

## “Making Cool Things Hot Again” Blackface and Newfoundland Mummering

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Hommage à Peter Narváez  
In Honour of Peter Narváez

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine d'un point de vue critique les occurrences de *blackface* au temps du *mummering*, à la période de Noël à Terre-Neuve. En réponse à l'appel de Peter Narváez pour une analyse de la culture expressive à l'aide d'approches empruntées à l'ethnologie et aux études culturelles, l'auteure examine les points communs entre ces deux phénomènes culturels. Elle les perçoit comme des tentatives d'élimination des tensions raciales et de classe chez les classes les plus défavorisées vivant dans ces petites villes portuaires bourgeoises le long du littoral nord-américain et qui étaient intimement connectées, à l'époque, par les routes maritimes très fréquentées. Elle propose une nouvelle analyse de la tradition qui dépasse le ritualisme inconscient et symbolique pour examiner le *mummering* dans un contexte historique. À cet effet, elle présente des faits qui mettent à mal les interprétations communément acceptées du *mummering* de Noël comme une coutume calendaire provenant de l'Angleterre.

## “MAKING COOL THINGS HOT AGAIN”

### *Blackface and Newfoundland Mumming*

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Christmas mummers are easy to spot in Newfoundland, even in the middle of a hot July. These summertime mummers appear in gift shops across the island. Captured in freeze-frame, they can be found on posters, art cards, books, and, most recently, in the form of collectible figurines and Christmas miniatures.<sup>1</sup> The presence of mummers in the cultural iconography available for purchase in these tourist targeted locations suggests that Christmas mumming is an important symbol of Newfoundland cultural identity. Although not widely practiced today, mumming enjoyed an urban revival in the 1970s, brought about by the scholarly and folk revivalist attention given to the custom as it was practiced in outport Newfoundland during the 1960s (see Pocius 1988).

Scholars have extensively documented the typology, as well as the symbolic and social meanings of the twentieth-century Christmas mumming tradition in rural Newfoundland. However, instances of blackface performance within this custom appear to have escaped close analysis (Halpert and Story 1969; Lovelace 1980; McCann 1988; Robertson 1984; Sider 1976 and 2003). Drawing upon historical data, W.T. Lhamon’s (2003) interpretation of “Jim Crow” as an underclass

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1. The figurines “Ambrose from Heart’s Delight” and “Bridie from Bareneed” are the first two mummer figurines in a series developed by Mummer’s the Word (2008).

hero<sup>2</sup>, and the existing literature on Christmas mummers from the Jim Crow era and the mid 1960s, this article<sup>3</sup> explores the connections between Newfoundland mummering and early (1827-1860) blackface theatre. Following Peter Narváez's (1992) call for analysis of expressive culture from folklore and cultural studies approaches, I explore the similarities between these two cultural phenomena.

I see them as attempts to work out racial and class tensions among those dwelling in burgeoning seaport towns along the North American seaboard that were intimately connected, at that time, through heavily-trafficked shipping routes. After Carl Lindahl's (1996) study of historical and contemporary influences on the Cajun country Mardi Gras, I argue for a re-examination of Newfoundland mummering that takes the social history of both these periods into account as well as the periods in between, much of which has yet to be studied. From this position, I offer the following ideas for consideration.

First, I contend it is necessary to frame nineteenth-century accounts of the tradition as a form of public protest/dispute rather than simply a celebration of the season. Second, I want to draw specific attention to the importance of blackness as a concept in twentieth-century rural Newfoundland and how it was understood in the context of mummering. Finally, I wish to suggest a potential line of inquiry that may bring us closer to addressing two long-standing questions: why are there few accounts of mummering in Newfoundland before 1830; and why are there so many in the following decades?<sup>4</sup>

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2. Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1860) created the comedic character of a runaway slave he named "Jim Crow." He performed this character in blackface and is credited with starting the craze in New York City in the 1830s. His song and dance "Jump Jim Crow" became an international popular culture sensation. Although most widely associated now with the Jim Crow segregation laws in the United States, Jim Crow's meaning early in Rice's career was counter hegemonic. See Lhamon 2003.
  3. I wish to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people: Pauline Greenhill, Philip Hiscock, Gerald Sider, and Diane Tye for their close attention, comments, and suggestions; Beverley Diamond and Kati Szego for drawing my attention to the subject and the photo of Ignatius Rumboldt in blackface; Joy Fraser and Paul Smith for sharing archival data; Ken Ficara for editorial assistance with previous drafts; Peter Greathead for his knowledge of sailing.
  4. Newfoundland mummering is not the only tradition that exhibits this break in the historical record. In England, too, A.E. Greene states that "records for the

