

## Big Words and Big Ideas: The Reconstruction of Cultural Identity in *Anne with an E*

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*Anne with an E* (CBC/Netflix, 2017-19) negotiates the distinct imperatives of its two co-commissioning networks: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), an ad-supported public service broadcaster, and the US-based premium streaming service, Netflix. For the CBC, the adaptation of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) allows the narrative's reflection of Canadian cultural attitudes towards children in the early twentieth century (Blackford, 2009: xix-xx) to be developed for the twenty-first century. This leads to the introduction of wider representation as the series progresses, most notably in the characters of Sebastian (Dalmar Abuzeid), a Black Trinidadian, Cole (Cory Grüter-Andrew), a gay teenager, and Ka'kwet (Kiawenti:io Tarbell), an indigenous Mik'maw, as well as through storylines involving female empowerment and sexual consent. These elements allow *Anne with an E* to expand upon the novel's themes to encompass diverse demographics of race, gender and sexuality. For Netflix, meanwhile, the adaptation adheres to the service's pursuit of international productions and co-productions (Lobato, 2019: 107-62 passim), utilising the name recognition of *Anne of Green Gables* in combination with the high production values familiar to Netflix productions; the latter allows the Canadian landscape to be presented alongside the developed identities of the drama's characters. While the CBC's CEO Catherine Tait more recently likened Netflix's transnational activities to "cultural imperialism" (quoted in Benzine, 2019), this attitude presumably influencing the series' cancellation, it can also be argued that the co-production arrangement between the two networks allowed *Anne with an E* to become a culturally innovative adaptation that overcomes the limitations of what Maurice Charland calls 'technological nationalism' (1986), a perceived need to protect Canadian organisations from international influences.

The pre-industrialised fictional town of Avonlea, where Anne (Amybeth McNulty) is taken in by Marilla (Geraldine James) and Matthew (R.H. Thomson) Cuthbert, is of course situated on Prince Edward Island. As Elaine Stratford establishes, islands are settings with

the potential to “enhance how we understand the world and the self, place and identity” (Stratford, 2003: 495). In *Anne with an E*, this geographic potential is realised by depicting not only the community’s gradual acceptance of Anne herself, but its response to the diverse elements that are added to Montgomery’s narrative. This allows the adaptation to expand upon Green Gables’ literary function as a ‘site of self-formation and self-actualization’ (Alexander, 2009: 49) to the island in its entirety, with the sense of belonging felt by Anne projected back towards the marginalised figures of Sebastian, Cole and Ka’kwet, her influence helping the community understand the differences of these figures. While Sebastian is able to establish himself at Gilbert’s (Lucas Jade Zumann) farm in Avonlea, other characters face greater difficulties: Cole, like other homosexual characters in the drama, is only able to fully embrace his sexuality by moving away from Avonlea and into the more industrialised Charlottetown; Ka’kwet, more harrowingly, is left incarcerated in a state-run school for ‘Indians’, forced to take an English name and abandon her culture. The latter circumstance reveals the structural inequalities that remain at the national level, regardless of the progressive developments on Prince Edward Island.

Anne’s literary characteristics, including her irrepressible voice and keen social consciousness, naturally allow her to champion the causes of the marginalised figures added to Montgomery’s narrative. Her interventions also elicit support for other Avonlea residents who are threatened by ostracisation, such as when schoolteacher Miss Stacy (Joanna Douglas) faces dismissal and Josie Pye (Miranda McKeon) is sexually assaulted. *Anne with an E* is therefore able to explore the social strata of *Anne of Green Gables*’ early-twentieth century conception, revealing the capacity for progressiveness behind the novel’s depiction of a conservative society with ‘an antipathy to change’ (Alexander, 2009: 50). This reconstruction of the island community for an international, twenty-first century audience demonstrates what may be termed ‘Darwinian’ adaptation, whereby stories display ‘migration to favorable conditions’ (Hutcheon, 2013: 31); in this case, Anne’s story migrates not only to a new medium but to a developed sociological context. While Montgomery’s Anne herself ‘undergoes a process of adaptation as she moves with

the times' (Alexander, 2009: 53), the adaptation of her novel allows the world around her to develop alongside her, reflecting both our changing understanding of both her time and the importance of diverse cultural identities.

## Works Cited

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