

(RE)IMAGINED COMMUNITIES:
ANNIE PROULX'S NEWFOUNDLAND 25
YEARS AFTER *THE SHIPPING NEWS*

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ABSTRACT

A quarter-century has passed since Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* won the Pulitzer Prize and kindled an international interest in Newfoundland, and in that time, the island has fostered a tourism industry catering to those expecting the quaint seaside villages of Proulx's novel. This paper re-evaluates Proulx's 1993 work, especially its imagination of Newfoundland as a geographically peripheral location at the edge of rapid economic change. The novel works through its internal newspaper, the *Gammy Bird*, to depict a community's self-representation as resistance to outside economic and cultural forces, often framing traditional 'native' storytelling against modern, fact-driven journalistic conventions. Yet, *The Shipping News* is not a native text to Newfoundland, and its fictional reimagination of the island accomplishes the same outside obfuscation it ascribes to contemporary journalistic practice.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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KEYWORDS

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In Annie Proulx's 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Shipping News*, an American blow-in named Quoye returns to his ancestral Newfoundland, determined to start a new life. That includes a job reporting for the local newspaper, the *Gammy Bird*, and when Quoye meets with publisher Jack Buggit for his first day, Jack explains to him that he has two tasks. One: he must go weekly to Killick-Claw's port for a list of ingoing and outgoing ships. And two: he should make sure they can 'run a front-page photo of a car wreck every week, whether we have a wreck or not' (Proulx 1993: 69). Not ethical journalism, to say the least—but Jack Buggit is a former fisherman whose livelihood has disappeared with the cod, and he's no stickler for accuracy or objectivity.

In Proulx's Newfoundland, accuracy and objectivity are the concerns of outsiders. Fact-driven, objective journalistic practice is imagined as an attendant cultural practice of a global economic order entering Newfoundland in the form of oil investment and foreign fisheries. In this paper, I'll suggest Proulx uses the form of the local newspaper to imagine a community's self-representation as a matter of maintaining traditional, contrafactual discourses against the encroachment of these outside forces. Media scholars have linked an emphasis on objectivity or factuality to the profit-making imperative of newspapers in the 20th century (Muhlmann 2008; Teel 2006), and the novel takes up this idea of fact-making as an operation of capital expansion of industry into Newfoundland. However, I argue against simply reading *The Shipping News* as demonstrative of fiction's implacability in maintaining cultural practices; despite its inherent fictionality, the novel itself has obscured Newfoundlander communities in ways like those it imagines for oil investment and fact-based journalism. I analyse one climactic scene—Quoye's argument over an article about the picture of an oil tanker—to demonstrate how the novel's emphasis on fictionality in journalism helps to collapse distinctions between novels and news as textual categories.

The Shipping News is one of countless novels about finding one's ancestral roots and the impossibility of returning home. One of the most captivating features of the novel is the *Gammy Bird's* status as a particularly 'native' representative of the community into which the protagonist must integrate. In many ways, Quoye's success as a newspaper reporter is understood as a direct corollary to the novel's bildungsroman. Critics have written at length about the ways that Proulx's meticulous research methods produce the novel's myriad details of life on the rocky island—from bakeapples to screech-ins—but it is the form of the local newspaper that allows the imagined community of Killick-Claw to talk about itself, especially in terms of the economic disruption threatening the island. Jack tells Quoye that he started the *Gammy Bird* after promising the Canadian

government he'd create jobs for 50 of his fellow displaced fishermen in exchange for government funding:

They sent me off to Toronto to learn about the newspaper business. They give me money. What the hell, I hung around Toronto what, four or five weeks, listening to them rave at me about editorial balance, integrity, the new journalism, reporter ethics, service to the community. Give me the fits. I couldn't understand the half of what they said. Learned what I had to know finally by doing it right here in my old shop. I been running *Gammy Bird* for seven years now, and the circulation is up to thirteen thousand, gaining every year. All along this coast. Because I know what people want to read about. And no arguments about it. (Proulx 1993: 67)

Even though journalism is the new work replacing fishing in Jack's life, the *Gammy Bird* is agnostic to the standards of contemporary mainstream journalism. Jack publishes fake ads, encourages his staff to plagiarise international stories they hear on the radio, and makes editorial decisions based on his anecdotal sense of the community's desires. Jack, yearning to maintain his cultural identity, has taken on the money from the new economy and its wealth of readers—'thirteen thousand, gaining every year'—without replicating its journalistic norms, opting instead for a paper that sensationalises 'Blood, Boats and Blowups' (Proulx 1993: 158). In doing so, he aims to maintain a sense of Newfoundland's traditional premodern outport communities, before foreign oil investment and overfishing bottomed out the economy.

