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## **You're Not From Here: Place and Identity in Newfoundland Drama**

In addressing the issues which naturally arise from the title of my paper, one could rightly anticipate an analysis of a trope based on some variant of the “you can't go home” variety, or perhaps, in dealing with a traditional culture rooted in a kind of self-perpetuated victim mythology, a set of themes dealing with the sentimental fiction of “home is where the heart is”. Perhaps the most predictable trope of all the home-based patterns is that of the “stranger”, which involves an isolated or insular community which defines itself in relation to those it defines as outsiders.

This paper will place particular emphasis on plays which depict outsider or stranger figures, focusing on those which take rural communities as their setting. The reason for this is that the outports are themselves outsider figures in the Newfoundland demographic and geographic landscape; they also function effectively as microcosmic studies of the fissures which divide Newfoundland society and which mark the shifting boundaries between insider and outsider in the culture.

There is no shortage of plays from which to choose. The value of such a study lies partly in the fact that the figures of the stranger and outsider are as central to Newfoundland drama in every generation as they are in the greater consciousness of the society itself. An intriguing aspect of such a study is that it reveals a gradual evolution, both in the notion of what constitutes outsider status and the shifting attitudes of the outsiders themselves. This trope is perhaps the defining feature of Newfoundland's dramatic literature. From the earliest manifestations of dramatic writing in the 1940s, which arose out of the extensive network of amateur community theatres in what was then the not-quite post-colonial British outpost, the idea of a people whose very survival is continually at risk from the elements and the perilous nature of the fishing trade, was put forth in terms which most typically lacked any critical context. The notion of cultural distinctiveness implies an outsider status which is simply reversed, or to put it in photographic terms, used as a

negative definition rather than as a positive one in determining who belongs within the body politic and who must be ostracised or kept at bay.

Thus, at various times, the figure of the stranger has been played by the Dominion of Canada (prior to Confederation in 1949), the “townie” or merchant figure in the outports, and, of course, reversing that, the “bayman” who dares to visit the province’s capital, St. John’s. The Irish who emigrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became stranger figures within predominantly Anglican communities. Within the tradition of mummering brought over from the British Isles, the disguised figure of the mummer who visits homes in a community each evening over the twelve days of Christmas is perhaps the quintessential outsider, one of terror to small children who may be used in that respect as a socializing force; one of liberation to adults, who may, at all other times of the year, be trapped by the dyadic principles of the community in personas which do not allow for ribaldry, license, or aggression towards one’s fellow citizens.

There is much historical and contemporary evidence to support Newfoundlanders’ self-definition as outsiders. “Discovered” by the adventurer John Cabot, the island has been utilised as a commodity by varying nations; the roots of what G.M. Story refers to as the island’s “arrested development” (Story, 14) lie in the unwillingness of the Bristol fishing trade, the London sack merchants, the British Crown, or the French military to establish meaningful settlement on Newfoundland soil. The prevailing attitude is bested summed up by the remarks of Lord Grenville in 1789:

Newfoundland is in no respect a British colony and is never so considered in our laws. On the contrary, the uniform tenor of our laws respecting the fishery there, and of the King’s instructions founded upon them, goes [...] to restrain the subjects of Great Britain from colonizing that island (Story, 18).

Natural disasters have also been a constant factor in contributing to the sense of impermanence which pervades Newfoundland life. Tsunamis, city-destroying fires, record snowfalls, accidents at sea too numerous to list, and the tragic loss of almost an entire regiment of Newfoundland soldiers at Beaumont Hamel in 1915 are among the examples which serve as touchstones in determining a distinct identity for Newfoundlanders based on perseverance and alienation (Major). Gradually settlement did take place, as over the years the various bye-boat keepers, planters and livyers flouted British law and set

up their tilts within the interdicted six mile radius of the coastline. Irish settlers soon added to the mix of residents largely made up of English West Country migrants and a sectarian tension was added to the list of demarcatives in Newfoundland life.

