

## **Strange Terrain: Re-Producing and Resisting Place-Myths in Two Contemporary Fictions of Newfoundland.<sup>1</sup>**

Danielle Fuller

In 1994, Helen Porter described to me how the local media in Newfoundland paid a great deal of attention to E. Annie Proulx's novel *The Shipping News* (1993), while ignoring Bernice Morgan's *Random Passage* (1992) for the first six months of its publication. Porter explained this fascination with Proulx and her work as the last vestiges of a colonial mentality: 'there's still this enchantment with people from another place.' Fast forward to the turn of the century and Newfoundland writing had not only won more acclaim in the province but also a prominent place in the Canadian cultural imaginary. Who is 'enchanted' now? Consider the following mainland newspaper coverage of two writers and their work:

Wayne Johnston, the writer who has hit the big time, having won a \$400,000 advance for *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) from a US publisher who is uncertain where Newfoundland actually is, but confident that Americans want to read about a place made famously quirky by an American writer. Courted by the power-brokers of metropolitan culture but framed as the 'down home' non-sophisticate, 'totally unpretentious, dressed in a nubbly gray sweater...', (*Montreal Gazette*, 29 January, 1999), apparently unsullied by his exile in Toronto and the adulation of press and critics: witness the 'pot of tea [simmering] East-Coast-style on the back of the stove, and the map of the island, drawn in the 17<sup>th</sup> century but newly framed, sitting on the sofa.' (*Globe & Mail*, 22 Oct, 1998). A man who knows his roots. Authentic Down Home Talent.

---

Joan Clark, apparently in love with the cold Atlantic air, rocky land and ice-bergs, and yet simultaneously 'out of place' against this landscape, looking as if she had stepped out of the homeware department of a (Toronto?) store. 'Tall, slim and elegant, Clark looks like she'd be more at home in the fine-china department than on a bleak cliff in the North Atlantic. But there's no doubting her connection to that place.' ('Ice Queen', *Globe & Mail*, 18 Nov. 2000). A commentary that indicates preconceptions about class identity in Newfoundland as it also attempts to domesticate Clark, making the location of her novel more accessible to city-dwellers while simultaneously underlining its strange appeal. Canada's Far Eastern Exotic.

As my tag-lines imply, these newspaper articles on 'Newfoundland' writers draw heavily on place-myths about the province, as well as cultural stereotypes about its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> What enchants outsiders is frequently the myth of Newfoundland as a cure-all for the urbanite's ills, as a wilderness space, a quaint cultural backwater offering old-time folk charm: 'a World of Difference', Canada's Far Eastern 'Other'.<sup>3</sup> As James Overton's work demonstrates, such place-myths have been deliberately constructed, re-fashioned and promoted for decades from within Newfoundland by businessmen and government officials hoping to attract foreign investment and tourist dollars (1996). They are also a result of a mid-twentieth-century discourse of cultural preservation, with its regionalist ideology that set a model of a rural, humanistic lifestyle against the alienation of urban modernisation (Overton 1988, 9). With its social and political roots in Joey Smallwood's program of resettlement, a folk- and outport-centred notion of the province's identity gained institutional validation in the 1960s and 1970s through the work of Memorial University's folklore department, the scholarship and publications of the Institute for Social and Economic Research, and the University's Extension Services. The work of Newfoundland-based

---

literary presses such as Breakwater, founded in 1972, extended this ideological work into a literary medium, constructing a readership that valued ‘insider’ representations of Newfoundland against the flood of American popular culture and educational texts in circulation (Fuller 2004). What fascinates me about recent fiction by Johnston and Clark is how far their work counters or colludes with popular cultural constructions of Newfoundland as a ‘strange terrain’ attractive to non-Newfoundlanders because of its associations with place-myths. How do *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) and *Latitudes of Melt* (2000) position the non-local reader: as tourist? Friendly visitor? Alien invader? And to what extent does each writer’s fictional geography foster an uncritical consumption of place?

### Place-Myths

The concept of the place-myth was coined by Rob Shields whose investigations into the cultural construction of space have included an examination of the contested space myths of the Canadian north (1991). Shields’ methodology develops Henri Lefebvre’s interest in ‘the processes of production of cultural notions and practices of space’ (Urry 1995:25).<sup>4</sup> One of Shields’ most compelling insights regards the exchanges that take place between producers and consumers and ‘the productive nature of ludic activities’ (262). In other words, activities in spaces that have been formally or traditionally set aside as leisure spaces (e.g. national parks), are not only or always about consuming space. They may also re-produce and transform those spaces, especially when activities subvert or fail to conform to dominant ideologies. It should be noted that Lefebvre’s strong influence on cultural geography has created

---

a wariness about the ‘illusory power of representation to render space “legible”’ while masking the relations of power and the material experience of social relations in “everyday life” (Balshaw and Kennedy 2000, 3). Lefebvre’s concern is a useful reminder to the literary cultural critic that textual forms of representation produce both opacity and (apparent) transparency. Although textual representation has ideological force and consequences that we might interrogate, these may not coincide with the material experiences of place and space. In this essay, I am not proposing that writing and reading fiction about particular places are equivalent to spatial practices that are more immediately material in their effects (our daily interactions with work, leisure and domestic sites, for example). However, I am following Shields’ thesis that places and the place-myths that attach to them are produced and reproduced through a variety of social actions, including discursive practices such as textual representation and interpretation.

For the majority of cultural geographers a space becomes a place when it is imbued with meaning by local cultures via stories, images and memories (e.g. Rose 1995; Shields 1991; Tuan 1977). The connotations that a place holds within a particular community may or may not be visible to visitors, and the myths associated with it will not necessarily coincide with its contemporary function. Within Shields’ case studies, ‘images and myths were found to have a complex, historically changing relationship with empirical facts and practices. In some cases images preserved past practices, in other cases they followed changing “realities” strictly’ (1991: 261). The image of Newfoundland as an isolated, rural province populated by hardy fisherfolk living in outports persists outside the province despite the collapse of the codfishery because it supports several place-myths. One of these posits Newfoundland as ‘other’ to

urban centres such as Toronto, and therefore a leisure space where city-dwellers can enjoy outdoor ‘wilderness’ pursuits far away from the stresses of life in a global city. Indeed, this place-myth travels across the Atlantic in an attempt to allure British tourists to Newfoundland’s ‘unspoilt shores’ (*World Report*, 2002). The image of the island province as a non-urban, rural space that offers a less complicated lifestyle to the morally bankrupt and physically exhausted metropolitan is reiterated by the narrative trajectory of Proulx’s best-selling novel *The Shipping News* (1994) and Lasse Hallström’s widely distributed Hollywood film adaptation (2001). Another persistent place-myth upholds Newfoundland’s heritage and folk culture as distinctive, shaped by the hardships of life on a wind-battered rock in the midst of the Atlantic ocean, and resistant to outside cultural influences. For some Newfoundlanders, this latter myth underwrites a very significant place-bound identity. The declarations of Breakwater’s founder and publisher Clyde Rose in his introductions to the press’s catalogues and on its website testify to this attitude ([www.breakwater.nf.net](http://www.breakwater.nf.net)). While for other Newfoundlanders this image of cultural isolation and distinctiveness is backward-looking and restrictive, to the Newfoundland tourist industry it represents a marketing opportunity exemplified in the mid-1990s by the ‘World of Difference’ television campaign (Whalen 1998).