By analyzing nineteenth-century Newfoundland mummering in the context of social and economic history, I hope that this article will serve to trouble commonly held understandings of the tradition while simultaneously demonstrating that there is much to yet be understood by going back over old data. As E.P. Thompson counsels:

So what we have to do ... is to re-examine old, long-collected material, asking new questions of it, and seeking to recover lost customs and the beliefs which informed them. I can best illustrate the problem by turning away from the materials and the method, and addressing the kinds of questions that must be asked. These questions, when we examine a customary culture, may often be less concerned with the process and logic of change than with the recovery of past states of consciousness and the texturing of social and domestic relationships. They are concerned less with *becoming* than with *being* (1994 [1972]: 204-205; emphasis in original).

I do not mean to suggest that we do away with previous scholarship that has looked at mummering as a way of becoming, or a symbolic, transitional ritual performed in the liminal space of the twelve days of Christmas. However, Thompson's suggestion that we consider the being or the day-to-day lives of people who engaged with tradition could serve as a useful strategy while striving to conduct ethnography (a mode of research that carries heavy connotations of the present) from an historical perspective, a method for which Sider (2003) also advocates.

When I first became interested in the topic of blackface performance in Newfoundland, I was looking, specifically and primarily, for accounts of public dramas, musicals, and school plays — much like the one shown in a photograph on display at the School of Music which features a

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[Antrobus] (or any other) type of mummers' play before 1800 are extremely scanty; during the nineteenth century, they multiply a hundredfold." Although he attributes this disparity in part to the growth in folklore scholarship among the middle and upper classes, he asks, "if [these] plays were common before the nineteenth century (their existence is not in itself in doubt), why did those recorders of 'all old strange things'...make no mention of them?" (42). In the case of Morris dancing in Herefordshire, Shropshire, and Worcestershire, E. C. Cawte writes about the gap in the written evidence after the seventeenth century. "I have not found any further record of Morris in these three counties until the nineteenth century. It is possible that the dance reported at Broseley during the Commonwealth has been passed in unbroken sequence to the present century, but the next record is in 1885" (1963: 201). This record describes dancers in blackface.

young Ignatius Rumboldt<sup>5</sup> dressed in minstrel clothing and with a blackened face. I also remembered reading about how Christmas mummers often blackened their faces as a way of masking themselves during the house visiting activities in rural Newfoundland. But I was not very keen on studying Newfoundland mummering. I thought that the book had, quite literally, been written on that tradition<sup>6</sup> by Herbert Halpert and George Story (1969) and was eager to research and write about something edgy: blackface and minstrel theatre in Newfoundland. I thought that I would have little trouble finding historical data. After a few encouraging and early finds, however, the rest of my leads quickly fizzled.

I began to feel that this project was like a spring iceberg. What had begun, in my mind, as a towering topic, full of potential, appeared to be dissolving under the heat of deadlines while grounded on a shoal of dead-ends. Then I realized something. What I was observing from land, metaphorically speaking, was a partial view. I needed to look at this project from the perspective of the sea. And what was revealed underneath was something bigger and more complex than I had imagined.

References to blackface performance within professional and amateur theatrical performances in Newfoundland are scant, but spread out over a wide time period: from the late nineteenth century to the present day.<sup>7</sup> Examples in the literature, however, of face blackening as

5. Ignatius Rumboldt was an influential Newfoundland choir director often credited with establishing a choral tradition in Newfoundland. He is especially noted for his choral arrangements of Newfoundland folksong. See Woodford 1984.
6. Bucklan describes a similar sentiment among the members of the English Folk Dance Society with respect to the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers of Bacup in the Rossendale Valley, Northwest England, an Easter dance tradition held at least since the mid nineteenth century. She says the EFDS “was of the belief that Cecil Sharp, their principal collector and scholar, had already recorded the most significant dances of English folk tradition prior to his death in 1924, and that aside from scattered examples, there was really nothing left to be discovered” (2001: 418).
7. According to Paul Moore’s research on The Nickel Theatre and other nickelodeons in St. John’s after 1907, visits by minstrel troupes appear to have declined after the introduction of nickelodeon theatres. Performance announcements of such troupes in the St. John’s newspaper the *Daily News* were numerous but became scarce after the Nickel Theatre came to town in 1907. None of the performances announced in the newspapers was included in

