

# Ainsley Hawthorn, ed. Land of Many Shores: Perspectives from a Diverse Newfoundland and Labrador

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Ainsley Hawthorn, ed. *Land of Many Shores: Perspectives from a Diverse Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2021. ISBN 978-1-55081-896-3

*Land of Many Shores* is a diverse and inclusive anthology held together by its emphasis on the importance of stories and the act of unlearning.

The book begins with an effective preface by the editor, Ainsley Hawthorn, “a cultural historian, author, and multidisciplinary artist raised in Steady Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, and now based in St. John's” (227). “For a people renowned for pride in our heritage, we have a staggeringly limited view of our history and society” (1), Hawthorn claims. She further asserts that “[b]y dismissing the possibility that people born elsewhere in the world could ever qualify as Newfoundlanders, they set the stage for the exclusion of later immigrants from our understanding of Newfoundland identity” (4). Here, Hawthorn deconstructs the belief that, for the most part, Newfoundlanders are “a group of English and Irish descendants” (1).

By their very inclusion, the 24 stories/personal essays in this text support Hawthorn's prefatory remarks, as does the equitable amount of space given to each voice. I wish I could quote from, and draw attention to, each contributor to meet the high standards that Breakwater Books has set with this publication, but limited space does not permit.

Overall, *Land of Many Shores* questions and deconstructs binaries, exposing the fact that dichotomies do not allow for an understanding of the sophistication of human experience. “I'm my own prototype,” Julie Bull asserts in her poem “Where I'm From,” the opening piece to the collection. Bull, “a queer, non-binary Inuk artist from NunatuKavut”

(226), sets an important tone and critical stage for the voices that follow her and that dismantle a belief in restrictive categories.

Gemma Hickey, who is no stranger to the Newfoundland literary scene and who is a “celebrated human rights activist from Newfoundland and Labrador” (228), explains that they “came to the realization that claiming an identity within a binary constricted [them] to a singular gender script rooted in coloniality” (22). The rejecting of binaries is now fundamental in conversations surrounding gender and sexuality, and Daze Jeffries, whose contribution focuses on challenges facing the trans community — in particular, the challenges she faced and faces — describes her younger self as being “[p]ushed and pulled between senseless logics of binary gender” (151). Damaging dichotomies are not only addressed in pieces governed by conversations about gender, however. Michelle Butler Hallett, “a novelist, history nerd, disabled person, and an ankylosing spondylitis patient” (226), draws attention to the fact that “disability is not a competition, and most of all, disability is not a binary” (96). She describes what she alludes to in the title of her piece, “You’re Not ‘Disabled’-Disabled”: “[f]ar too often, when I am driving my own car and getting out of it in a blue spot, people watch me. This does not happen when I get out of the passenger door. It’s as though my being able to drive while hanging a disabled parking permit in my car is deeply offensive” (92). Her claim that her “identity as a disabled person exist[s] on a spectrum, not a binary” (97) echoes, in perhaps a non-transparent way, what Stephen Miller, who has “experience with opiate addiction and incarceration” (230), describes: “[m]y time in prison solidified the idea in my mind that I was no longer part of the same society most inhabit” (125). The harmful dichotomy of “us” and “them,” which burgeoned with the emergence of post-colonial criticism in the late 1980s and 1990s in Canada and elsewhere, is thus seriously challenged in different and important ways in *Land of Many Shores*.

A belief in the power and importance of stories is also woven throughout this anthology. Jewish Newfoundlander and celebrated author Robin McGrath reminds readers that “books and beliefs can travel where people cannot” (50). There is both warning and solace

here. Stories that derive from a limited understanding of what constitutes Newfoundlanders and Labradorians can create damage, as Hawthorn outlines in her preface: “[t]o dismiss [diverse] experiences is to impoverish ourselves” (6). However, the resilience of stories and beliefs, carried through oral or written means, can help maintain cultures and build strength. In her excellent overview of Baltic history in the province, “Newfoundland’s Offer: How the Baltic People Came to Corner Brook in the 1950s,” Ilga Leja, “born in Germany, the daughter of Latvian parents displaced by the Second World War” (229), points to stories and cultural practices as guardians of culture: “[l]ike Newfoundland, which had its own unique culture fostered in its outports and recorded in its folksongs and folklore, so, too, Latvia . . . hung on to its identity by relying on the ‘dainas’ (Latvian folksongs) and Latvian mythology” (32).