Newfoundlanders’ resistance to and complication of such romantic and outdated notions of their home place and lifestyle comes in various forms. Great Big Sea, a group popular in both Canada and the United States, refused a mainland producer’s suggestion that they don oil-slickers and arrive on-stage in a dory during Canada Day musical celebrations. In another cultural sphere, Bruce Porter’s eloquent introduction to the Confederation anniversary issue of the literary periodical *TickleAce*

catalogues economic loss and change ('the sealing industry...codfishery; the forfeiting of control of offshore oil') and protests against 'those wretched Newfie jokes; [and] the relentless misrepresentation in self-appointed "national" publications' (2000, 6-7). But, as my examples suggest, the resistance to idealised place-myths and cultural stereotypes often occurs in local arena or assumes forms that do not receive wide-scale circulation. In contrast, Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and Clark's *Latitudes of Melt* have been published by a major North American press (Knopf Canada), translated into French, published in the United States and (in *Colony*'s case) the UK. *Colony* was nominated for both the Giller Prize and the Governor General's Award, was one of five books selected for the CBC's 'Canada Reads' project in 2003 and went on to win the 'People's Choice' award. *Latitudes*, meanwhile, was nominated for the Commonwealth Writer's prize.

To me, as an outsider, such place-myths appear to operate paradoxically. They render Newfoundland terrain and culture legible because they reference memories, emotions, tangible experiences and 'real' events, as well as provide clues to local interpretations of them. Simultaneously, however, they make the island opaque because they are complex social constructions given articulation not only through specific local practices (e.g. mumming; oral storytelling) but also through more widely disseminated media that are not referential but representational, such as film, song and literature. The interpretative work of representing place through language and the generic codes of literary fiction, re-produces space and place as text, which is, in turn, decoded, consumed and perhaps transformed by differently situated readers. Even though 'representation... invokes material, visual and psychic forms and practices that cannot be reduced to textuality' (Balshaw and Kennedy

2000, 4), fictional texts can construct vivid imagined geographies that articulate emotions associated with particular places. In the final section of this essay, I argue that Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) alerts the reader to the 'slipperiness' of representation even as he conveys a powerful love of place through his prose fiction. While the metafictional elements of the novel such as Fielding's journal and her 'Condensed History of Newfoundland' foreground Johnston's ludic relationship with history and narrative, the selectivity of his geography and re-arranged topography is less evident. As I shall demonstrate, Johnston adopts certain tactics in his representation of St. John's that mediate the city differently for local and non-local readers. In doing so, Johnston's novel foregrounds a challenge faced by Atlantic Canadian writers for at least a century. The risk of reinforcing sentimental, nostalgic or romantic notions of particular places, thereby masking regional inequalities and/or having your work dismissed as unsophisticated, is particularly acute for writers located in areas that are strongly and primarily associated within the popular imaginary with leisure activities and 'old-fashioned' cultural practices (whether material or social). Writing for a dual audience, Atlantic Canadians have long faced a delicate balancing act when they write about their culturally distinct but also heavily mediated (for external consumption) marginal region. Joan Clark's *Latitudes of Melt* (2000) eschews overtly self-reflexive strategies in her response to this challenge, but she does explore the processes through which place-myths are constructed via characterisation and her depiction of the relationship between the quotidian and the fantastic. In both Johnston's and Clark's novels, however, this self-consciousness about the mythologizing and representation of Newfoundland is in tension with the strategies through which each writer re-enchants the landscape as a 'strange terrain'.

Newfoundland is a differentiated space culturally and physically apart from the mainland in Johnston's novel, and a magical place of fairies and folklore in Clark's text. To some extent, then, as I demonstrate in the next two sections of this essay, both writers appear to reinforce the images of Newfoundland as an Eastern 'other' to urban mainland Canada.

### 'Worlds Unto Themselves': Johnston's Newfoundland

Two particular aspects of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* establish the island as a land apart: the repeated images of Newfoundland and its people as 'enised' (e.g. 131, 389), and the lack of any awareness of mainland Canada, aptly nominated by Joey as 'a continent of strangers' (Johnston 1998, 152; Ravvin 1999, 11). Ironically, given Newfoundland's economic dependence on the sea for five hundred years and the political support that Joey wins for Confederation amongst the outport fishermen, Joey's fear of the boundary-less ocean prompts a re-imagining of his home place 'as landlocked in the middle of some otherwise empty continent' (131). For Johnston's Joey, a lack of physical limits and boundary markers produces anxiety because it evokes the threat of continuity with other spaces and a concomitant loss of place-bound identity. Prior to his first trip off-island as a young man, Smallwood wonders if he will be bewildered 'by the sheer unknowable, unencompassable size of the world.... How could you say for certain where you were, where home left off and away began, if the earth that you were standing on went on forever...in all directions? For an islander, there had to be natural limits, gaps, demarcations, not just artificial ones on a map. Between us and them and here and there, there had to be a gulf' (132). Joey requires the physical environment to provide markers that delimit both the geography of home and a psychic space of cultural difference from mainlanders. In the midst of New York City, this psychic



space is reproduced and 'enislement' physically secured by the boarding-house dubbed the 'Newfoundland Hotel' because so many islanders live there (156). Outside this space, Joey is a chameleon-like figure, frequently mis-identified and mis-placed as Jewish (163), Welsh, Scottish and Irish (171), until he becomes enisled once again as a journalist writing for the *Backhomer*, a newspaper catering to the Newfoundland diaspora. Once he loses this job he becomes both literally and symbolically homeless, and returns to the island.

But the sense of being 'enisled' is not as straightforwardly reassuring of home, identity and community membership as these images at first suggest. Just as the verb 'enisle' denotes the creation of an island while figuratively meaning 'to isolate', so Smallwood's travels alert him to the way that Newfoundlanders are enisled from each other as well as from the mainland. The sectionmen living along seven hundred miles of railway track whom Joey visits during his long cross-island trek by foot (213ff), and, later, the outporters whom he approaches by schooner in an attempt to unionize the fishermen, are 'cut off in time and space' (355). Similarly, the outporters reached by sea-plane during his Confederation campaign, dwell in 'homes that were worlds unto themselves' (454). Joey's stint as a radio broadcaster, the Barrelman, is an attempt to build imaginary bridges between these islands of Newfoundlanders (389). Like most of Joey's ventures, the radio show is mocked by Fielding in her satirical newspaper column, 'Field Day' (386-8). The satire punctures Smallwood's grand gesture and renders his attempt to create an imagined community as naïve and romantic in a society riven by class and economic differences, where, as Joey should recognise from his own experience, people are not so much 'starved for information' as hungry for food (388).

In *Colony* Newfoundland is represented as a differentiated space not only through images of landscape and inhabitants as ‘enisled’ by physical geography and social hierarchies, but also because Johnston romances the landscape as Joey criss-crosses the island. As several reviewers noted, Johnston’s descriptions of the bogs and barrens (137-8), Joey’s trek along the railway line (213-242), the caribou migration and his walk across the frozen ocean (355) are amongst the most emotionally powerful and visually vivid passages in the novel (Marchand 1998, A35; Morgan 1999, 103). They convey a great love of place and constitute an ‘Ode to Newfoundland’ that offers a romantic counterpoint to the satirical ‘Ode Not Taken’ which Johnston creates for Boyle in Fielding’s ‘Condensed History of Newfoundland’ (474-5). Johnston’s Newfoundland is a dramatic, elemental landscape of ice, bogs, rock, ocean and craggy inlets. The physical threat that land and climate pose to humans is never underestimated, not least in Johnston’s virtuoso recreation of the sealing disaster when three-quarters of the crew of the *S.S. Newfoundland* were frozen to death (105-109). The unnecessary and tragic loss of life incurred haunts the novel and symbolises the divide between the merchant and labouring classes that Joey’s pseudo-socialism seeks to bridge.