Colonial predation did not cease. It continued in the form of the British mercantile interests who initiated the infamous *truck* or non-cash system in the outports, whereby fishermen sold their fish at a rate set by the local merchant, in exchange for equipment, also sold at his price. The rival French controlled vast sections of the island's west, south, and north coasts, and their military sacked and burned English settlements in a series of raids from 1696 to 1708. The Portuguese and Basque fishermen eagerly fished *green cod* from the Grand Banks, salting it lightly on board and never so much as setting foot on Newfoundland soil. The American and Canadian forces in the Second World War set up military bases in Stephenville, Goose Bay, Torbay, Argentia, and Gander at a bargain-basement lease-rate from a Newfoundland government which quietly agreed that its workers would be paid at less than half the rate paid to the visitors (Neary, 46-7).

Small wonder then, that the hospitable face Newfoundlanders present to visitors belies a wariness that is manifested in their literature and the stubborn unwillingness to adopt a fully North American way of life. A large dictionary devoted to the distinct argot of Newfoundlanders has been compiled and is a favoured article in many houses and a gift to those who would become more familiar with Newfoundland's otherness (*The Dictionary*). In casual conversation studded with references to the "mainland" or *upalong* (Central Canada), the view is perpetuated of a people who view themselves as associate members of the Canadian federation. In bars where the pink, white and green flag of the former country of Newfoundland flies, one may hear a sentimental (and utterly unrequited) attachment to the British Empire, and a betrayed lover's lament at love's labours lost.

Newfoundlanders define themselves in general cultural terms as warm and friendly hosts whose door is always unlocked. While this cultural picture may be true, it requires a visitor, a stranger, to complete the definition. In drama, works such as Des Walsh's adaptation of *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* by Harold Horwood, *Young Triffie Been Made Away With* by Ray Guy, the Mummers Troupe's *Makin' Time With the Yanks* and *They Club Seals, Don't They?* and RCA Theatre's *Terras de Bacalhau* all present outsiders in positive or negative terms as boundary creators, necessary figures in the creation of

a Newfoundland identity. In each of these plays, and others, the notion of Newfoundland as a place one calls home, and a defining measure of one's personal identity, is strongly expressed. One is from home, or one is *from away*.

In other works, notably Rising Tide Theatre's *Joey* and Tom Cahill's *The Only Living Father*, Newfoundlanders themselves are the outsiders, the underdogs who persevere against the marshalled forces of a hostile world. In such a depiction the ultimate success of the subject is not important or even relevant; the perseverance, the survival against the odds of the bigger/richer/more educated/luckier/live-in-a-better-climate types is what counts. Here, identity lies in the notion of survival against long odds – a notion not far different than that espoused by Margaret Atwood with regard to Canadians in her essay on survival many years ago. In *Joey* and *The Only Living Father* the subject is Joseph Smallwood, a native Newfoundlander of small stature and grand ambition who ruled – and that is the proper word – Newfoundland politics for over 24 years, starting with his almost single-handed self-willing of the nation into Canadian confederation in 1949. Smallwood's life, as recounted in these simple but not uncritical plays, is one of a plucky little guy who defies odds stacked against him at every turn. A poor outport boy brought to the class-based society of St. John's, twisting and turning through a checkered private school career, the owner of a pig farm who decides, at age 43, to become a politician, Smallwood represents everything that is conflicted about Newfoundlanders and their view of themselves. A visionary leader whose ideas often came to ruin, a populist who ruled like an autocrat, a man whose love of Newfoundland was unquestioned and who moved entire outport communities forcibly, Joe Smallwood is the insider Newfoundlanders love to hate.

This is interesting, because in the figure of Smallwood resides the basis for a much more intriguing Newfoundland self-definition. Recent playwrights such as Torquil Colbo and Robert Chafe have begun to question the assumptions about the symbiotic relationship between place and identity in Newfoundland. Rather than an oft-sentimentalised picture of the old home town, or its mythologised corollary, the lonesome expatriate adrift in the miasma of Canadian culture – David French somehow manages to combine both stereotypes in his plays – this new self-definition involves the notion of familiarity as a vehicle of estrangement, the idea that we are all strangers. This is open to debate if one ventures into the realm of contemporary post-colonial theory, particularly the recent work of Sara Ahmed and Gayatri

Spivak, but it is possible to explicate the necessary distinctions to establish the localised validity of this thesis.