This essay seeks to re-evaluate Proulx's representation, of both the *Gammy Bird* and Newfoundland, given the fact that her novel—more than any locally produced newspaper—has altered both perception and economic reality in the province in the 25 years since its release. Readers and critics have celebrated *The Shipping News* for its depiction of the harsh Newfoundland landscape and sense of fancy, but locals have bristled at the creative liberties that saddle Newfoundlanders with parochial stereotypes. These 'readers continue to read for realism and subject themselves to its framing', one critic points out, and considering their precarious economic position, Newfoundlanders might be especially concerned with 'the politics of identity and place, undoubtedly a serious issue for those being represented, but also for those interpreting such representations' (Scanlon 2008: 101). Following the book's popular success, Newfoundland's Memorial University set up various programs aimed at debunking or offering alternatives to Proulx's descriptions of Newfoundland life (Scanlon 2008: 106), which often exploit—or at least indulge—the peculiarities of local linguistic and cultural practice. The real

Newfoundland is not nearly so quaint, nor its inhabitants nearly so provincial, as Proulx's novel might suggest.

But in any case, Proulx's work is often regarded as a revival of literary regionalism, and though she was not native to the Canadian province, her version of Newfoundland, with its seal flipper pies and romantic whale sightings, has spurred a Newfoundland tourist industry keen on reproducing the culture detailed in her novel. The literary success of *The Shipping News* added to the island's growing dependence on tourism, in part obscuring any authentic Newfoundland with the tourism industry's desire to provide a Proulx-esque version to travellers (Lerena 2015: 23). The cod moratorium of 1992 gutted Newfoundland's fishing industry at roughly the same time Proulx's novel inspired foreign tourists to trace Quoye's footsteps, which only further entrenched tourism as a vital economic force for the region and removed residents from traditional outport fishing. As such, Proulx might be accurately considered a symbolic figure of foreign disruption in Newfoundland, helping to usher in an economic order similar to the one she imagines as a threat to the *Gammy Bird's* contrafactual take on journalistic practice.

I would suggest that Proulx's novel, irrespective of the author's intentions, is best understood as displacing the kind of bottom-up, sustainable self-representation that she valorises in *The Shipping News*. Creative practitioners ought to be aware that imaginative representations of communities, even those overtly exploring a politics of localism and heritage, can become just as powerful a 'report' upon that community as any news item. In light of this history, I argue for reading *The Shipping News* as a provocative example of this displacement because it so persistently thematises the importance of a community's shared fictions, especially in the case of the *Gammy Bird*, which conflates fiction and fact as a matter of course. In doing so, the novel not only emphasises the tragedy of a cultural heritage's irrecoverable loss, but also suggests that the supposedly divergent formal traditions of newspapers and novels are not so easily separable in postmodern public discourse.

The Shipping News presents an especially interesting case because Proulx has attributed her prose style—with short, clipped fragments and a frequent reliance on metonymy—to small-town newspapers. For her, the language and contents of a newspaper are a kind of shorthand for the values of the community that it represents, and Quoye must learn these things on the job. Quoye is desperate to find his place in Killick-Claw society after his unfaithful wife's death, and despite being a 'third-rate newspaperman', he earns acclaim after writing a

sensationalised story about a yacht named *Tough Baby*. Temporarily docked in town, the boat was supposedly built for Hitler, and its current owners are members of the global financier class. They brag to Quoyle about how *Tough Baby* had once docked in another port and destroyed every other boat during a storm, a symbol for the destruction that the international capitalist class has introduced to Newfoundland's own shores. In writing his article, Quoyle gets his first sense that he's 'writing well [because] The Melvilles' pride in the boat's destructiveness shone out of the piece' (Proulx 1993: 142), and he's right, largely because he embellishes many of its chilling qualities. The ghost-tale quality of Quoyle's account makes global capital's destructive qualities legible to the people of Killick-Claw. 'That's the kind of stuff I want' (Proulx 1993: 144), Buggit tells Quoyle, who gets a new assignment profiling an unusual boat each week. More importantly, the *Tough Baby* story is the 'kind of stuff' that the Killick-Claw readers want, reminding us that the *Gammy Bird*, framed within the larger fiction of the novel, can be read symptomatically as a cultural product of the community. It is important to notice that we essentially have an imaginary newspaper standing in for an imaginary place, which in turn reproduces a wide representation of the 'real' Newfoundland.