The sealing incident also establishes the extremities created by the natural environment: its dramatic, awe-inspiring appearance; its isolating qualities, and the dangers that land-, sea- and ice-scape pose to human life. These elements make Joey’s odysseys across the island by foot seem all the more impressive and extraordinary – the stuff of local myth, in fact. Walking on ice around the south coast, for instance, is ‘treacherous’ and requires ‘a certain knack to time your step’ from ‘shorewards-

heaving pack ice to the rim ice' if the walker is to avoid 'being swallowed up' by the 'green sea-water-frothing mouth' of a fissure (351). As these images suggest, Johnston often animates the land and ocean, and while this manoeuvre does not diminish the reality of his intricate descriptions, it certainly heightens the fabulous aspects of the island's geography. Johnston romances the landscape in order to inspire awe and wonder in the reader for both the land and the people who know how to survive it. His casting of Joey-the-traveller as a mixture of adventurer, secular itinerant priest and anthropologist adds to this project. In other words, Joey is never entirely an insider, rather, he is a discoverer and a participant-observer who is only too aware of his vulnerability in the face of extreme physical conditions and his resulting dependency on the knowledge and generosity of the outporters. Portraying Joey in this manner and focalizing the physical environment through him positions the reader as a fellow traveller, welcomed as an outsider to foreign climes and customs. Joey's increasing love affair with the landscape sustains the sense of enchantment for the reader, while his humility in the face of outporters' skill mediates the difference between urban and rural lifestyles that might otherwise alienate many readers of the novel.

Narrative structure and Johnston's employment of generic conventions also contribute to his romantic representation of the landscape. Fielding's journal adopts the intimate and confessional mode associated with that genre. It operates in the novel as the private, self-reflective flip-side to her witty, abrasive journalism in which she takes public figures to task. The journal is a life-long letter to Joey and a record of their unconsummated love affair, so it also helps to extend Johnston's allegory of Joey-as-Newfoundland. In this vein, Fielding's musings on the 'old lost land' and the 'Ode to Newfoundland' set the tenor for Joey's first

train trip across the island. Her favourite verse of the anthem pictures the island in winter and articulates the Newfoundlander's devotion to the 'frozen land' (129). Fielding identifies this verse as 'the Fielding family anthem', and as 'indefinably sad... as if Boyle imagined himself looking back from a time when Newfoundland had ceased to be'. Interpreting the Ode as both a public and private form of expression, as both anthem and elegy, Fielding's journal frames Joey's trans-island trip as a personal journey of national significance. It also prefigures the eventual closure of the railway and the post-Confederation development of the island: a loss lamented explicitly in Johnston's memoir, *Baltimore's Mansion* (1999).<sup>5</sup> Crucially for my consideration of the novel's engagement with dominant place-myths of Newfoundland, Fielding's journal entry introduces the tropes of emptiness and 'un-knowability' that shape the representation of the island in the succeeding chapter. As a girl, even the map of Newfoundland fails to assist her imagination, and she cannot envisage the island beyond St John's described by her father: "'Almost all of it is empty. No one lives there. No one's ever seen most of it'" (1998, 129). Significantly, given her class position, Fielding can only imagine 'the grounds of Government House going on forever,' as if her ocular and cognitive resources are circumscribed by her upper-class family lifestyle of motor-car rides and polite society on the Avalon peninsula. Joey's train journey subsequently maps the void, the unseen-land of the wealthy elite who can afford to take the boat from St John's direct to Europe, Canada or the United States.

Johnston portrays Joey on his first train trip as a time-travelling cartographer, who, from an Olympian position, is able to read the landscape for its future as well as its history. The projection beyond the

---

contemporary time-frame also makes the retrospective stance of the narration explicit, underlining Joey's position as an apparently omniscient but partisan narrator. Joey notes the evidence of 'forest fires that had burned away... the topsoil' on the Bog of Avalon; the 'bleak beauty' of the history-defying barrens which can only be discussed in 'geological terms' (137), and the 'ruins of [his] refinery at Come by Chance' which will be visible only fifty years after this journey takes place (138). Such telescoping or condensing of time emphasises the tenuous hold that humans appear to have on the island's natural formation and suggests that the island's history cannot be contained by or understood within human time-scales. Moreover, time is subordinated to space in this scene, reversing the traditional Euroamerican conception of space as a backdrop to history and upsetting the notions of causality and progress that depend upon it. As a result, Joey's desperate need to succeed, to progress in both the physical and social sense beyond his origins, and to transform Newfoundland through modern (and modernising) 'progressive' means, seems to be a grand but futile gesture. Progress – in all senses – is rendered questionable if not impossible through Johnston's reconfiguring of the relationship between time and space. The ruins of the refinery symbolise the gap between 'what might have been' and what actually happened; the 'unrequited dreams' of the novel's title and the failure of Joey's youthful ambitions. If *Baltimore's Mansion* is a personal elegy for 'the circumscribed geography of "home"' possible in pre-Confederate Newfoundland (1999, 89), then Johnston's novel operates as a public elegy for the lost dream of a nation-state. For the literary landscape in *Colony* is somewhat similar to a classic pastoral elegy in which 'the rural scene as it is composed by the poet and experienced by the herdsman,... consoles us' in the face of death (Lambert 1976, xv). Consolation arises from Johnston's landscape, not because loss or death

is compared to natural cycles of regeneration as they often are in the tradition of pastoral elegy, but because the reader is invited to see the landscape as resilient in the face of, even resistant to, human efforts to change and profit from it. Human settlements, 'small, unaccountably located towns a hundred miles apart' are dwarfed by ancient, petrified trees, frozen lakes, hills and bogs (142). Meanwhile, 'spring-fed streams' continue to run down 'cuts of rock so sheer and high you could not see the tops of them' despite the passage that engineers have blasted through the hills for the train (141).

The train journey in *Colony* is not straightforwardly romantic or elegiac in its tenor, however. Throughout the novel, Johnston traces, allegorizes and frequently satirizes Joey's life story in terms of Newfoundland's 'national' narrative (Wyile 2002, 125). Here, as the reader 'discovers' the interior of the island alongside the young Smallwood, so we are alerted to Joey's twin ambitions for himself and his home-land. On this train journey, the unknown 'core of wilderness' ceases to be threatening to him, its oxymoronic 'bleak beauty of sparsity, scarcity and stuntedness' capable of 'driv[ing] you mad'(137), becomes for Joey part of 'the great tract of possibility' stretching back from the coast-line (139): 'the unfoundland that will make us great someday' (141). Joey's narration explicitly reads his own life through the landscape when he sees his birth-place of Gambo: 'a cluster of crude, garishly painted one-storey houses' (139). He is relieved to have escaped the 'Smallwood that might have been, standing out there, staring in wonderment and longing at the train' (139). Instead, Joey is inside the train looking out: a more empowered position of spectatorship from which he can play the parts of discoverer, prospector and champion. From such standpoints he is able

to aestheticize the landscape and its inhabitants without having to join them in their daily ‘afflictions’ (139).

Joey’s capitalist and imperial mode of viewing the landscape could be read as counter-colonial in its political effect, given that he is a Newfoundlander of humble class origins setting out to reclaim his homeland from its British colonizers. However, the tropes of emptiness and time-travel traced above make this a problematic reading, evoking the rhetoric of tourist literature which invites potential visitors ‘to “step back in time” and “discover” new worlds as if they were uninhabited or, if not, then at least “uncontaminated” by Western culture’ (Duncan & Duncan, 1992: 36). Identified by James and Nancy Duncan as part of a western orientalist discourse that identifies the ‘traditional exotic culture’ at the expense of the ‘modern or familiar’, Johnston’s employment of these tropes within an elegiac narrative, risks reinforcing the ex-centric ‘otherness’ of the Newfoundland sold to tourists. Focalized through Joey, the island’s eccentric inhabitants are seen as spurning the trappings of modernity and clinging to traditional beliefs and habits. Gambo is populated by ‘fairy feeble men’ wary of the unknown land beyond their settlement and loggers who prefer to ‘ride the river’ rather than the train (140). ‘Take away their radios’ and the outporters on the ‘ice-bound south-west coast...lived not much differently than people in such places had a hundred, even two hundred years ago’ (388). These observations can be read as ‘realistic’ details of Newfoundland life circa 1920, or as the biased observations of a modernizing zealot of a narrator who has his own reasons for wanting to escape the past. Either way, these depictions of island communities contribute to Johnston’s powerful evocation of a place that is out of step with time and culture on the mainland (and under threat from Joey’s ambitious plans).