If Smallwood is the insider as outsider, one who this throws the conventional or traditional definition of strangeness into question, then Chafe and Colbo take this one step further. For Chafe, the outsider can now become an insider. This is a heretical notion in traditional insular cultures and one of the great truths of Newfoundland culture is that you are where you're from. In other words, one is defined by one's place (and by extension, in even less savoury terms, one's ethnicity). Chafe, in his hugely successful play *Tempting Providence*, suggests that one can in fact become an insider – perhaps only after one has died, but better late than never.

*Tempting Providence*, a play commissioned by Theatre Newfoundland and Labrador for its Gros Morne Theatre Festival, examines the life and work of Myra Bennett, née Grimsley, a nurse who came from England in the 1920s to bring medical services to isolated outports on the island's west coast. Chafe documents the local resistance to Nurse Bennett's imperious and blunt ways.

MYRA: I'm Nurse Grimsley.

*No response.*

And you are?

*No response.*

My first patient.

WOMAN: Knows it all, do ya?

MYRA: Pardon me?

WOMAN: Thinks ya knows it all.

MYRA: Well, I've certainly never said that.

WOMAN: Oh yes, you knows it all, all right.

MYRA: Perhaps enough to help. What is the trouble?

WOMAN: Where you from?

MYRA: Madam –

WOMAN: Not from here (Chafe, 77).

The Nurse's insistence on full medical disclosure is at odds with the traditional Newfoundland attitude towards pain: that is, if one can bear it, one shouldn't mention it. Newfoundlanders have an extraordinary ability to withstand discomfort and the region's legendary humour is based largely upon its ability to see something funny about the most dire situations imaginable. In quotidian terms, however, this has led to short average life spans, a high infant mortality

rate, and numerous correctable lifestyle and environmental depredations going unattended. In *Tempting Providence*, the outsider Grimsley becomes the insider Bennett even as she challenges this heterodoxy. The critical agency lies not in her marriage to a local man, as one might think, but rather in her defiant ability to define herself in personal terms, neither through the land of her birth nor through her newly acquired home.

MYRA: There is a cautious curiosity here. I must remember that. I just remember that these people, not only have they never had any formal medical aid, but they also rarely meet someone new. I am standing in front of Mrs. House's, and I am watched by my new neighbours. They look at me from the paths. They whisper as they walk. They exist in this sublime world of friends and relatives. So, of course, there will be a trust issue, with a stranger in town. A stranger barking commands. And this is fine. I'm not here to make friends. That is not my intent. I must remember that too. As I knock on the door. As I start to talk pleasantries (Chafe, 80).

What is respected is her willingness to exist as a stranger, her insistence on her own identity. This is something even the recalcitrant outport residents can recognise as valid, because it accords with their shared values. These shared values become the currency of identity, as they do in multi-cultural societies like that of Canada, dislodging the culture of geographic and familial intimacy upon which traditional heterogeneous cultures depend. Chafe, through the figure of the pioneering Nurse Bennett, is bringing Newfoundland's cultural attitudes into the twenty-first century. It is not irrelevant to note that Robert Chafe is an openly gay man in what has hitherto been a very difficult climate for those identified as deviant; he also practises, as resident playwright at the company Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, a form of theatre based on non-linear physicality and use of music and rhythm that is very much a reaction against the colonial narrative model once popular in the island's amateur theatres and amongst its political elite. Chafe is demanding inclusion and promoting, through Nurse Bennett, the value and *locality* of outsiders such as he.

Torquil Colbo is a playwright and actor who remains something of a celebrity in the small but fiercely loyal St. John's theatre scene, even though he has now been living in Toronto for five years. Colbo's background places him in a similar, but different, outsider/insider position in relation to Robert Chafe, with whom he has worked and who rose to prominence around the same

time. While Chafe is a native Newfoundlander, Colbo was born in an English coastal town, moved to Alberta, and moved to Newfoundland in pre-adolescence. Nonetheless, he views himself, and is widely viewed, as a Newfoundlander. This attitude stands in stark contrast to traditional attitudes of previous generations of Newfoundlanders, as well as to other young playwrights who produced work in the 1990s in Newfoundland. Where the work of writers such as John Taylor in *My Three Dads*, Pete Soucy in *Flux*, and Elizabeth Pickard in the narcissistic *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* reifies the traditional attitude towards outsiders – a particularly disappointing result in Pickard's work, which features a young lesbian protagonist – Colbo, like Chafe, has chosen the path of inclusion for his estranged characters. The socially immature, lone cowboy stance of Liz Pickard's Lizzie is challenged by another character standing in for its author.

