

Fluid Possibilities

Theorizing Life Writing at the Confluence of Decolonial and Post-Colonial Approaches in Newfoundland and Labrador

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Fluid Possibilities:
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Vicki Hallett

A nation/colony/province like Newfoundland can only be read postcolonially, for such a reading strategy is the only one that will respect the amalgam of “truths” that is Newfoundland. (Chafe 333)

The tensions between settler cultures and indigenous nations must also be written; otherwise, the notion of a “postcolonial” nation state that has exceeded its colonial history becomes nothing more than an extraordinary fiction. (Emberley xiv)

Movements of water and movements on water — these have always been defining forces shaping Newfoundland and Labrador. The frigid Labrador Current flows south from the Arctic and meets the Gulf Stream, continuously eroding the edges of this place, forming and reforming the shores to which Indigenous and settler populations have gravitated for centuries in search of the rich food sources provided by these same currents (Macpherson). Since time immemorial, serpentine rivers have brought life-giving water and carved out essential pathways to the sea, for both the island of Newfoundland and the larger territory of Labrador.

It seems appropriate to envision a blending of theoretical currents in order to make meaning from the history of such a place. If decolonial and post-colonial approaches to the interpretation of life writing are allowed to flow together, might they create a rich new swell of insight into pre-colonial and continuing colonial realities,¹ and thus help us work towards a decolonized future? Can this particular surge of “theoretical promiscuity” (Simpson and Smith 13) avoid “the academic tendency to define and conclude” (Fagan et al. 37) and instead buoy us with more open possibilities for complex identifications and future directions?

My engagement with Doris Saunders’s collection of personal essays, letters, and speeches wades into these turbid waters. It begins with the assertion that places create and are created by the people who live in them, and by the stories we tell about ourselves. It is enhanced by the belief that such study needs to be anchored in particular localities so that the totalizing discourse of colonialism is not reproduced in any analysis. As a settler Newfoundlander working with the life stories of an Indigenous Labradorian, I am cognizant of both my privilege and my need for humility (Tuhiwai Smith, 5) in this endeavour.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, as in most settler-colonial societies, pre-colonial history is often relegated to museums and the time before “real” history began, or is discussed in predominantly archaeological terms. However, the peoples here share a particular colonial history, albeit with very different experiences of power, agency, and control. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians also share a future, one that is yet to be determined but that can be different from our past if we are able to “sharpen our senses and sense of how to track the tangibilities of empire as effective histories of the present” (Stoler 29). But we also must remember that the processes enabling the co-constitutive relationships of people and place do not begin and end with colonialism.

Within Canada, as Grace Ouellette and Josephine Wuttunee remind us, “Not only do Aboriginal people have to live within the confines of the Indian Act, they are also subject to provincial and federal laws. The process of colonialism is still very much alive” (31). In this

province, due to a peculiarity of the 1949 agreement that brought Newfoundland and Labrador into the Canadian federation, Inuit, Innu, Métis, and Mi'kmaq peoples have lived without the "benefit" of the Indian Act, or a treaty system, but have been subject to provincial laws. This has led to tremendously uneven processes of negotiation between these peoples and federal and provincial governments. For example, the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation formed in September 2011, but under its agreement with the federal government, "federal agencies will determine social and political orders and all rights to lands and resources are to be forfeited" (Robinson 383). And while Inuit in northern Labrador now live under partial self-government in Nunatsiavut, southern Inuit of NunatuKavut (formerly Inuit Métis) are still fighting to be recognized by the provincial and federal governments and their land claim is unresolved. As a result, as Amelia Reimer of the St. John's Native Friendship Centre remarks, "because of the unique history of Newfoundland and Labrador, . . . many people have had their Aboriginal or Indigenous backgrounds denied, shamed, silenced. A lot of people have had to fight very, very, very hard for their Indigenous acknowledgement" (Quinn, par. 2).

One such fighter was Dr. Doris Saunders (1941–2006). Saunders was the founding editor of *Them Days*, a magazine begun in 1975 to record Labrador's cultural history. For her tireless and underpaid work of recording, telling, and crafting the story of Labrador's past for almost three decades, Saunders received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Memorial University (1994) and the Order of Canada (1986). She was a woman of mixed Inuit, Innu, and European heritage. Throughout her rich archive of personal documents, Saunders refers to herself variously as an Inuit woman, a Settler (which in Labrador means a person of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry), and an Aboriginal, but first and foremost as a Labradorian.