Fielding's contrapuntal history offers some resistance to the more tourist-friendly representation of Newfoundland focalized through Joey.

Although highly parodic in style and extremely funny to read, Fielding's short 'book' historicises rural Newfoundland and its apparent premodernity through her attention to colonial politics and economics.<sup>6</sup>

However, even Fielding's pen withholds satire when it comes to evoking the physical landscape, and instead reiterates images of emptiness, wilderness and the unknown island core (129,382). And it is through the public medium of Fielding's newspaper column that the novel's final romantic image of a people shaped by their geography is presented: 'the northern night, the barrens, the bogs, the rocks and ponds and hills of Newfoundland.... These things, finally, primarily, are

Newfoundland.... We are a people in whose bodies old sea-seeking rivers roar with blood' (562). Emotionally moving and dramatic in their effect, these images essentialize Newfoundland identity as explicitly land-bound and implicitly unavailable to immigrants and mainlanders 'From Away'.

Once again, the unknowable wilderness interior of the island (barrens, bogs, ponds and hills) is invoked, this time as the primordial terrain that produces 'a people' – an ancient race whose very blood is mingled with the elements of the physical environment. As a sympathetic non-

Newfoundland reader I would like to interpret this as an example of a strategic essentialism, a deliberate political claim to a specific 'racialized' identity by a group of people who have experienced long-term colonisation by Britain and social and economic marginalisation within the Canadian Confederation. However, the inclusion of the story of Nancy April/Shawnawdithit, 'the last Beothuk Indian' in Fielding's final 'Field Day' column troubles this reading (556).



The Beothuk have been frequently idealised and elegised in the province's literature and popular culture in a history of literary representation that positions indigenous culture as anterior to white settler realities. One 'real world' effect of this, as Terry Goldie has argued, is that contemporary Aboriginal issues, rights and land-claims raised by Mi'kmaq inhabitants of Newfoundland and the Innu of Labrador have often been ignored (1989).<sup>7</sup> Re-imagining or invoking the Beothuk in fiction thus becomes a difficult and risky process, since it involves negotiating with all the histories and mythologies that have accumulated around their existence and eventual demise after contact with European diseases.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, because *Colony* only mentions Newfoundland's Aboriginal history in passing prior to Fielding's final column, Johnston's inclusion of 'Nancy April's' story is sudden, unexpected and de-contextualised and, because Fielding speculates on the parallels with her own life story, problematically naïve and romantic. Although clearly marked off in the text through a change in font as 'Fielding's' account, and despite self-conscious comments that it is 'presumptuous to try' and imagine 'Nancy' 'in what is, after all, an address to absence, silence,' (559), the column does not avoid the dangers it describes. The function of Fielding's Beothuk narrative is to re-establish the romantic and elegiac tenor at the end of the novel, so this signalling of a representational 'problem' is eclipsed by the drawing together of the novel's themes in an emotional crescendo. Nancy/Shawnawdithit's (and by extension the Beothuk's) claim on the bogs, rocks and ponds of Newfoundland is erased by the completion of Fielding's life story and the assertion that politics – specifically the moment of Confederation with Canada – is

---

irrelevant to ‘the mountains’ or ‘the land on which ...all the cities, towns and settlements of Newfoundland are built’ (560). Subsequently, the ‘people’ interpellated by the concluding images of the novel are clearly the descendants of the white settler-invaders who inhabit these ‘settlements’.

To summarise my critique thus far, the representation of the landscape in *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* operates on several levels. First, Johnston employs the aesthetic codes of elegy and literary realism to produce a ‘strange terrain’ that secures the place-bound identity of white Newfoundlanders. Second, he draws on tropes of emptiness and time-travel that uphold well-established place-myths familiar to both local and non-local readers. Third, images of Newfoundland as ‘enised’ contribute to the portrayal of a strange terrain dislocated in time and space from other places and barely touched by modernisation. Since Joey is the primary focalizer for much of the novel, and Fielding’s reflections on place are confined to her journal and short history text, the reader is frequently offered positions of spectatorship that are romantic, ethnographic or capitalistic. Each of these encourages a consumption of place that reproduces unequal power relations between the viewer and the viewed, the tourist and the local, in ways that I have tried to indicate. The ‘othering’ of Newfoundland as ‘Canada’s Far East’ therefore appears to be sustained by Johnston’s imagined geography. Before examining ways in which his novel posits limitations on the representation of place and landscape, I want to consider the creation of another, rather different, Newfoundland.

### Magical Sites: Clark’s Newfoundland

---

The narrative trigger for Joan Clark's *Latitudes of Melt* (2000) is a fanciful event rather than a fictionalized biography of an actual person – the rescue of baby Aurora from a 'bergy bit' in the Atlantic ocean by fishermen after the sinking of the Titanic. The life story of a fictional character, the same Aurora, who has magical powers, determines the novel's time-frame. Like *Colony* Clark's novel spans almost the entire length of the twentieth century. Where *Colony* follows Joey's political career and illustrates the economic privations, class prejudices and colonial hierarchies that he must overcome to succeed, *Latitudes* charts social change in Newfoundland through the multi-generation story of an outport family. In common with Johnston's work, *Latitudes* is a predominantly linear, chronological narrative with occasional shifts in time, most notably in its third part which turns back to 1910-12 to reveal how Aurora's mother came to board the Titanic. Clark is not a satirist, and *Latitudes* is not laden with irony aimed at a 'great small' politician and what Herb Wyile aptly describes as the 'colonial cringe' adopted by both man and country (2002, 130). For Clark, dreams are related to fantasy and magic rather than political ambition, and provide another realm of existence, one that is contingent on the quotidian.

Joan Clark's representation of place and landscape is of a different order to Johnston's. Her portrait of the island as a physical entity consists of concise, sparing descriptions which often indicate and debunk the myths associated with it. In case the reader should mistake Aurora's chance rescue as the prelude to a fairy-tale set in an entirely invented location, for instance, Clark ends the description of her discovery with the following:

Though the waters of the island were often filled with ice and its shores hidden in mist, it was not the fabled Vinland or the Island of

the Blessed, and it was not newly found except perhaps to an Italian explorer....The shoreline of the island went on at such length and in such a configuration of coves, inlets, harbours, tickles, bights and bays that it was possible for a child who had been rescued from the ice to grow and flourish in splendid isolation (6).

Here, the physical realities of geology and climate are responsible for geographic isolation, but the romance of such places as the Drook, where Aurora is raised by the St Croix family, is misperceived by strangers. Clark's overt rejection of outsider's visions of Newfoundland clears a narrative space for the relationships to land-, sea- and ice-scapes that she constructs for her various characters.

Although Clark's portrayal of Newfoundland does not evoke the tropes of emptiness, wilderness and time-travel evident in *Colony*, her novel does not entirely pull away from dominant place-myths of the island as an exotic 'Other' to urban sophistication, particularly in its fascination with magic and fairies. 'Informed' by folklorist Barbara Rieti's study *Strange Terrain* (1991) about fairy lore in Newfoundland, Clark's portrait of the Drook settlement and Aurora's idyllic early childhood, foregrounds the tenacity of local belief in changelings (11), the dangers of being fairy-led (12) and suspicion about Aurora's unusual, otherworldly appearance. Her different coloured eyes, white hair and white skin that defies freckles, sunburn and insect bites make local people wary of her (12). Her step-brother Louis is full of wonder at his sister, 'marvell[ing] at how delicately made she was', 'fascinated' by her eyes, noticing how she never feels the cold, and her 'downright odd' ability to remain quiet (15). Her unusual relationship with animals begins with her 'shocking' friendship with a fox, then an injured bird, and culminates in her 'miraculously' ordering a polar bear from the house (16). Fairy lore clearly helps the

community to explain the difference of an outsider lacking ‘the panoply of aunts and uncles and cousins’ that would confirm her insider status (11). However, the early chapters of Clark’s narrative position this rational explanation as subordinate to a culture of fairy lore which colours the everyday world.