a form of mummer disguise, are abundant and documented in every sub-category of the mumming complex.<sup>8</sup> They are found in the first written description of a mummering episode in 1831 (Sider 1976); in the fieldwork conducted during the 1960s (Robertson 1984; Halpert and Story 1969) — which includes the urban parades that eventually were outlawed in 1861, the rural Christmas house visits, and associated disguises and masks; and in the mummers’ plays, including the revival troupe of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> I had, like others it seemed, assumed blackface in mummering to be a natural extension of an English custom that scholars argued had roots in medieval pagan ritual and old English folk dramas.<sup>10</sup>

This assumption continued despite the fact that Margaret Robertson’s monograph for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1984 describes mummers’ costumes derived from popular cultural

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O’Neill’s (2003) chapter on the history of theatre in St. John’s. And the accounts continue well into the late twentieth century. Philip Hiscock reported being dressed as a golliwog for a school play in the 1950s (personal communication); Janice Esther Tulk, in 1996, was criticized by a Kiwanis Music Festival voice adjudicator for not wearing blackface while performing a piece from the musical *South Pacific* (personal communication).

8. Scholars use the terms mummering and mumming interchangeably. The “mumming complex” is used by Halpert and Story (1969) to describe the whole range of related activities explored in their essay collection.
9. In Halpert and Story (1969) and Robertson (1984), face blackening is described at least forty times. It appears to have been a province-wide phenomenon, with the exception of Labrador. In Story’s review of the printed literature on mummering (1969), face blackening, especially in early accounts, is conspicuous in its absence, whereas Sider’s (1976) work includes anecdotes of early mummering activities in Carbonear that specifically mention it. Brooke’s monograph on the history of the revival Mummer’s Troupe of the 1970s contains a full-page photo of Donna Butt, founder of the renowned theatre troupe in Trinity, in blackface, with a metal colander on her head and dressed as the Turkish Knight (1988: 63). Her mouth is turned down in a sneer and her brow is furrowed. The photo is dated Christmas 1974.
10. Lovelace has written eloquently about some other research biases associated with local revival activities and the mummer plays. Story (1969) claims that mummering can be linked back to Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s first landing in 1583 by virtue of the fact he was English and that he brought Morris Dancers and Hobby Horses over with him. However, focusing on a putative origin ignores the hundreds of years of history during which cultural exchange and influence have no doubt affected the Newfoundland (and other) mummering traditions. Indeed, the majority of work on Newfoundland mummering made no attempt to place it contextually in the popular culture of the time.

representations of ethnicity.<sup>11</sup> Her work was an attempt to find behavioural patterns in Newfoundland mummering based upon the field recordings and survey cards collected in the 1960s and held in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive: the *same data* upon which the authors in Halpert and Story based their work. These links to popular culture were documented when work was done in the 1960s, but rarely cited or discussed in Halpert and Story (1969). Robertson described these references as examples of patterned behaviour, but did not examine them critically. They were presented as just another fact about mummering in Newfoundland.

Could this assumption of mine (and others), that blackface was just something that mummies did, be an example of Pauline Greenhill's (1994) notion of "mainstream ethnicity" at work (1994)? My association of Englishness (and Newfoundlandness)<sup>12</sup> with mummering is why I initially dismissed blackface mummering and judged it relatively unimportant compared to the handful of faded, turn-of-the-century photographs found in the Centre for Newfoundland and Labrador Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland that depicted unidentified amateur theatre performers in blackface.

I questioned and eventually dismissed my initial assumption that blackface disguise was an unproblematic part of mummering, after I suspended two biases about Newfoundland expressive culture. The first of these I thought I had dealt with a long time ago: that Newfoundland was the epitome of an isolated, naïve and Redfieldian<sup>13</sup> "ideal type" of culture, "rather than a social real type" (Cothran 1981: 447). I shed this bias largely through the paradigm shift I described above: the move from a land-based to a sea-based point of view. I stopped looking for instances of blackface performance as a narrow genre of popular culture