The complex boundary dispute that gave rise to the split between northern and southern Inuit land claims is one that bears the imprint of colonial policies carried over into the post-colonial era — the type that Gloria Bird has described as "the policy of dividing and conquering,

keeping us bickering among ourselves in order to distract us from the larger issues that affect our lives” (27). Saunders became embroiled in these disputes in the late 1980s and 1990s and found herself on the outside of an imaginary line that defined the border of Inuit lands in northern Labrador. In her ensuing fight with the board of the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA), which would eventually become the Nunatsiavut Government, Saunders wrote multiple letters, passionate entreaties, and denunciations to the LIA board of directors, the media, and members of the provincial and federal governments. In one such missive to the Board of Directors of the LIA in 1991, Saunders wrote:

I was born and grew up in Cartwright, but my father told me even when I was a little child about my heritage. He had so much pride in his roots, which had been passed on to him by his mother. Do any of you realize how unique it was, and is, for people, who by fate were removed from their ancestral [*sic*] areas, to maintain such a pride? It is unique but not impossible. . . . I am secure in the knowledge of who I am and what I represent. (Saunders Collection, File #32)

Such pieces demonstrate why the archive of letters, essays, and speeches that Saunders left behind are so vital, because they give a first-person account of how pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial processes affected her life and her place-based identity. This multifaceted identity was expressed through its opposition to both Newfoundland and Canadian cultural hegemony and colonization, and by the “complex and contentious task” (Fagan et al. 36) of defining an Indigenous nation. It was also outlined through what Indigenous literary theorist Kristina Fagan has termed the “Labrador literary tradition” (49), an Aboriginal tradition that grew in relation to the unique historical, social, and cultural milieu of the place and its people.

An engagement with the richness and complexity of Saunders’s life writing, with its deep currents of history and storytelling, requires a “strong sense of the intimacies of identity formation, how subjects

are formed and reformed in relation to others, with unpredictable intersections, connections, and leakage between” (Whitlock 34). But more than that, it necessitates the disruption of what Indigenous and gender studies scholar Mishuana Goeman terms the “settler-colonial grammar of place” (2014, 236) by examining Indigenous women’s life narratives as evolving configurations of relationships to time, space, and place. Blended together, these ideas help us navigate how subject positions and subjectivities are continually co-created within and through the spaces and stories we inhabit, including the space of the “academic industrial complex” (Smith 214).

These spaces and stories are not finished; they are alive, heterogeneous, and fluid, continually flowing into those of the self and others — thus not knowable in their entirety. This “not knowing” is anathema to the colonial drive to control through knowledge, expressed most succinctly through map-making. Doris Saunders understood that she was part of the remaking or, in Goeman’s terms, the Indigenous “(re)mapping” (2013, 3), of Labrador — that Labrador was a space that had complexly constructed colonial boundaries, but that it also had much more. Saunders knew it was a place that was defined by the stories of the people who lived there, by their everyday practices and traditional knowledge, and that this was an ongoing, continually occurring set of processes — Labrador was not finished. In a speech delivered at the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW) in 1989, Saunders concluded by saying, “I hope that through *Them Days* we can move into the ever-changing world and not forget our past” (Saunders Collection, File #16).

For Saunders, building *Them Days* was akin to building Labrador and Labrador identity. It was her life’s goal to comprehend more completely how her homeland was forged, and to share that knowledge both inside and outside Labrador. In her address to Memorial University graduates in 1994, the newly minted Dr. Doris Saunders said this about the foundation of the magazine: “The idea was to let the rest of the world, and in particular, the island portion of our province understand the real Labrador as experienced by the people of Labrador”

(qtd. in Fitzhugh x). Her other goal, one embedded within her life and life writing, was to help Labradorians come to know themselves, and the unique place they call home.