The miracle of Aurora’s rescue from the berg and her fearless approach to the natural world have the effect of casting the Drook, as well as the girl, in a magical light. Since Aurora’s point of view and her life-story dominate the novel, the island, especially the southern shore, becomes something of a fantastical place. This impression of the Drook and Cape Race is enhanced by the fact that several characters understand their relationship with each other and the southern shore through storytelling and pictorial practices. These representational forms are not mimetic, drawing instead on the conventions of fairy-tale, or using allegory or abstract art to explore the fantastic. Francis St Croix turns his oral story of Aurora’s rescue into a ‘magical’ tale (30). Tom, Aurora’s husband, hails Aurora as ‘the faery child’ when he first meets her on the barrens, and woos her through reciting the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Louis Stevenson and Emily Dickinson (33). Up in the lighthouse that he tends, Tom views the ‘expanse of water and air’, experiences a feeling of ‘quietude’, and imagines the island as God’s experiment before he ‘moved on to greener Edens’ (57) – thoughts and feelings which he translates into poetry in his ‘battered blue scribbler’ (56). Throughout her life, Aurora creates a series of ‘Wander’ books, forming collages from natural materials collected during her long walks on the barrens. Her images are not intended as a referential record of her wanderings, rather they express, through the creative re-configuration of found objects, the ‘transforming magic’ (314) that leads to her out-of-body experiences.

Later, her grand-daughter Sheila becomes a landscape painter of non-figurative scenes that portray Aurora as ‘both ghost and angel’ floating above the ‘imagined landscapes’ of a nevertheless recognisable Cape (298). All of these representational practices construct a ‘landscape of the imagination’ that begins in the character’s encounters with their physical environment, but which emphasises its magical, transformational qualities. Through her depiction of these various artistic processes, Clark posits Newfoundland as a place that inspires fantastic acts, dreams and stories.

Wonder in worlds beyond everyday material existence is conveyed through patterns of imagery, as well as through characterisation, plot and narrative focalisation. In the second half of the novel, Aurora’s son Stan’s fascination with ice and the world beneath the ocean extends the atmosphere of enchantment into the realm of scientific exploration. The imagery and descriptions of ice that recur in the novel construct an emotional and imagined geography as well as referring to a literal terrain: ‘Ice was solid but not immobile, and beneath the ice cap it flowed ceaselessly, imperceptibly opening up fissures and crevasses. Somewhere inside [Stan] a subterranean widening had taken place...’ (181). Although Stan’s work is about measuring ice scour and ice bergs, recording flow paths and rates of melt, his knowledge does not diminish or contain for him the mysteries within the ice or the ocean. Similarly, when he visits the wreck of the *Titantic* in a submarine he sees the ‘exotic beauty of a reef’ as well as a location for the collection of scientific samples, and he remembers that he is present in ‘a vast cemetery of unmarked graves’ (328). In this place, a psychic space ‘between the living and the dead’, Stan, keenly aware of his physical vulnerability to the ‘immensity of the sea’, sees his dying mother as ‘no more and no less

than a borealic shimmer' passing the submarine's window (329). This final fantastic image marries Clark's realistic description of the ocean bed with the emotional landscape of grief and sorrow figured through metaphors of ice, and the magical realm that she has mapped through Aurora's life story.

Clark's Newfoundland is, then, a place where magic occurs, where fairies may reside and where even sophisticated technologies such as computer imaging, IMAX photography, submarines and ground length radar - the tools of 'rational' science - provoke wonder in the physical environment. As such, *Latitudes* seems to aestheticize Newfoundland as the site of fantastic events, 'a world of difference'. However, unlike the 'enised' world of Johnston's *Colony*, Clark represents the island as connected to other places, spaces and histories. Clark's Newfoundland is a dynamic site in a network of economic, cultural and social relations that connects even the inhabitants of the remote Drook to St John's, England, New York, Italy and Ireland. At the beginning of the novel and the twentieth century, the Drook and the Cape are geographically isolated, but fishing and shipping routes link the settlements to a North Atlantic economy. During the Second World War, these connections are severed, but the presence of U boats, 'the planes droning above the convoys', and Canadian, American and British naval men, furnish a new series of relationships between the Cape and the wider world (54). The settlement grows to accommodate radio operators and loses members of its families in combat (55). In other words, Clark portrays a place and a community that are situated within wider economic and political relations which impact directly on the activities that take place locally. What Clark represents Doreen Massey and Pat Jess describe as the 'inevitable hybridity of places', whose 'character is always influenced by relations

and contacts with other places' (1995, 218). Conceptualising place in these terms prompts a dismantling of the 'here/there' binary that defines and privileges 'here' in opposition to an outside place. This binary operates within Johnston's image of Joey Smallwood as someone who requires a 'gap' or a 'gulf' between the island and the mainland as a literal and symbolic marker of his difference. In *Latitudes* places and the people who inhabit them retain specific cultural practices like Merla's manufacture of hooked mats, Francis's oral storytelling, and the beliefs in fairies, but they also respond to and are affected by the availability of university education, world events and technological change. Hence, the outport communities in Clark's novel are not static in time and space, but dynamic and mutable. The Drook is eventually abandoned as a place to live when the fish stocks decline and becomes reconfigured by locals as a leisure space popular as 'a weekend camp, a place to boil tea and have a cook-up' (Clark 2000, 262). By the end of the novel, the spatial practices taking place on the Cape have altered, and even Aurora, the character most closely associated with its physical environment and original community, has 'settled into another life...made herself over into someone else' (262).

The dynamism of Clark's Newfoundland and her portrayal of an ever-changing, adaptive culture counters the place-myths which perpetuate the notion of the island as a quaint cultural backwater or a wilderness space set apart from the ever-changing ways of urban life. Her generic choices also undermine these stereotypes: by blending social realism and the fantastic she both disrupts the reader's ability to read the novel mimetically, while creating a recognizable world in which myth and magic co-exist. Clark's re-enchantment of the island as a place where fairies are capable of kidnapping and confusing the unwary occurs within



a narrative that attends to the quotidian and the material with an acute eye. For one reviewer, the ‘surfeit of what’s-the-point detail...drags the narrative down like an anchor’ but this isn’t the first time that Clark’s ability to examine the minutiae of the everyday has been dismissed as ‘detail revealing little’ (Dann 2000, D8).<sup>9</sup> For me, Clark’s inclusion of everyday detail about activities such as child-care, house-work, relationships with neighbours, hobbies and minor local events, is part of her on-going effort to put words to the apparently mundane aspects of daily life. As readers, we are prompted by her descriptions to review the meaning and value of the mundane within the lives of Clark’s characters but also within our own daily activities. In this way Clark builds connections with her reader’s lives. She also foregrounds the significance of practices that are frequently privatised as belonging within the domestic sphere or which accrue low economic and social reward within western industrialised societies.

In *Latitudes of Melt* home-making tasks such as cooking, cleaning, repairing and decorating are a means through which Clark examines the gender dynamics within families and the significance of domestic ritual. At the same time, the descriptions contribute to the novel’s sense of place, by delineating interior spaces and home places that locate fictional characters and magical occurrences within a recognisable, ordinary setting. Different power relations operate in the families that Clark depicts. Merla and Francis, Aurora’s adopted parents, run their household by dividing tasks according to traditional gender roles: Merla cooks, washes clothes and sweeps the floor, while Francis fishes and chops wood. Later, Nancy’s early life with her English husband Phillip echoes this division but with the important difference that, away from the

---

Cape, Nancy's experience of home-making brings with it a sense of isolation and boredom. These emotions are not made explicit but emerge through Nancy's guarded accounts of daily life in letters to her parents and through Clark's matter of fact style of narration that is stripped of adjectives, adverbs and evaluative remarks. The detailing of domestic tasks often indicates important silences in her prose that the reader learns to recognise and decode: 'Nancy shaped up.... She learned to cook after a fashion.... She washed clothes in the sink and dried them on the wooden rack hanging from the kitchen ceiling. She darned socks and patched jackets and pants' (105). By contrast, Aurora and Tom in the early and later years of their marriage share chores and approach many of them as extensions of their creative interests. So, for instance, Tom writes Nancy about building a new bathroom and kitchen and Aurora asks for pressed flowers 'to glue on the cupboards' (75). At the time a university student in the city, Nancy is embarrassed by her mother's 'peculiar taste'. Later, after her miserable time in England as a housewife, she reassesses the 'rough edges' of outport life (292), along with her father's adherence to family traditions such as putting hoofprints on a snowy roof at Christmas. Nancy realises that such practices symbolise her parents' mutual devotion and articulate her own identification with the Cape as her home place.