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11. Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, and The Dutch Cleanser Lady are examples of ethnic mummer costumes derived from popular culture. Modern-day (1960s) rubber Halloween masks were also common.
  12. Greenhill's notion of mainstream ethnicity, I would argue, works differently in Newfoundland. Although Newfoundlandness is seen as mainstream and, in many cases, the right or natural way of doing things by many in the province, it is not seen as neutral or having no race or ethnicity attached to it. Like Quebecers, Newfoundlanders are well aware of their distinctiveness within Canada and see themselves as a people.
  13. I refer here, as Cothran does, to Robert Redfield's definitions of folk societies (1956 and 1969).

performed by people living on an island, and separated from the rest of North America by the sea. Instead, I started looking at how elements of this internationally famous form of American working class theatre might make their way into the lives and folk culture of other transnationals who lived in Newfoundland seaports along the nautical superhighway<sup>14</sup> that was the Atlantic Ocean, which Gilroy (1993) has termed the "black Atlantic." These routes not only carried goods and material culture, but also transported people — many of whom were black — as well as ideas. Thus, North American seaport towns were intimately connected. The province's place in the "black Atlantic" was crucial because Newfoundland was, before the age of steamships,<sup>15</sup> the last stop on the trip to the New World from England and Ireland.

North American seaport towns were not only connected physically through shipping routes, but socially by shared experience. The growing urban centres of St. John's, Harbour Grace, and Carbonear during the fourth, fifth and sixth decades of the nineteenth century, were the site of violent clashes between ethnic groups (English and Irish) and classes at a time when rapidly expanding populations were attempting to achieve permanent settlement in the colony under a new representative government (McCann 1988; Mannion 1977). Instead of thinking in terms of isolation, I considered how connected St. John's and the northeast coast of Newfoundland were, not only to England and Ireland, the two countries most often cited when considering both the peopling and customs of Newfoundland,<sup>16</sup> but also to the eastern seaboard of North America. Like the urban centres in Newfoundland, Philadelphia and New York City experienced a population boom between 1820 and 1860 — a time during which emigrants were dealing with the physical hardships and social chaos of life in North American frontier towns

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14. Nautical charts of North Atlantic shipping lanes often place Newfoundland in the centre due to its importance as a point of land between Northern Europe and the eastern seaboard of North America. See "Gulf of Maine" 2002. The Atlantic Ocean did not only serve as a major natural resource around which traditional Newfoundland work patterns developed in order to sustain the majority of the coastal settlers for hundreds of years. It was also a channel of extensive cultural exchange and a vehicle for a kind of globalization.
  15. According to Crandall, the age of passenger steam ships officially began in 1832. There was a significant period of crossover between sail and steam ships in the mid nineteenth century.
  16. Mannion et al. have described in detail the development of rural communities in Newfoundland during this period.



(Toll 1974: 4). Much of this chaos concerned the shifting labour forces and the class struggles of ethnically marked populations.

New York City and Newfoundland both saw emancipation acts passed in the same decade, which resulted in expanded civil liberties for large populations of previously indentured/enslaved labourers. The Catholic Emancipation Act, passed by the British parliament in 1829, made it possible for Irish Newfoundlanders to fully participate in government and other levels of civil society (by law, if not by practice). In fact, “in the last half of the eighteenth century, Catholics [in Newfoundland] grew to outnumber the Anglicans because of official [British] toleration of the Catholics and a large influx of Irish immigrants” (Greene 1999: 7). In New York City, there was a population of black slaves of comparable size. For most of the eighteenth century, the city “ranked only second to Charleston, in mainland British North America, in the number of slaves held by its inhabitants. Not only was slavery firmly entrenched in and around New York City, but in the 1790s the institution had actually expanded. That decade saw a 22 percent increase in the city’s slave population and a massive 33 percent increase in its slaveholders” (White 2002: 12-13). Although the first bill to end slavery was passed in 1799, it was not until 1827 that all New York blacks were officially freed.

Newfoundland and New York were certainly not the only places that experienced social unrest associated with growing class-consciousness and changing political and economic conditions. The Irish protests in Newfoundland did not occur in a bubble; they were no doubt influenced by and directly linked to the situation in England. However, there were similarities between Newfoundland and New York with respect to the granting of civil liberties to workers who were previously, and in varying degrees, men and women who were not free.