Of course, there are important differences between the representational strategies and consequences of a newspaper and that of a novel. Although I do not have the opportunity here for a full sketch of the history of the novel, theorists of the form have demonstrated the ways in which the novel emerged in contradistinction to journalistic texts. Michael McKeon, in his *Origins of the English Novel*, suggests both 'news' and romances of the 17th century conventionally included an assertion of their own trueness, but the news carried 'a double epistemological charge' in its claim of being historically objective in a way that demystified the claim of the romance (McKeon 1987: 51). That claim historicity became what we'd call verisimilitude in the early novel: the commitment to mundane detail that defines realist work. 'If a narrative observes the proper conventions,' as McKeon suggests, 'it demonstrates its own veracity' (1987: 110). So, where we might understand journalistic claims as *being* real, a novel instead *seems* so real that its truthfulness is difficult to distinguish. By implying this textual authority in representing the fabric of everyday life, it produces a logic for accepting its claims, and that foundational logic remains with us in today's literary realism. We might notice that the *Gammy Bird* is imagined as more like a novel than a newspaper; its readers want something that *seems* real and fits with their conceptions of the community and outside world.

Whereas a newspaper's claim to historicity is constitutive of the form—factuality is an ontological requirement of news reportage—novels instead treat historicity

as a rhetorical trope. We should notice how Proulx's project in *The Shipping News* produces a conflation of these two by challenging the notion of how a newspaper like the *Gammy Bird* ought to be read. Jack Buggit's unorthodox approach is not meant to deceive the reading public (any more than say, a novel). Rather, the *Gammy Bird* stages a complex entanglement of fact and fiction meant to sustain and reproduce a Newfoundland culture increasingly considered superstitious or fantastical by outsiders who visit the island with the influx of capital. In 2001, *Maclean's* profiled Newfoundlanders moved away from outports and into urban economic centres, where cultural obfuscation mirrored the literal loss of their communities. Singer Anita Best, who collected oral histories as a way of retaining pride in ancestral life, describes how the stories of lost communities often centre on contrafactual or supernatural beliefs:

Belief systems were completely different in those days. If you saw dead fellows—they were never called ghosts, they were called spirits or dead fellows, or by their names—it was generally a warning of some kind of bad weather approaching, so you would move your boat. I would hear people talk about them quite matter-of-factly. Some people might laugh, but in some of the communities, if there was a critical mass of believers, you wouldn't go out after night without some bread in your pockets in case you met the good people—aka, the fairies, or the little people. Those things were actually believed and practised (Gushue 2001: 24).

To the extent to which these things were 'actually believed and practised', stories of outport life showed that once the physical communities had vanished and their 'critical mass of believers' dispersed, their beliefs and practices also disappeared. The survival of Newfoundland's culture is thus figured as a matter of its constant reproduction of old folk tales and myths, and Proulx figures the *Gammy Bird* as a repository wherein these mythologically inflected discourses find purchase.

When novelists like Proulx take up news and newspapers as a literary subject, they offer reflexive interventions into how we think about the relationship between news and novels. The two forms have a common but divergent history. In his seminal work on nationalism and modernity, Benedict Anderson calls the novel and the newspaper 'two forms of imagining' that 'provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation' in the 18th century (2006: 24-25). Anderson emphasizes the importance of the daily newspaper in cultivating a sense of simultaneity among the people of a nation, allowing, for example, a reader in Chicago to imagine kinship with a reader in New York. The daily newspaper, which Anderson characterises as a 'one-day

best-seller' (2006: 35) is an "extreme form" of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity' (2006: 34). Novels, meanwhile, are written to last considerably longer than one day on the bestseller list, at least. And yet we might say the ideological work of a newspaper, in which a community agrees upon a narrative that legitimates their kinship—well, that might also be the work of a novel. In his study of the origins of the English novel, Lennard Davis theorises a 'news/novel matrix' in which early printed materials treated fact and fiction as ambivalent categories. He analyses the novels of Daniel Defoe, whose works helped to define the 18th century's categorisation of novels and news and distinct genres, as evidence the journalist-novelist was 'groping in the dark' (1996: 161) for a form that could be both allegorically true and historically true without violating Puritan mores or legal constraints on his writing. Defoe came to understand fiction as 'just another category of fact' (Davis 1996: 173), and his novels occupy a paradoxical position as a factual fiction—one that must be both true and false at the same time. Unable to disentangle this so-called 'double discourse', the novelist becomes a different kind of reporter, according to Davis: a reporter who gives us 'news of the ideology ... of that nation' (1996: 192).