Through the details of everyday life, Clark charts the work involved in creating that home place, and in maintaining family relationships. She distinguishes between drudgery and creativity, while suggesting how magic and fantasy might arise from the mundane to transport people beyond the temporal and spatial limits of the everyday: '[Aurora] couldn't keep her mind on a household task. If she was told to wash the dishes, she pretended the plates and cups were birds or fish...' (17). Similarly, berry-picking on the Barrens is an activity and a memory that

engenders Aurora's magical, out of body experiences in which she floats through the air (277, 315). Aurora's need for a strange terrain that transports her beyond her everyday world is counter-balanced in the novel by her daughter Nancy's scholarly interest in folklore. Through the character of pragmatic Nancy, Clark represents a different type of relationship to place-myth and the fantastic. Whereas Aurora's attachment to place is organised around modes of being, Nancy's sense of location is shaped by her desire to know about genealogy (who are Aurora's biological parents?), and to understand Newfoundland via local knowledge articulated through folklore, myth and material culture. Nancy's life describes the trajectory of decolonisation: as a university student in St John's she is ashamed of outport culture, and as a young wife she is initially thrilled to visit 'the Mother country' with her English husband. However, as a mature woman Nancy rejects both husband and imperial cultural taste in favour of investigating, collecting and preserving the kinds of local cultural practices that are frequently marginalised or destroyed by colonisation (Berland 1997, 78).

Through Nancy, Clark comments overtly on the process of myth-making and differentiates between insider and outsider standpoints of cultural practices. Nancy's work alerts her to the commodification of place and the peddling of place-myths to tourists, and 'she is suspicious of people who want to become Newfoundlanders because they naively regard the island as a panacea for troubled times' (257). Teaching during a sabbatical in Ireland, Nancy deliberately withholds information about Newfoundland folklore from her students because she does not 'want Newfoundland to be seen as an imitation of the tourist view of Ireland....Newfoundland fairies had a context uniquely their own' (291). Portrayed by Clark as someone who is sensitive to that context, Nancy's

academic pursuits are driven by both a personal sense of loss as the Cape, her home-place, changes and her concomitant recognition of social transformation occurring on a wider scale (122). Clark's deft shifts in narrative level and focalisation introduce a note of gentle amusement at Nancy's fervour as her mother, Aurora, reflects: 'she's on a mission to reclaim the outport life erased by the decline in the fishery and Confederation' (275). Here, Clark signals that the 'context' for both fairies and Merla's hooked mats is no longer everyday use in their original setting, but is more likely to be the tourist brochure or the urban art gallery where Nancy acts as curator for the exhibition of her grandmother's handiwork.

Clark's commentary on the construction and perpetuation of place-myths is at its most overt in the short section of the novel dealing with the relationship between Stan and Anna. To Stan's amusement, his Italian wife finds Newfoundland exotic because of 'the blinding purity of ice, the silvered fences and trees, the fogged voices of the drowned' (165). Stan, by contrast, associates these features of a winter landscape with physical danger rather than beauty. Though his intention to portray Newfoundland as 'barren and cold...inhospitable and unyielding' is explicit (163), Stan is unconscious of the way that he has framed Anna's vision of his 'homescape' by bombarding her with postcards of sublime scenes: 'pictures of Bell Island's rugged cliffs rearing out of Conception Bay, the bleak stone tower on Signal Hill' (163). Stan encourages in Anna, a native of Florence well versed in classical European visual aesthetics, a regime of looking that replicates the 'aesthetic traditions of the sublime and picturesque - ideological determinants of Canadian landscape inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (Hepburn 2001,72). Subsequently, Anna becomes 'fascinated by

[Newfoundland's] wildness' just as many Europeans and mainland Canadians have before her (163). If, as a reader, we have become enchanted by Clark's descriptions of icebergs, shipwrecks, isolated outports and towering cliffs, then Clark offers us an opportunity here to acknowledge the ideological implications and historic context of our romantic standpoint.

### Teasing the Tourists: Johnston's St John's

Such 'outsider' standpoints as Anna's – and Clark includes several, Nancy's English husband Philip providing another – render the peculiarity of Newfoundland, but also alert the reader to the process and history of exoticising the landscape. Clark's novel offers a range of subject positions for the reader through the employment of multiple narrators whose relationships to place differ considerably. Johnston, however, draws attention to the consumption and reproduction of particular place-myths and the limits of textual representation of place in a more covert manner. In *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* Wayne Johnston pulls off a reality trick in his portrayal of St John's that is most detectable to those with local, 'insider' knowledge. On first reading most 'come-from-away' readers like myself will happily buy (I use the term advisedly) Johnston's portrait of his native city, not least because his prose style, thumb-nail sketches of characters, and his attention to the city's moral and class geography echo Dickens' descriptions of nineteenth-century London. Indeed, at least one reviewer noted the resemblance (Ravvin 1999, 16), which is comforting to the non-Newfoundland reader well versed in the generic codes of the classic realist novel but less familiar with the streets and inhabitants of Canada's most eastern city. Johnson's portrait of St John's is presented for a dual audience: while he makes the city legible to the outsider reader, he alters

its topography in ways only detectable to local readers. I believe that this ‘doubled’ mode of representation signals the difficult balancing act of writing about culturally distinct but heavily mediated marginal places. The ‘slipperiness’ between opacity and transparency, legibility and illegibility that becomes apparent when a local interpretation of Johnston’s St John’s is considered, highlights how a ‘city is inseparable from its representations, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to them’ (Balshaw and Kennedy 2000, 3). Johnston’s attention to the city of local memory and the extant built environment, combined with his descriptions of a semi-fictionalised place, foregrounds the ‘traffic’ that occurs between psychic, physical and textual space. While he may be teasing the tourists and testing local readers, Johnston’s prose portrait suggests how cultural forms such as narrative fiction play their part in the production of space and place.

*Colony* begins with Fielding ‘remembering the city’ as it was in the early 1900s, nearly fifty years before her journal entry (4). Her elegiac narration reads the cityscape of 1949 as a palimpsest: ‘I like to remember what used to be where something else now stands, or what used to be where there is nothing now’ (4). The St. John’s of Fielding’s memory is barely differentiated from the countryside, and some of her images are positively bucolic: ‘animals were everywhere....Goats wandered about at will....Everyone milked them. For children, to go out milking was not much different than to go out picking berries.’ Street-sweepers, horses, wooden water tanks, ships crammed into the harbour and fish-flakes ‘arched over’ the streets (6): Johnston’s opening portrait of St John’s evokes the sights, smells and activities of a city that is virtually pre-industrial, and that has been transformed in the space of ‘one generation’ (7).