Although it is not my intention to equate the New York slave experience with that of the Newfoundland Irish, I would argue that these two vulnerable populations had much, if not *more* in common with each other than they did with the people left behind in the Old World, especially if compared to those in the long-established English towns and institutions of power. Both of these groups were struggling to find a foothold within their newly forming locations that would allow them to establish themselves as citizens. There was much at stake for both the newly-freed black slaves of New York and the poor, Irish

Catholic fish workers of Newfoundland not only politically but also in terms of an immediate and urgent effect on everyday living such as housing, food, employment, and education.<sup>17</sup>

My second bias was the assumption that ethnicity, in general, and blackness, in particular, had very little to do with Newfoundland outport culture because of the fact that very few if any of the settlers were people of colour; Newfoundland was colonized largely by white emigrants of English and Irish descent (Mannion 1977: 7). The contemporary population still reflects these nineteenth century settlement patterns.<sup>18</sup> Although the large majority of Newfoundlanders were and still are white, two major ethnic groups have long been rivals: the Irish (Catholic) and the English (Protestant).<sup>19</sup> Battles for hegemony between these two white (but certainly neither invisible nor homogeneous) ethnic groups were at the centre of the establishment of Newfoundland as a permanent British colony during 1832-1855 (see Greene 1999).

In addition to considering the political and social dynamics among white ethnic groups in nineteenth-century Newfoundland, the more I read the twentieth century literature on mummering, the harder it became to ignore accounts like this: “In Spaniard’s Bay, January 6 might also be called ‘Nigger Night.’ According to one informant, on Nigger Night, vandals in black attacked and tried to blacken the faces of anyone they could catch” (Robertson 1984: 10). Or this:

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17. Black New Yorkers, although officially freed, faced appalling living conditions, were constantly made to prove their lawfulness, and were jailed often for being poor, hungry, and homeless (White 2002). In Newfoundland, political and religious battles over school jurisdiction in the nineteenth century left a legacy that endured until 1997 when the Canadian Constitution was amended to end the denominational school system in the province (see Greene 1999).
  18. The 2001 Canadian census gives Newfoundland’s population as 508,075 of whom only 840 people self-identified as “black” (approximately 0.17%). In St. John’s, 350 out of 171,105 residents identified as “black” (0.20% of the city population). See *Statistics Canada* “2001 Community Profiles”.
  19. See McCann 1988. This rivalry continues to the present day; Trew (2005) addresses the recent debate surrounding the placement of the new provincial museum, The Rooms, on the unexamined ruins of Fort Townsend which was built to keep the Catholics under control in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Further, the current location of The Rooms competes with the Roman Catholic Basilica for domination of the St. John’s skyline.

In Port Blanford, B.B.,<sup>20</sup> mummers who wished to resemble “real niggers,” blackened their faces with Sunlight stove polish. A man in Heart’s Content, T.B., representing a nigger woman, rubbed soot on his face and put on a woman’s dress, shoes, stockings and a turban. In St. John’s, there was always an Aunt Jemima, and often Uncle Tom and Little Eva from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1984: 35).

There may have been few or no black people living in Newfoundland during the time most of the fieldwork on Christmas mummering took place, but that does not mean that Newfoundlanders were ignorant of the sociocultural connotations of being black. According to the data I have collected to date, it appears that they never were. Before I continue, I wish to clarify, first, that I do not mean to suggest that most Newfoundlanders are unusually or deliberately racist, nor do I question the goodwill of residents of the communities that were under scholarly investigation during the 1960s, as Firestone (1969) and Faris (1969) were also careful to note. However, according to Greenhill, who not only critically examines “the Englishness and whiteness” of a related custom, Morris dance, but also “folklore scholarship in Canada, and that scholarship’s complicity in fostering racist ideologies and practices,” the cultural relativism which pervades most folklore scholarship “reduces the idea of difference into a series of variant practices on a purportedly level cultural playing field” (2002: 227). Greenhill counters this tendency by understanding “racism as a discourse about difference; specifically, about difference that makes a difference” (227). She states that “It is not racist for a white person to participate in a practice like Morris dance; it is racist, however, to assert that the general whiteness of Morris is a phenomenon of happenstance” (228). The Englishness of Newfoundland Christmas mummering has gone unchallenged for more than forty years. This fact, along with Greenhill’s insistence that we academics must be ethically accountable for the implications of conducting “ethnograph[ies] of niceness” (227) within the discipline of folklore and the academy in general, adds a sense of urgency.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the social meanings of blackface mummering have not remained the same throughout the history of the custom in

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20. B.B and T.B are abbreviations for Bonavista Bay and Trinity Bay, respectively.

21. Indeed it is important to also examine forms of expressive culture, other than Newfoundland Christmas mummering, especially those that are exclusively white or make no claims to ethnicity. See Greenhill 2002.