This is a land that is thought by many, if they think of Labrador at all, to be a harsh and unforgiving territory. In fact, it is still sometimes described in terms first used by Jacques Cartier in 1534, who called the place he witnessed only from the safe preserve of his ship, “the Land God gave to Cain.” Yet, for the Innu and Inuit who have called this place home for countless generations, Labrador is known as Nunatsiavut, Nitassinan, and/or NunatuKavut — all roughly meaning “our land” or “our beautiful land” (Nunatsiavut Government, NunatuKavut). It is a place rich in natural bounty, a land that provides both spiritual and bodily sustenance. Innu elder Elizabeth Penashue says this about the land around the Lower Churchill River, where the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric development is currently underway: “It’s hard to believe it will all be under water. So many people hunt and fish and trap there. . . . It’s not a playground. It’s a spiritual land for the Innu, a place for our traditional performances” (250). Such relationships with the land do not play a role in provincial legislative decisions about Labrador’s future.

For the Newfoundland government, Saunders suspected, the union of the two portions of the province has been a marriage of convenience — offering the island access to natural resources, such as minerals, lumber, and hydroelectricity, while garnering little in the way of compensation for Labrador and its people. This has created a tense intra-relational dynamic within the province, which is visible in numerous places in Saunders’s writing. In the aforementioned speech to CRIAW, Saunders said, “I don’t think the distant government in St. John’s ever saw Labrador in terms of people but saw it more as a storehouse of resources which could benefit Newfoundland” (Saunders Collection, File #16). Saunders was even more blunt in a presentation to a provincial policy forum in 1992, when she decried what she saw as the despicable treatment of Labrador by Newfoundland, calling its governance “colonial” and likening its racism to that of apartheid-era South Africa (Saunders Collection, File #1).

As well, Saunders wanted to change what she saw as the disproportionate influence of non-Labradorians on her homeland. She wrote about the population of Labrador and broke it down into four categories: “1000 Inuit, 850 Indians, 10,500 Settlers, 24,500 Outsiders” (Saunders Collection, File #16). Saunders was keenly aware of how those identity markers sometimes worked to cleave divisions within Labrador and beyond it. For her, one of the key changes that she wanted to see was for Labradorians to unite and work for a better future for their homeland. As she wrote in response to a conference on “Labrador in the 80s,” what she desired to see in Labrador 10 years hence was “Unity between the different groups in Labrador which would give a stronger voice. This would give us local control and put us on the road to a regional government. I would like to see more Labradorians standing up and being heard, so that if there is a conference in the nineties it will be 80% Labradorians and 20% transients” (Saunders Collection, File #1).

Saunders labelled herself different things at various times in her life. But throughout all of her writings one label was consistent — “Labradorian.” As she put it, “I am a native Labradorian of Inuit, Indian and white descent, a Labrador Settler” (Saunders Collection, File #1). For Saunders, the label “Labradorian” was political because it signified a unifying banner under which Indigenous and non-Indigenous could unite against the colonial oppression and neglect of Newfoundland and Canada. This label was also a cultural and familial one, and could not be based on a colonizer/colonized binary. Instead, Saunders’s identity was rooted in an Indigenous tradition in Labrador, one that took its inspiration from the diverse cultures that populated its shores. Saunders most clearly identified this tradition through her literary foremothers, her great aunts Elizabeth Goudie and Margaret Baikie who published their autobiographical reflections in the 1970s, and her great-great-grandmother Lydia Campbell, whose diary-like *Sketches of Labrador Life* first appeared in the St. John’s newspaper the *Evening Herald* in 1895.

Literary theorist, and member of NunatuKavut, Kristina Fagan

writes about this as the “Labrador literary tradition,” and says that it must be analyzed using more sophisticated tools than those of most post-colonial theory, which do not pay enough heed to the “social context, to the ways in which literature emerges out of and functions within Aboriginal communities” (51). For Fagan and others, writing about Aboriginal authors like Lydia Campbell means taking stock of the ways in which she was valued in her own community as a woman, an elder, a cultural producer, a storyteller, and a woman “who could turn her hand to anything,” as the phrase often goes in Labrador (and not incidentally in Newfoundland as well). This stock-taking, in turn, requires us to stop thinking in false dichotomies, positioning Indigenous cultures as always, and only, oppositional to those of colonizing cultures. It also necessitates a reassessment of the colonial encounter as the most important and all-encompassing relationship of Aboriginal peoples’ existences. Instead, opposition and/or co-operation between Native peoples and Europeans can be factored in as one relationship among many, and not always the most definitive, of those. Thus, when Fagan writes about Campbell and her depictions of late nineteenth century Labrador, she discusses not assimilation but a “blending of cultures that has been part of daily life and identity for the Inuit Métis” (52).