Fielding remembers in a state of reverie and wistfulness that, as John Urry explains, 'is not a matter of intellectual or positivistic observation, rather it involves fantasy, wish-processes and dreams. The city is the repository of people's memories and of the past; and it also functions as a receptacle of cultural symbols' (1995: 24). For the local reader, Fielding's description may articulate collective myths and memories inscribed in the streets and buildings such as the 'mansard roofs' indicating 'how far the fire burned in 1892' (4), and the 'premises of Harbour Drive' which once contained 'cod stacked storeys high' (6). Furthermore, Fielding's imagined reader, Smallwood, shares not only her memories of the early twentieth-century St John's, but also her life-long propensity for wandering through the city at night, enjoying the anonymity afforded by the dark. During these walks their day-time involvement with the city as journalist and political public figure are temporarily set aside in favour of a more personal mode of reflection and the distracted observation that helps to 'disrupt conservative cultural traditions' (Urry 1995, 24). Fielding's upper-class social status allies her with those traditions, but her habit of contemplating the city at night – sitting on the steps of the legislature housed in the 'old Colonial building', watching the lights coming on in the Battery houses and spotting 'the lantern lights of dories' putting out to sea (382) – offers her an alternative cultural narrative. If Fielding's night-time wanderings impress upon her a less elitist sense of the city's past, Smallwood's perambulations appear to confirm a disquietude at his social mobility. On the night of the second Confederation vote, Smallwood's intimate knowledge of a class geography of St John's, a colonial legacy that is challenged both by his own political success and the province's Confederation with Canada, is enacted in his walk to the Narrows. The cultural symbolism of buildings

established earlier in the novel is evoked as Smallwood hurries past the Newfoundland Hotel towards the safety represented by the Battery 'houses of the poor' (484).

For the non-local reader, Fielding's opening journal entry becomes a tour guide to a city only legible to those who can read its gaps and absences, restore vanished sounds and smells, and fill its streets with deceased members of the 'quality' and the 'scruff'. Fielding may as well be leading such a reader around a working museum or the film-set for a costume drama. For this is also a representation of the city fashioned by Johnston for easy consumption by outsiders accustomed to heritage tourism and images of Newfoundland's 'unspoilt shores' (*World Report* 2002). In a later description, focalized through Smallwood, Johnston conveys a vivid picture of the Battery and the warehouses along the harbour that incorporates information about how cod is dried, prepared and eaten (120-1). Smallwood's anthropological style of narration positions the reader as outsider-listener to his local and familial experience. The occasional 'you' of his dialogic address refers to those who share that experience: 'When you emerged from one of these coves, a gust of wind would hit you in the face as if you had just stepped outside from the cabin of a ship at sea' (121). The comparison made here restricts the frame of reference to sailors and coast-dwellers, rather than operating as an inclusive simile. Lending Smallwood the authoritative stance of local informant, Johnston keeps non-Newfoundlanders engaged in a detailed and highly believable depiction of the city.

Readers who share Smallwood's local knowledge, however, detect the reality trick. Bernice Morgan, author of the best-selling historical fiction of early nineteenth-century Newfoundland *Random Passage* (1992),



found herself unable to resist a comparison of Johnston's fictionalised St John's with the city she has always lived in. In her review of *Colony* for the Newfoundland literary journal, *TickleAce*, Morgan lists a number of misplaced and misnamed details that '[drove her] to distraction': 'he keeps referring to "the apron", tells us coves are little streets between Water Street and the Harbour Drive....[puts] crosses in Protestant homes, [moves a bridge in] from Kilbride, [has] Newfoundlanders strolling into Fort Pepperell in wartime)' and omits 'those rotting wooden wharves that were the stinking soul of St John's until the mid-1960's' (1999,103). An acute and self-conscious reader, Morgan is fully aware that she is not reading a biography, that Johnston's city is fictional and that she should not read it mimetically, but she is surely not alone in noting the mistakes and suspecting that 'townie nit-pickers' are being deliberately 'set up' by the author (105)? As Morgan points out, Fielding remarks of another author '... he, being a writer, is able to imagine so vividly that other people who have never been to Newfoundland find the book convincing and it sells quite well' (105). From Morgan's local standpoint, this comment clearly has a metafictional intent. It also exemplifies a 'canny' move by Johnston who, in the different ways outlined above, manages to engage non-Newfoundland readers with a persuasive fiction of St John's, while signalling the construction of his consumer-friendly representation to those with 'insider' knowledge. In doing so Johnston indicates self-awareness about his own contribution to the marketing and commodification of place – and the concomitant reproduction of certain place-myths - as a writer whose work circulates internationally. His 'doubled' portrait of St John's demonstrates how easily textual representations of reality can be attributed 'a false "epistemological precedence" over the realities of lived social space' – a point made by

Edward Soja who is concerned with the ways that ‘space can conceal relations of power’ (Balshaw & Kennedy, 3).

Paradoxically, Joey Smallwood’s controversial real-world reconfiguration of Newfoundland’s topography and social geography through the outpost resettlement programmes receives short shrift in *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Johnston’s Joey nevertheless exhibits a determination to chart, map and record the island through his cross-island journeys by foot (213ff), train (137), boat (346) and plane (452). Travelling ‘to escape’ his family responsibilities and humble origins, Smallwood is also attempting to escape Newfoundland’s colonial past (389), to deconstruct the map of England he learnt at Bishop Feild School, and to replace it with one of ‘the Republic of Smallwood’ (132). His earlier attempts to ‘reverse [the] psychological colonization’ instrumented by the Anglophile headmaster Reeves fail (Wyile 2002, 128), because ‘England had been so early imprinted on my brain that no amount of drawing other maps could supplant it’ (Johnston 1998, 89-90). As Herb Wyile points out, ‘many postcolonial texts deploy cartographic tropes to expose and deconstruct the imposition of colonial perception’ (2002, 40). Joey’s cartographic impulse is just one example of Johnston’s framing of Newfoundland as both an epistemological and ontological problem: a place that is difficult to know, especially through the established regimes of looking (347, 452, 485), and virtually impossible to ‘live up to’ (154). What language, which generic codes and modes of visual perception can convey this island without reproducing colonial models of representation or unwittingly contributing to the contemporary tourist imagery that erases the social geographies, cultural memories and class hierarchies visible to local communities? As Joey/Johnston concludes, ‘perhaps only an artist

can measure up to such a place or come to terms with the impossibility of doing so' (552).

\*\*\*\*

In a globalized world where spaces, particularly urban spaces located in industrialised countries, are often experienced as not so different from each other, an enchantment with places and place-myths that offer the possibility of unique place-based identities is frequently manifested through tourism, television viewing and reading. John Urry argues that 'as spatial barriers diminish so we become more sensitised to what different places in the world actually or appear to contain' (1995, 23). This process helps to explain why the rural and remote place, the binary 'other' of the metropolitan city, has become a more acute object of urbanite longing. In the early twenty-first century, it seems that Newfoundland's allure as a pristine wilderness space and as a location offering a slower, less complicated lifestyle is increasing, often as the direct result of film and television dramas that receive international circulation.<sup>10</sup> Literary fiction, as I have demonstrated through my discussion of *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and *Latitudes of Melt*, also plays a part in the tourist commodification of place and the perpetuation of well-established place-myths. However, writers such as Clark and Johnston construct imagined geographies of Newfoundland in novels that also encode and comment upon the history and consequences of the island's mythologization. Their 'strange terrains' embody the difficulties of representing place in fiction even as they articulate a powerful love of place borne out of lived experience and a familiarity with the songs, stories, images and tourist propaganda that mediate Newfoundland

differently for the local and non-local reader. Bringing their considerable literary talents to bear on the complex challenge of writing about a marginal and heavily mediated place, these two fine writers invite all their readers to review their perceptions and interpretations of the material island and its literary geographies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Herb Wyile (Acadia University) and Deborah Parsons (University of Birmingham) for their careful reading of an earlier version of this essay and their acute commentary upon it which was extremely helpful to me. Any remaining errors, weaknesses and inaccuracies are, of course, my responsibility. A version of this essay appeared in *Essays in Canadian Writing* 82 (2004), Special Issue: Newfoundland Literature, 21-50.