In Colbo's *Beyond Zebra*, the name of the protagonist, Muckle Muggeridge, reflects both Colbo's interests as an intellectual gadfly and a quality that is referred to in *process* and *devised* theatre as "serious playfulness". The name Muggeridge is a reference to the intellectual titan Malcolm Muggeridge; "Muckle" is the name of an island off the shores of Newfoundland. Colbo further combines his interest in cryptozoology and the work of Theodore Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, in creating the compelling fantasy that is *Beyond Zebra*. *Beyond Zebra* takes place in one extended scene, packed densely with nuance and metaphor. Muckle Muggeridge, a junior cryptozoologist (one who pursues the study of mythological creatures), has washed up after a storm at sea on the shores of a small island. The off-stage sound of Muckle's Grandfather is heard reciting the confident words of the child in Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra*:

VOICE OF GRANDFATHER:

The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.  
The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.  
The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.  
I know all the twenty-six letters like that.  
Through to Zed is for Zebra, from the start to the close,  
Now I know everything anyone knows –  
Because Zed is as far as the alphabet goes (Colbo, 2).

This text establishes the play's theme of assumptions exploded. Amongst the first assumptions we witness being destroyed is our, and Muckle's, assumption that he knows nothing of this place. This is also the first act of spectator *implication* in the play. Through a process of deduction he concludes

that he is on Muckle Island, the island first visited by his Grandfather and after whom both his son and his son's son have taken their names. This discovery presages the multi-faceted themes of *home* and the dialectical relationship of *homecoming* that are interwoven throughout the play. Further evidences of this alienated familiarity begin to appear. Muckle's spoken musings are echoed by a soothing, unseen female voice, uttered by a creature who darts in and out of sight. Muckle is excited by this; as an aspiring cryptozoologist sent to Newfoundland on a kind of "work term" by the suspiciously Seuss-like Nazzim of Bazzim, he is eager to capture this seemingly undiscovered creature. Believing that this may be the legendary "Ray Woman of Newfoundland" whose exhibition at a London Museum in 1925 led to his Grandfather's humiliation and later his insanity, Muckle's motivation for discovering and capturing the creature becomes personal; he realizes that his father was, in fact, half sea creature:

MUCKLE: Could this mean that Father, with his cold clammy skin... his lidded nostrils...his lack of speech [...] or teeth...his, his pulsating cheeks...he was partly a creature of the Sea? I just thought he took all those long Epsom salts bath because that's what senior citizens did! (Colbo, 9).

His sense of misplaced identity deepens further when he recalls how his Grandfather often sang odes to his "Muckle Harbour Jenny" and that an alternate name for the creature is "Jenny Haniver". Muckle, it turns out, is descended from a mythological sea creature – in other words, from no definable or tangible place. He is "[...] HOME AT LAST" (Colbo, 10).

The question of ancestry from a mythological creature causes the whole issue of nativism to be raised to a different level. Muckle is, in practical terms, *from here*; yet he clearly exists in a state of alienation with this aspect of his ancestry. Interestingly, the creature's song bears a close resemblance to Welsh Gaelic, a language which would have been at once familiar in sound to a Newfoundlander of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the same time possessed of an exotic quality.x (The descendants of most Newfoundlanders come from England and Ireland, not Wales). Colbo then ties in, in a thoroughly post-modern way, the proto-text for the play. Muckle brandishes his copy of Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra* from whence he is able to decipher what the "Jenny" says. The language of the book is evidence of an "indigenous Newfoundland language", given to him as a child by his grandfather not as a simple gift, it turns out, but as a kind of Rosetta Stone connecting Muckle to his forebears.