Newfoundland and beyond.<sup>22</sup> Like Lhamon, I make a distinction between early blackface theatre and minstrelsy. Although they both employ blackface and depict comedic characters of African American slaves, they had different meanings and audiences. Early blackface theatre, primarily in the form of Jim Crow, was a form of entertainment developed for the enjoyment of the underclasses. It depicted clever black characters making fun of upper class citizens, or dandies (Lhamon 2003). In contrast, the minstrelsy phenomenon grew out of the circus tradition in the 1840s, more than ten years after early blackface theatre was in its heyday.

Minstrelsy borrowed conventions from early blackface theatre to stage blatantly racist depictions of not only black Americans, but of any other ethnic group considered to be part of the underclass (Polish, Irish, German, Jewish). The audiences of minstrel shows were the white middle and upper classes (Lott 1993). Minstrelsy far outlasted the original Jim Crow character, which died along with its creator T.D. Rice, in 1860. It continued well into the twentieth century in the form of school plays, variety shows, films, and television shows. For the purposes of this article, it is important to make a distinction between these two forms because many instances of the blackface mummering in nineteenth-century Newfoundland took place during the pre-minstrelsy era.

It is known that blackface was part of mummering as early as 1831 (Dawson and Buckingham 1831 in Sider 1977),<sup>23</sup> but as the current scholarship stands, we can only infer its social meanings and how they may have changed between the 1830s and the early twentieth century. Finally, it is not my intention to dismiss the work of previous scholars. Nor do I suggest that they, for any reason, set out to obscure the nature of the tradition. The scholarly investigation of cross-racial impersonation

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22. An entire other area for investigation is the influence of mummering customs in the Caribbean on not only English and Newfoundland mummering customs, but also on the phenomenon of blackface performance itself in the United States. This is another area for further investigation. See Abrahams and Szwed (1983) for letters and accounts of Christmas mumming by slaves in the British West Indies in the late 1700s or Beckwith's (1928 [1969]) collection of Jamaican folklore, for example.

23. This refers to a letter written to D. Campbell, secretary to the governor, Harbour Grace, Northern District, 20 January 1831. According to Sider, this letter is held in the provincial archives in St. John's.

has long been taboo, in part due to the criticism of minstrelsy in the twentieth century. As Sandra Gubar writes, “not only has the blatant racism of minstrelsy (quite reasonably) made white impersonations of blacks seem shameful, it has also (less sensibly) spilled over to discourage scholarship about its ongoing impact on American culture” (1997: xvii).

### **Beyond Cultural Survival and the “Condescension of Posterity”**

It could be argued that much of the face blackening by mummers was nothing more than an inexpensive and effective form of masking. A case could also be made for the possible English origin of blackface in mummering, with theatrical precedents for representation of blackness on the English stage prior to the American blackface craze. There were also localized forms of minstrelsy in England since the 1840s (Pickering 1997: 191). Similarly, traces of minstrelsy have been well documented in nineteenth-century Morris dances of Herefordshire, Shropshire, and Worcestershire (Cawte 1963: 201). However, it is extremely difficult to determine with certainty the origins and meanings of any custom rooted heavily in oral tradition, and in any case simply arguing for the Americanness of mummering (instead of its Englishness) would do little to further our understanding of the tradition. In so doing, I would be guilty of a kind of neo-Frazerism<sup>24</sup> by switching one set of outmoded cultural survivals for another without accounting for any localization of meaning. However, it would be dishonest for me to admit that this thinking had never crossed my mind. My first thoughts about blackface mummering were along these very lines. My initial gut reaction could be an example of Frazer’s enduring legacy.

As Theresa Buckland states in her article on the shifting meanings of the Britannia Coco-Nut Dancers, another English tradition of uncertain origin which uses blackface,

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24. Cultural anthropologist Sir James George Frazer was the author of *The Golden Bough* (1890), a book about the evolution of religious mythology. He claimed that there was a natural progression from primitive human beliefs to modern day thought. Contemporary customs similar to those he had labeled “primitive” were thought to be cultural survivals from an ancient past. This book was written during the formative years of folklore as a discipline and it became standard reading for those interested in cultural studies.