2. Are Wayne Johnston and Joan Clark 'Newfoundland writers'? Johnston, born and raised in Newfoundland, has lived in Toronto since 1989 and rejected the 'regional writer' label explicitly in an interview with *TickleAce* editor Bruce Porter (1994, 27). Clark, born in Nova Scotia and raised in the Maritimes, lived in Alberta for over twenty years and has been based in St John's for over fifteen. She is sensitive to the difference between islanders and those from away, a cultural designation that she explained to a mainland journalist through the story of *This Hour...*'s Mary Walsh 'dubbing' her 'an official Newfoundlander' at a book launch (*Globe and Mail*, 18 Nov., 2000, D8). For the purposes of

---

this essay Johnston and Clark are writers with an intimate knowledge of Newfoundland who have both written extensively about it.

3. 'A World of Difference' was an advertising slogan used by the province's Department of Heritage and Tourism in the first half of the 1990s. It also appeared on car license plates for vehicles registered in Newfoundland and Labrador. 'Canada's Far East' was another advertising slogan in circulation during the same period.

4. Spatial practice refers to a variety of social action from an individual's daily routine engagement with domestic, work and leisure sites, to the systematic creation of zones by a city council or regions by provincial governments forming an economic alliance. The important point about spatial practices for my purposes is that they should not be thought of as either only producing or consuming space.

5. In *Baltimore's Mansion* the writer's own first trip on the train takes place at his father's insistence precisely because it invokes 'pre-Confederate Newfoundland as nothing else could' (1999, 73). Since the line is about to be closed down, the loss of the railway symbolises a severing, both temporally and spatially, with the possibility of imagining Newfoundland as a nation-state.

6. Many thanks to Herb Wyile for highlighting to me this important function of Fielding's 'History'.

7. Mary Dalton's poem 'dead Indians' (1993, 57) provides a brief but eloquent critique of the attitudes and narratives that enable Newfoundlanders to 'mourn the Beothuk' whilst ignoring the contemporary issues raised by the Labrador Innu.

8. Joan Clark's children's novel *The Dream-Carvers* (1995), Bernard Assiniwi's *La Saga des Béothuks* (1996), and Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* (2001) are examples of other contemporary attempts to re-imagine Beothuk history.

9. See, for example, reviews of Clark's short story cycle *Swimming Toward the Light* at its first publication (1990) by Cynthia Sugars (1991) and Ann Jansen (1990), and my commentary upon this tendency to dismiss 'the details of a life' (Jansen 1990, 30) (Fuller, 2004).
10. After the release of Hallstrom's film of *The Shipping News* and the first broadcast of the TV mini-series adaptation of *Random Passage* by the CBC in January/February 2002, tourist enquiries apparently doubled. Press coverage of both films resulted in spin-off features: much of the journalism reiterated the place-myths discussed in this essay, see for example, Toughill in the *Toronto Star* (2001, A7); Edemariam in *The Irish Times* (2002).

## **Bibliography**

- Assiniwi, Bernard. *La Saga des Béothuks*. Montreal: Lemeac, 1997.
- Barnes, Trevor J. and James S. Duncan, eds. *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Balshaw, Maria and Liam Kennedy, eds. 'Introduction: Urban Space and Representation.' In *Urban Space and Representation*, edited by Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy. London: Pluto, 2000: 1-22.
- Berland, Jody. 'Space at the Margins: Colonial Spatiality and Critical Theory After Innis.' *Topia*. 1 (Spring 1997): 55-82.
- Clark, Joan. *The Dream-Carvers*. Toronto: Penguin, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Latitudes of Melt*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2000.
- Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001.
- Dalton, Mary. *Allowing the Light*. St John's, NFD: Breakwater, 1993.
- Dann, Moira. 'Foundered Foundling.' Review of *Latitudes of Melt* by

- Joan Clark. *The Globe and Mail*. November 18, 2000: D8.
- Duncan, James S. and Nancy G. Duncan. 'Ideology and Bliss: Roland Barthes and the Secret Histories of Landscape.' In *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape*. London: Routledge, 1992: 18-37.
- Edemariam, Aida. 'News from the Wasteland.' *The Irish Times*. February 23, 2002.
- Fuller, Danielle. *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.
- Goldie, Terry. *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989.
- Hallström, Lasse. *The Shipping News*. (Colombia Pictures & Miramax), 2001.
- Hepburn, Allan. "Images of a Wonder": Landscape and Tourism in Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*. *Essays on Canadian Writing* 73, 2001: 72-92.
- Jansen, Ann. Review of *Swimming Toward the Light*, by Joan Clark. *Quill & Quire* (June, 1990): 30.
- Johnston, Wayne. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Baltimore's Mansion: A Memoir*. Toronto: Random House of Canada. 1999.
- Lambert, Ellen Zetzel. *Placing Sorrow: A Study of the Pastoral Elegy Convention from Theocritus to Milton*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1976.
- Marchand, Philip. 'Newfoundland Dreams.' Interview with Wayne Johnston. *The Toronto Star*. October 22, 1998: A35.
- Massey, Doreen and Pat Jess. 'Places and Cultures in an Uneven World'

in *A Place in the World?* edited by Doreen Massey and Pat Jess.  
Milton Keynes and Oxford: Open University and Oxford University  
Press, 1995: 215-240.

Morgan, Bernice. *Random Passage*. St John's, NFD: Breakwater  
Press, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. Review of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, by Wayne  
Johnston. *TickleAce* 36, 1999: 102-105.

Murphy, Rex. 'Alas, Joey Smallwood was larger than fiction.'  
Review of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, by Wayne Johnston.  
*The Globe and Mail*. October 3, 1998: D15.

Overton, James. 1988. 'A Newfoundland Culture?' *Journal of  
Canadian Studies*. 23 (3), 1998: 5-22.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture  
and Development in Newfoundland*. St John's, NFD: Institute of  
Social and Economic Research, no. 56, 1996.

Porter, Bruce. 'The Time of His Life: An Interview with Wayne  
Johnston.' *TickleAce* (27), 1994: 14-29.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Facing the Gulf.' Special Confederation 50 Issue.  
*TickleAce* 37: 6-7.

2000.

Proulx, E. Annie. *The Shipping News*. New York: Simon &  
Shuster, 1993.

Ravvin, Norman. 'Within the Tribal Circle.' Review of *The  
Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, by Wayne Johnston. *Books in  
Canada*. (February) 28.1:

11. 1999.

Renzetti, Elizabeth. 'Between the Rock and a hard place.'

Interview with Wayne Johnston. *The Globe and Mail*. October  
22, 1998: D1-2.



- Rieti, Barbara. *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland*. St John's, NFD: ISER, 1991.
- Rose, Gillian. 'Place and Identity: a sense of place.' In *A Place in the world? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, edited by Doreen Massey and Pat Jess. Milton Keynes and Oxford: Open University and Oxford University Press, 1995: 87-132.
- Rothman, Claire. 'Writer left the Rock but it hasn't left him?' Interview with Wayne Johnson. *Montreal Gazette*. January 29, 2000: J1-2.
- Shields, Rob. *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Smith, John E. *Random Passage*. Toronto and Dublin: CBC/RTE, 2001.
- Sugars, Cynthia. Review of *Swimming Toward the Light*, by Joan Clark. *Canadian Literature* (131), 1991: 238-240.
- Toughill, Kelly. 'When Hollywood came to Town.' *Toronto Star*. 19 December, 2001: A7.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.
- Turbide, Diane. 'Ice Queen.' Interview with Joan Clark. *The Globe and Mail*. November 18, 2000: D8-9.
- Urry, John. 'Time and Space in the Consumption of Place.' *Consuming Places*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995:1-30.
- Whalen, Tracy. "'Imagine That!' A Social Semiotic Analysis of a Newfoundland Tourism Campaign.' *Canadian Issues*, 20, 1998: 111-124.
- World Report: Newfoundland and Labrador. The Independent*. Supplement. October 5, 2002.

Wyle, Herb. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002.