada, my aim was to effect several interventions in the field of Canadian criticism. First, I wanted to draw attention to how marginalized materialist criticism has always been in Canada — to be more specific, how marginalized it has always been in English Canadian criticism. I have always found this marginalization surprising, especially in light of the critical and theoretical orientations of other fields of research in and on Canada that have perhaps gone too far the *other way* in their focus on political economy and on socioeconomic factors. (I am thinking in particular of Canadian studies and of communications studies in Canada, but what I say here is true of other fields as well.) It is possible, I suppose, to cite numerous examples of criticism in Canada that might be considered materialist, in which case my sense of materialism's marginalization would simply be misplaced. One could begin, for example, with Northrop Frye's reflections on Canadian literature and culture, especially in lesser known works such as *The Modern Century*. From this point, one could slowly progress to a catalogue of more recent works, such as Frank Davey's *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967* (1993) or Robert Lecker's *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* (1995), both of which, in very different ways, examine Canadian writing and criticism through explicit reference to historical context. Yet it seems clear that none of these are materialist in the way that I have outlined here. The key element missing in much of this kind of work is a failure to consider "Canada" as a specific kind of social and political formation instead of as a site (a space, real or imagined, an idea, a concept, etc.) that enables the endless recoding of literary texts into critical language via allegories of Canadian character or Canadian identity.<sup>6</sup> It thus seems to me that only the collection edited by Paul Cappon, *In Our Own House: Social Perspectives on Canadian Literature* (1978), introduced the possibility of a materialist turn in Canadian literary studies. Two decades later, however, this volume, launched at the high point of intellectual fascination with the postmodern and the poststructural, seems to have fallen

stillborn from the presses; whatever its merits or faults, it seems to have failed to spark the fire of materialist analysis in Canada. Sadly, in a country whose politics and literature have often leaned toward the left and — to borrow one of the common metaphors of materialism — toward the ground, most of its criticism has remained ethereal, formal, and belletristic. I hope that the essays in this issue help to change this situation through their collective investigation into not only why materialist criticism has remained marginal in Canada but also — in a properly materialist fashion — why other critical practices have dominated Canadian letters.

There is an unavoidable paradox faced by any editor who wishes to promote a practice that has been given insufficient attention. If materialist criticism has been as marginalized as I have just suggested, then how has it been possible to pull together these ten essays (and to leave other deserving ones out for lack of space)? My second intervention must therefore be taken as frankly polemic. Clearly, my aim is not simply to use this issue to ponder the fate of materialist criticism in Canada. This introduction, along with the essays that follow, forms an argument for the necessity, indeed the priority, of materialist criticism in the investigation of Canadian literary and cultural objects. I hope that I have already provided at least some of the reasons why materialist criticism is necessary, in Canada and elsewhere, and that the trenchant examples of materialist analyses that follow show the wide-ranging interpretive insights that this practice makes possible. But allow me to point, all too briefly, to another reason for the *priority* of materialist criticism at the beginning of the new millennium. Over a decade ago, Jameson identified a signal feature of the “postmodern” present that distinguished it from all the eras that preceded it. Jameson asserted that in postmodernity culture can no longer be understood separately from other spheres of social life, because it has expanded “throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life — from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself — can be said to have become ‘cultural’ in some original and yet untheorized sense” (*Postmodernism* 48). In the intervening years, there have been numerous attempts to theorize this radical shift in the position occupied by culture, in particular the significance of this shift for the study of culture and cultural objects. The more recent concern with the cultural implications and effects of globalization have only further complicated the picture, as is evident in Lawrence Grossberg’s attempts to grapple

with the difficult problems that a newly deterritorialized culture — a culture that is also (in a typical postmodern fashion) “virtually coextensive with the economy itself” (Anderson 55) — poses for the study of contemporary culture (see Grossberg, “Space,” “Speculations”). We have experienced, in Perry Anderson’s words, “a radical disturbance of the nature of the arts themselves” that requires us to rethink how we approach texts and what we do with them (97). Yet, with few exceptions, Canadian criticism seems to be happy to contemplate even contemporary writing as if nothing really significant has happened in the world. (Postcolonial criticism is perhaps the exception to the rule here.) In the context of postmodernity and globalization (which I take to describe roughly the same set of phenomena), what would seem to have been rendered most problematic is, of course, the operation by which a cultural object is “read” against its historical determinations. That this has been, in one way or another, the bread and butter of Canadian criticism is all the more reason why we might want to consider oscillating our way into the millennium instead of continuing with business as usual.