Frazerism continued to exercise a compelling power, particularly in the arts and humanities, long after anthropology as a professional discipline had rejected such interpretations. Indeed, the myth of “the folk” and the supposed primitive religious origins of the [Coco-Nut] dance itself were classified as a “cultural survival” in the publications and teachings [about the origins of the dance] until at least the 1960s, and may be found in the publicity distributed by present day revivalist dancers (2001: 419).

Does the emphasis on symbolic ritual and the classification of various forms of mummering present in some of the scholarship on Newfoundland mummering suggest a similar Frazerian tendency? Further, has the academic storying of mummering become part of the ethnographic record, as Buckland observed with the Coco-Nut Dancers? Although Margaret Robertson strived to make meaning out of the data collected in the 1960s — a varied collection of cultural artifacts and traditions — to argue the importance of this custom in the lives of rural Newfoundlanders, she appeared to do so at the expense of individual agency.<sup>25</sup>

In the isolated outport communities, the ingredients for mummers’ costumes were limited but not so limited that they had to wear hobby horses or the clothes of the opposite sex. Since the patterns in the [mummers’] house-visits occurred too frequently to have been accidental, it seems that, *unconsciously*, masqueraders chose particular sorts of groups, particular sorts of costumes, particular ways of behaving, and a particular mummering time. The conclusion [of this study] suggests (1) that these patterns, the *unconsciously* chosen time, groups, costumes, and behaviour, were ritual symbols; (2) that, through these symbols, [mummers] both temporarily escaped from, and expressed or reaffirmed the norms or values of their culture; (3) that mummering was a ritual of transition and that the Twelve Days of Christmas, the customary mummering period, was a liminal state, a threshold, a sacred time when deviance was sanctioned, without jeopardizing normal social values or relationships, but when the social mores were also upheld (Robertson 1984: 133; emphasis added).

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25. Sider suggests that the concept of agency within anthropology is problematic because it “is too direct, too pragmatically rooted, and too conscious to merge very comfortably with any anthropological approach that has pondered the intricate interweavings and complex causal links that occur within the domain of culture” (2003: 69). While I am uncertain that this applies to all cultural studies, he describes well the tendency of some to focus on liminality and transition rather than the day-to-day lives of informants.

I do not mean to suggest that Robertson's work is without merit. However, I would argue that her conclusions risk negating the importance of this tradition in lives of rural Newfoundlanders by claiming that their motivations for participating in it were outside their realm of consciousness. I do not think that mummers were, beyond personal control, merely acting out a ritual that was beyond time, in a liminal, a-historical space. Robertson's confident conclusions suggest a too-rosy view of a mythical, rural, illogical folk observed by an authorized, urban, analytical collector. It is possible that informants simply chose not to reveal their conscious motivations behind reported public displays of real or symbolic violence towards certain members of the community in an effort to protect the integrity of the intra-community relationships that have been described by other scholars as being integral to economic survival since the beginning of permanent settlement in fishing villages (e.g. Sider 2003; Sweeny 1997).

Yet Robertson's conclusions not only run the risk of relegating the lives of rural Newfoundlanders to the "condescension of posterity" (Thompson 1963: 12), but also make it too easy for us Newfoundlanders to make use of or to simply ignore racially-marked language and symbols, especially those imbued with widely understood, racist meanings (e.g. "nigger night"), without question or any claim to responsibility. This could be part of the reason why I, as a Newfoundlander, initially thought that issues of race and ethnicity, especially those associated with being black, were of little consequence to an all-white province. I might have conflated the concept of folk with whiteness. And, given the conventionally held idea that Newfoundland was an isolated population for hundreds of years, I could have seen Newfoundland whiteness as a form of pure whiteness at that.

These are uncomfortable realizations. I remain uncertain about how to negotiate this territory. It is difficult to determine intentionality, not only when conducting ethnographic research involving participant observation, but also when using interviews as the primary mode of research. Cultural analysis tends to emphasize the symbolic, often involving considerable interpretation from the point of view of the researcher and her analytical lens of choice. I still am not sure how to discuss the history of folk customs without falling into a Frazerian trap, or worse, a racist one. Although I am hesitant to state it, I suspect that there is a certain element of cultural survival in mummering from early blackface theatre or minstrelsy, even if we ignore historical synchronicities, by virtue of the fact that this form of American popular

culture dominated the stage for such a long period of time. However, it is not my intention to suggest that the folk who may have drawn upon these forms of popular culture did so with no agency. Nor do I wish to simply state that they took up this cultural form exactly as it came. Instead, I concur with Michael Pickering that “Spreading attention to include the popular, and taking the historical seriously rather than as a handy talisman for flights into the intellectual firmament, are important not only because they widen the field of enquiry, but also because they become a richer understanding of the complexities of symbolic exchange between colonial periphery and imperial centre” (1997: 189).