Indeed, any analysis of Saunders’s writing, as emerging from this tradition, cannot ignore the cultural practices that predate colonial contacts. As Indigenous literary scholar and award-winning author Thomas King observes, “[T]he idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression” (1990, 1).

And yet, wouldn’t an engagement with Saunders’s writing be further enhanced by concepts such as post-colonial literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone,” which is made up of “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4)? This intermingling allows us to see that the encounter between European

men and Inuit women (in this case) was not simply a relation of domination, but one in which there were complex power dynamics, mutual dependencies, and cultural exchanges. The tradition of women's writing that emerged from this encounter was in English and participated (in some ways) in a European institution of autobiographical writing, but it also ran counter to that institution in that it was written by women of Indigenous ancestry, focused on the "mundane" aspects of women's lives and those of their extended families, and carried on storytelling traditions predating European contact.

Robin McGrath, writing about Inuit women's autobiographies, finds not only the influence of Christian missionaries but also lingering pre-colonial cultural elements. According to McGrath, the history of literacy in Inuit communities in Labrador, which began with Moravian missionaries in the late 1700s, took a distinct trajectory largely because of the nomadic lifestyle of the Inuit and their approach to the printed word as a useful tool in everyday life. Thus it was that, "in Labrador, literacy was not confined to established institutions but was broadly based in the community as a whole very early on in the contact era" (37). Indeed, it was largely women like Lydia Campbell who taught their children how to read and write.

Saunders understood this blending (or as Pratt would put it, "transculturation") as essential to her identity, and to Labrador's identity as well. She saw herself as intimately connected to her long line of ancestors — men and women who had hunted, fished, trapped, knitted, sewed, raised children, built houses and communities, and told stories. As Saunders told the graduating class of Memorial University in 1994, the stories of Labrador emanated from pre-colonial days and were irrevocably impacted by the arrival of Europeans. She said, "Women who married white men lost their names. . . . They were forced to speak a foreign language, and their children were raised to ignore the heritage of their mothers. . . . Fortunately some — like my great-great-grandmother — passed stories on to her [*sic*] children and grandchildren, who passed them on to theirs and so on, until today, and I am now passing those stories on to my grandchildren" (qtd. in Fitzhugh x–xi).

Thomas King says that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, 2). Certainly, Saunders would have appreciated that remark and understood its deep significance. She was a devoted teller, collector, and publisher of stories that she felt made her who she was, had made Labrador what it was, and could help Labradorians both remember where they came from and envision their future. As Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes assert, these kinds of processes are the very stuff of decolonization because “decolonization . . . is alive and vibrant, being theorized and enacted in Indigenous communities around the globe through practices such as story telling” (i).

So, in order to “respect the amalgam of ‘truths’ that is Newfoundland” (Chafe 333), it is imperative to remember that the innumerable movements of/on water that have shaped and been shaped by Newfoundland and Labrador continue their work in various ways. And perhaps the greatest mark of respect would be to continually query these “truths” through ongoing theoretical work. To engage effectively with the stories that make us who we are is to immerse ourselves in a similarly fluid merging of decolonial and post-colonial approaches to the study of life writing. Such readings remain open to what Helen Buss calls “the demands of multiplicity” (43) and to what we do not or cannot know today, and may allow for more complex, mutual dialogues towards a decolonized future.

Note

- 1 This reference to “continuing colonial realities” indicates the slippery nature of the term “post-colonial.” As scholars such as Anne McClintock, Terry Goldie, Taiaiake Alfred, Jeff Corntassel, and Laura Moss have articulated, continuing legacies of colonialism mark Canadian realities. Canada is a settler-colonial state, and whether those realities are the numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, the intergenerational traumas of residential schools, or continuing treaty negotiations, the notion that Canada is a “post-colonial” nation — in the literal sense of “post” meaning “after” — is a fiction. This makes

discussions of post-colonial theory tricky at the best of times, even trickier. But, as Terry Goldie has articulated, in theoretical approaches to literature, “The resonance of the ‘postcolonial’ is in the text and in the author of the text but also in the reading and the reader of the text” (308). Thus, in this complex terrain, “post-colonial” remains a fraught term, and as one thoughtful reviewer of this piece put it, is perhaps best understood in historical terms “as a process.”

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