How then, ought we read Proulx's 'report' on reporting in Newfoundland, given the novel's own role in altering the ideological overlay of the island? And, by extension, how might today's practitioners understand the consequences of rewriting a community with respect to its own textual productions? Perhaps *The Shipping News* is itself an artefact of an unrecoverable past—an essentially fictionalised account of a culture's foundational fictions. The novel evokes a sense of loss for a culture that it is both celebrating and obscuring, clarified by a climactic sequence in the novel in which Quoyle argues with the *Gammy Bird's* managing editor, Tert Card, over the conflict of Newfoundland traditions and threats from international oil companies. Quoyle pens a piece titled 'NOBODY HANGS A PICTURE OF AN OIL TANKER' that valorises the image of eight schooners headed out to the fishing grounds and the 'great skill and sea knowledge to sail them' (Proulx 1993: 201). The gist of Quoyle's article is that the 'old way' is not merely picturesque but also deeply intertwined with a long history of Newfoundland labour, one that Card would like to see ended with investment in the Grand Banks oil fields. 'Newfoundland is going to be the richest place in the world,' Card argues, imagining a life of leisure in Florida after collecting on his investment in oil. 'It's a new era. We'll be rolling in the money' (Proulx 1993: 199).

The two men argue over who benefits from industrial expansion, with Card claiming the romance of bygone outport fishing culture ignores the material suffering that often took place in those communities. 'Nobody, nobody in their

right mind would go back to them hard, hard times,' he says. 'People was only kind because life was so dirty you couldn't afford to have enemies. It was all swim or all sink' (Proulx 1993: 200). But Quoyle's decision to stick with his anti-oil story, which focuses on his own efforts to clean up a spill from an oil tanker (appropriately named the *Golden Goose*), signals the novel's desire to hold on to a cultural past outmoded by the expansion of international fisheries and oil investments. Quoyle's oil tanker story positions the question of economic struggle as a cultural one—whether oil and its 'new way' of living can possibly preserve the island's past.

But Card intervenes, changing the column to 'PICTURE OF AN OIL TANKER' and writing that 'Oil and Newfoundland go together like ham and eggs, and like ham and eggs they'll nourish us all in the coming years,' meanwhile insisting he 'Straightened it out, that's all. We don't want to hear that Greenpeace shit' (Proulx 1993: 203). Card's invocation of what 'we' want to hear is meant to remind Quoyle that he's an outsider and not a real Newfoundlander, doubling down on the representative qualities attributed to the *Gammy Bird*, even as he attempts to reverse its politics.

Quoyle's defence is that being a real Newfoundlander is fundamentally a matter of defending traditional ways. He calls Card's edits 'rotten cheap propaganda for the oil industry' that make him 'look like a mouthpiece for tanker interests' (Proulx 1993: 203). Like the fishermen, Quoyle sees his livelihood threatened by Card's style and its capitalist vision: 'Quoyle becomes the nostalgic countermeasure to both Tert Card's pro-industrialism and the inevitable loss of a way of life,' one critic explains. 'Quoyle sees the oncoming oil tankers, the chain stores, and the other trappings of modernity, senses the passing of culture and a people, understands that the Newfoundland he claims as home and the Newfoundland that will be are radically different' (Chafe 2008: 92). The matter of the column is left to Jack Buggit to settle, and, always a stalwart for the 'old way', he sides with Quoyle. Card eventually leaves the *Gammy Bird* to publish a newsletter for the tanker industry.

We might be tempted to read *The Shipping News* as celebratory of heritage and cynical toward economic development, though Proulx's persistent irony defeats any simplistic reading of the Quoyle-Card showdown. The problem, of course, is that Quoyle's rhetorical defence of Newfoundland cultural identity does nothing to stem the onset of an economic order based around the oil industry. That inevitability is the same for *The Shipping News* and its imagined newspaper—considering the irreversible ecological, economic and cultural destruction of the

real island, both are reduced to mere textual artefacts. As Jack puts it, ‘We live by rules made somewhere else by sons of a bitches don’t know nothin’ about this place’ (Proulx 1993: 293), pointing both toward routine exploitation by neoliberalism’s global reach and the fact that Proulx’s characters are ‘ruled’ by an outsider’s imagination. The community is an imagined one, as Anderson might suggest, but that imagination undoubtedly matters. ‘A paper has a life of its own,’ Quoye says near the end of *The Shipping News*, ‘beyond earthly owners’ (Proulx 1993: 330). The same is true for the novel.

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