Finally, the overarching reason for this special issue was simply to see the kind of critical work being produced in Canada and about Canadian writing that identifies itself *as* materialist. The vision of materialist criticism that I have outlined here is hardly reflected in entirety (or sometimes even in part) in the essays that follow. I don’t see this as a problem. Each essay oscillates in the way that its particular object of study demands of it: there is no one way of engaging in materialist criticism. This introduction can be seen as the beginning of a dialogue on materialism that each successive essay takes up, expanding and complicating the description of materialist criticism that I have given here. For this reason, my introduction does not contain the kind of capsule summaries commonly included at this point. I should say, without wishing to appear overly or inappropriately critical, that in my view some of the essays included here take materialism too literally, as if the only way to interrupt or move beyond a dominant form of criticism that reveals little that is not already known is to consider the actual passage of material objects in and through texts. I would like to see other essays oscillate even more with respect to the material conditions of possibility of their particular mode of textual analysis — that is, while the analysis might be materialist in orientation, it nevertheless seems to be undisturbed by larger questions concerning the

efficacy or necessity of *this* kind of analysis (i.e., “close readings” of individual literary texts) at *this* moment of history in the sanctioned institutional spaces of the university. There are still other essays whose work is essential to a materialist criticism but that do not contain a meditation on method. In this last case, it is probably important, however, not to unduly confuse and complicate the practice of literary history — or, better yet, literary genealogy — by demanding that it also always be metacritical about its aims and function in the way that the metaphor of oscillation suggests.

At this point, I should clarify one last thing. The essays in this volume range from critical readings of individual texts (Elmslie, Mack, McCallum and Olbey, Willmott) to literary histories (Irvine, McDonald) to discussions of intellectual and conceptual formations (Cavell, Irr) to analyses of objects and practices that don't seem at first glance to have much to do with literature and writing at all (McKinnie, Simpson). Given the wide differences in focus and scope, it is reasonable to ask in what way these essays can be taken as examples of *materialist* criticism, specifically as materialist criticism of Canadian *writing*. To take two examples that lie at what might seem to be opposite extremes of this question, what is it about Glenn Willmott's detailed examination of Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* that makes it *materialist* (as opposed to a particularly forceful and insightful example of a more or less standard form of textual analysis)? And what is it about Mark Simpson's consideration of a trio of turn-of-the-century cultural practices — big-game hunting and conservation, taxidermy, and collecting — that makes its insights applicable more broadly to the study of Canadian *writing*?

In both cases, the answer is simpler than it might appear to be. Willmott takes up a question that has been asked repeatedly of Leacock's work: how does one reconcile the positions that Leacock takes in his literary and his political-economic writings? Both the method by which Willmott arrives at an answer and the form of the answer itself are typically materialist. By sifting patiently and carefully through Leacock's work and the critical positions taken for and against the politics of Mariposa, Willmott develops an original theory of Leacock's self-cancelling “sublime humour.” What he shows is the particular way in which the ideology of sublime humour does not so much repress Mariposa's material reality — the reality of labour, economics, and capital that would necessarily define the space of a “real” town like Mariposa — as *sublimate* it,

including it only to drain it more effectively of its meaning or value. This is in itself an interesting and important insight that goes a long way toward making sense of the apparent contradictions between Leacock's fiction and nonfiction. However, this is not the final conclusion: it is followed by a remarkable critical oscillation that allows Willmott to reframe the question of Leacock's contradictions in an even more fundamental manner. Willmott's final oscillation allows us to see *Sunshine Sketches* as not just an ideologically suspect or limited text, a conclusion that Willmott himself characterizes as unsatisfying, but as a text in which ideological and utopian elements are dialectically interdependent. I take this to be a materialist solution to what has long been framed as a literary antinomy: instead of providing an answer to the question of how Leacock's politics are (or are not) represented in *Sunshine Sketches*, Willmott offers us a diagram of the conceptual machinery that has generated all the multiple and contradictory answers that have thus far been offered about the "true nature" of Leacock's politics.