I am reminded here of Christine Poker’s contribution, “My Visit,” which, through the principles and foregrounding of storytelling itself, reveals the importance of stories. Poker, “an Innu filmmaker from Natuashish, Labrador” (231), begins her piece in the following manner: “I’m going to tell you a story about my visit to the Eeyou community in Quebec called Chisasibi” (181). Poker’s story is rich and offers many truths, but it is Poker’s retelling of “a story about Kautetihumat, the man who went to live with caribou” (184), which is especially poignant. As Poker maintains, “[t]his is the story that the Innu *believe*” (188; emphasis added). It is the recognition here that stories are foundations of belief, that they are foundations for seeing the world in a certain way, that they are foundations guiding and determining actions, which is of paramount importance. If diverse stories are not told, and, just as importantly, if they are not listened to, then the world is less rich. Moreover, harm can often attend a myopic focus.

Histories are such stories. For example, Ivan J. White, who “[hails] from the Mi’kmaq Community of Flat Bay . . . [and] is an emissary for his culture, heritage, and people” (233), maintains the following: “You say history is written by the victors. But what a hollow victory it is to oppress and have control over a people that welcomed you to your new

home” (63). Indeed, part of the great loss here is not having listened to unfamiliar stories that came long before any boats broke the shores of old worlds incorrectly deemed new. Stories carry knowledge, lessons, morals, ways of knowing, and much more.

There are many more dangers if a diversity of stories and experiences are not listened to, shared, or sought out. In her powerful contribution, “Black Motherhood and Womanhood: Resistance and Resilience,” Delores V. Mullings, “an Associate Professor and Interim Dean of Undergraduate Programs at Memorial University in the School of Social Work” (230), “share[s] [her] experience of being a Black mother and an anti-Black racism and anti-racist activist living on the Rock” (99). As she explains, “[t]he most challenging part of [her] life in St. John’s has been [her] role as a Black mother trying to guide a young Black woman to understand her place in society” (100). Mullings speaks of the incredible racism she has also faced working at Memorial University. She inevitably points to the field of education as an important tool for using stories to break up divisions. In particular, she notes that “Black children need to see themselves positively reflected in their surroundings, books, education, teachers, and in the media” (101). Mullings’s assertion is remindful of the conversation Susan Rose has with her readers about same-sex rights in “A Rainbow Revolution Is Coming.” Rose, who “worked as a Special Education teacher in St. John’s from 1985 to 2006” and who, “[i]n 1992 . . . began to lobby government for 2SLGBTQI rights in the education system” (232), provides daunting statistics about queer students whose realities are not included in their daily educational lives: “[o]ur youth who do not see themselves reflected in their curriculum are four times more likely to attempt suicide” (178). What a powerful and disturbing testimony to the fact that educators, families, friends, and colleagues, for example, need to challenge dominant narratives.

It is the importance of both learning anew and unlearning to which *Land of Many Shores* points. Its very existence is invested in these very things. In her paper “Popcorn for the Blind,” Anna Malone, “a visually impaired Guide Dog handler” (229), hammers this point

home: “[o]ld views and beliefs can be replaced, but only when what people learned years ago is unlearned today” (41–42).

Part of a review often reveals weaknesses, but I’m not sure I can do this. This is an important collection, and it is also a responsible one. The book begins with a list of resources, such as contacts for help lines and offices, to indicate where some can turn should they need help negotiating life stories similar to those shared in this collection. And *Land of Many Shores* is a beautiful book. The cover designer has represented the spirit of mainland and ocean with vibrant orange and the colours of the wild Atlantic. Hopefully, this book will be adopted by educators in both high schools and universities not only to help all learn together but also to help all recognize the importance of unlearning.

## Note

1. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1989), is often considered to be a seminal text in the first stage of post-colonial literary criticism.

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