Muckle has thus been inextricably tied to this place from his earliest childhood – and has also always been definably *alien*. He begins to come to terms with this identity rooted in difference:

MUCKLE: And...*I'm* not entirely human. All those schoolyard taunts were true (Colbo, 9).

The use of the schoolyard metaphor implicates the spectator further in this perception of the outsider as insider, utilizing the arena of reception as a further underscoring of Colbo's thesis. We are *all* "not entirely human" – and by extension, never *entirely* from any one place. For Colbo, the Alberta-born, widely travelled, restless intellect, this is a more truthful presentation of the exterior correlative to the outsider's interior perception of identity and place. A further layering of the idea's manifestation is added with the fact that Colbo himself has played the role of Muckle Muggeridge on four different occasions. Surely he is speaking for, and defending, his perception of himself as a Newfoundlander when Muckle states:

MUCKLE: Three quarters human. How could this have affected my perspective on the world? It's suited me fine up until now. It seems to be about right, actually (Colbo, 9).

The fusion of place and alienated identity grows. He calls out to the "Jenny":

MUCKLE: Jenny? Don't be afraid of me. Washed up on this Island of Myself, I can see clearly for the first time! (Colbo, 10).

What follows is a profoundly desolate moment. The "Jenny" fails to respond. Muckle's identity is momentarily at play. After a few tense moments, however, the "Jenny" begins a call-and-response dialogue with Muckle which demonstrates that he *knows* this language on an instinctive level. This semiotic metaphor of hidden, familiar meanings coming to consciousness is a powerful one echoed in many literary works. Unlike many such works however, which tend to emphasise the mutability of place and thus its gradual estrangement from the notion of *homeness*, Colbo here reverses the meaning of this metaphor. To Colbo, one *can* go home again; that "home" consists of the hidden codes and signs which merely await one's long-distracted attention.

In the call-and-response dialogue there is a final element of alienation, given in recognisable stages. The first stage is one of union, or *communion*, as

Muckle realises that he is being accepted as fitting into a community based on a shared language. The second stage in the dialogue is *intimacy* or shared confidence; he and the “Jenny” use their shared knowledge to make a rude joke about Muckle’s mentor, the Nazzim of Bazzim.

The third stage of this call-and-response dialogue, which encapsulates degrees of a relationship to one’s home community, is that of *estrangement*. Muckle and the “Jenny” disagree over whether the last line of Seuss’ description of the sea creature is “rubbery tubs” (Muckle) or “blubbery tubs” (“Jenny”). As the disagreement escalates, Muckle unconsciously approaches the “Jenny”, wading deeper and deeper into the sea from whence they both come. He vanishes completely underwater, apparently continuing the debate – simultaneously joining his forebear community and reifying his estrangement from it at the same time.

The words of Muckle’s Grandfather are heard. They summarise Colbo’s acceptance of his insider/outsider status, and the necessity and value of extending one’s identity *beyond zebra*, that is, beyond conventional definitions of home, community, and borders. The Grandfather says, as Muckle vanishes from view under water:

GRANDFATHER: I led him around and I tried hard to show  
There are things beyond Zed that most people don’t know  
I took him past Zebra, as far as I could  
And I think, perhaps, maybe, I did him some good (Colbo, 12).

Like Dr. Seuss, Colbo tends to be underestimated. The erudition and theatrical imagination he demonstrates in *Beyond Zebra* is as resonant as the Seussian source it takes as its point of departure. Seuss’ exhortations for children to see “things beyond zed” is a call for the kind of creative rebellion which results in a truly responsible citizenry and a truly social society.

As members of Newfoundland’s “new guard” theatre generation, Colbo and Chafe question the old shibboleths upon which much of Newfoundland’s culture and its literary expression have depended. Home is *not* “where the heart is”; it is *not* a place to which the prodigal returns; not a place to rest one’s intellect with a descent into the familiar and unchallenged. Rather, for these artists, home – the culture and community of Newfoundland – is a place where one’s identity is that of a questioning, or wandering, stranger. It is the familiar stranger’s role to question, and his very presence must be

accepted as an integral part of the fabric out of which this unique culture is created.

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