If it is easy to see how Willmott's essay is materialist even if it does not turn its attention directly to the material pathways and cultural raw materials that make it possible to imagine a space such as Mariposa in the first place (the kind of task that Debray would set for himself), it might seem to be more difficult to see the relationship between Mark Simpson's study of these very pathways and materials and Canadian *writing*. But here, too, the gap appears to be larger than it really is. For even as Simpson ponders the social and cultural significance of objects and practices that are all too often passed over as "mere" cultural ephemera, he constantly refers to written texts: the travel adventures of William Hornaday, the letters of Theodore Roosevelt, the promotional chapbooks of Banff National Park, taxidermy manuals, newspaper advertisements, and so on. Simpson treats them not as texts to be read critically or interpreted in the manner of novels and poems. It is not that he is uninterested in the meaning or significance that these kinds of written texts encode; what interests him more, however, is the symbolic efficacy of these texts — texts that he shows to have had a decisive impact on Canadian culture even if they never make their way onto university syllabi. Taken together and considered alongside the cultural practices, beliefs, and somatic dispositions that they produce and reproduce, these texts do not merely "reflect" ideologies that need to be critically assessed but also actively and directly produce them in a manner that has powerful and immediate material effects.

One is reminded when reading Simpson's essay of Franco Moretti's suggestion that "criticism has not entirely freed itself of its old task: that of being a sort of cultivated accompaniment to reading" (13). It is this "old task" of literary interpretation that Simpson problematizes. "At the end of the nineteenth century hundreds of ghost stories were written," writes Moretti, "but *The Turn of the Screw* . . . is something else 'for us,' that tiny minority that acts in each case as the depository of prevailing taste" (14). In the same way that these ghost stories might have more to tell us about American culture than the novels of Henry James, Simpson's examination of Canadian cultural practices relating to the production of nature, practices both reflected in and produced by a variety of written texts, reveals the unexpected racist and patriarchal logic behind the long-enduring identification of Canada with its wilderness.

I hope that this discussion shows the range and power of a materialist approach to Canadian writing. I hasten to add, so that my intention in these past few paragraphs is not misunderstood, that it is, finally, not up to me to decide what does and does not constitute materialist criticism (a question of essences about which materialism is properly suspicious) and thus to hand out rewards and punishments depending on how well each essay articulates my sense of the aims of materialist criticism. I would presume to do no such thing, especially with respect to a group of sophisticated essays that admirably look at what has been left out of Canadian criticism for far too long. Instead, my task in putting this issue together is to insist on the fundamental importance of materialism as a critical practice in and on Canadian writing. So it is appropriate that I end with my own final materialist oscillation. I have given this introduction the rather grandiose title of a "manifesto." Perhaps only a materialist criticism would understand the inappropriateness of writing a manifesto at a time when heroic avant-gardes and political vanguards are absent and the concepts of political and social action once associated with them have become hopelessly inadequate. And only a materialist criticism would see in the use of the old vocabulary of the manifesto a sign for what is lacking in the present and what still remains to be done.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Nicholas Brown, Caren Irr, Mark Simpson, Susie O'Brien, and the ever critical Peter Mountford for their enormously



helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction. This issue is dedicated to the memory of Arnold (Ted) Davidson.

<sup>2</sup> The answer in this case may be that all too many people still see the classic base-superstructure distinction as a viable theoretical model. In her defence of a left politics that is also a cultural politics, Judith Butler points to the recent disturbing recourse among thinkers on the left as much as on the right to “an apparently stable distinction between material and cultural life [that] is clearly the resurgence of a theoretical anachronism, one that discounts the contributions to Marxist theory since Althusser’s displacement of the base-superstructure model, as well as various forms of cultural materialism — for instance, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak” (36). I want to start with the assumption that, post-Althusser, most critics would understand the need to think about this distinction in a more productive way.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Lawrence Grossberg characterizes cultural studies as “concerned with describing and intervening in the ways ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’ (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formation, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power. That is, if people make history but in conditions not of their own making (Marx), cultural studies explores the ways this process is enacted within and through cultural practices, and the place of these practices within specific historical formations” (*Bringing* 237).

<sup>4</sup> To me, this ubiquity is the chief defect of the collection on cultural materialism edited by Kiernan Ryan. He identifies Clifford Geertz *and* Michel Foucault *and* Louis Althusser *and* Raymond Williams *and* Jacques Derrida *and* Walter Benjamin as precursors to contemporary materialist investigations. What, then, *isn’t* materialist?

<sup>5</sup> *Media Manifestos* is an unfortunate translation of the French title of Debray’s book, *Manifestes médiologiques*, especially since Debray devotes little attention to the “media” as this concept is normally understood. A more literal translation would have focused on what he describes as “mediology”: the study of mediation, the technological (understood broadly) transmission of cultural forms.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Caren Irr for this key point.

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