These concepts of “colonial periphery and imperial centre” appear to be especially applicable to Newfoundland. Consider, for example, the province’s ambiguous geographical position, which could be seen as being both isolated and connected, depending upon one’s point of view. Or examine the complex socioeconomic history of the merchant-run, *tal qual*<sup>26</sup> inshore fishery which operated on a cashless truck system during which cured, salted codfish was exchanged for goods purchased the year before on credit. The cost of the goods fluctuated from year to year so that there were rarely, if ever, any positive balances on fishers’ accounts. For generations of rural Newfoundland fishing families, this was the dominant economy.

I would argue that the operative phrase in Pickering’s statement is “complexities of symbolic exchange.” Conventional understandings of merchant/fisher relationships are seen as simple sets of antagonistic binaries, such as good/bad, free/indentured, rich/poor. However, as Robert Sweeny has shown in his analysis of credit strategies documented in the 1889, 1890, and 1891 ledger books of two merchants in outport Newfoundland:

the unequal exchange of truck was not the result of merchants’ systematic exploitation of tied producers. The problem was not systematic; it was systemic: the product of sharply differentiated social relations of production and exchange within the fishery. Truck [credit] prices were onerous precisely because the ties did not bind. Individuals could and did get out. This individual exercise of human agency was,

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26. *Tal qual* roughly translates to “just like that” in Portuguese, but in this context it refers to the method with which merchant buyers graded salt fish in their jurisdiction as a lump product. Families who produced better quality fish were not compensated for the additional effort required. For an overview of the inshore fishery in Newfoundland, see Sider 2003.



however, seriously circumscribed by age and gender. Unquestionably, young, unmarried men were more likely to walk. Their choices left the community to pay the bill.... On one hand individuals were pitted against community and, on the other, producers were pitted against merchants. Neither dynamic was new nor unique in the inshore fishery, but it was their interaction that is important here. Unequal exchange justified, indeed for some necessitated, these individual actions which, however, weakened any community-based response to the merchants' strategies. These dynamics were politically and culturally significant and the knowledge that the exercise of individual freedom has high social costs has remained an important ethical dimension in the evolution of fishing communities (1997: 127-128).

Similarly, the divisions between Irish Catholics and English Protestants were not always clear-cut. John P. Greene's analysis of the developments in religion and politics in Newfoundland between 1745 and 1855 shows that, in general, the majority of the political and social unrest occurred between the Irish Catholic and English Protestant. However, alliances and allegiances were complex and volatile. For example, the majority of the ruling class in Newfoundland was Anglican, who made up only 35% of the population by the mid 1830s (Greene 1999: 33). The rest was not only comprised of Catholics, but also of evangelical Protestants. Prior to the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, Newfoundland political leaders pressed the British government for a bill which would make it illegal for Wesleyans to solemnize marriages and stated "that all persons married by them were living in adultery, and that children of all such marriages were illegitimate" (34). After the British government passed the Catholic Emancipation Act, the Newfoundland government became less concerned with dissenters and more concerned about the threat that Catholics posed to their ruling status (36). Yet the Irish Catholics were divided among themselves; a minority of Catholic, middle class merchants in St. John's believed in developing partnerships with Anglican merchants and government officials, whereas the majority of working class Catholics took a more confrontational approach and made their protest more often in the form of loud public displays,<sup>27</sup> some of which were in the form of mummering in blackface.

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27. Greene tells a fascinating story of Bishop Flemming's life and his influence on the politics and people of nineteenth-century Newfoundland. Flemming's confrontational approach in dealing with Irish oppression in Newfoundland was much different from that of his predecessor Bishop Scallan.

## The Concept of Blackness in Newfoundland Mumming

According to two editorial pieces written in January 1862 for *The Standard and Conception-Bay Advertiser* and *The Telegraph*, the “darkies”, as they were reportedly known, were an organized band of Catholic rebels who paraded in the streets at Christmas as mummers in blackface. Both of these editorials describe the events and consequences of a riot that took place on 12 January 1862, in Carbonear, Newfoundland. A band of darkies raided the property of Protestant families, engaged in fistfights with the men of the households, burglarized local shops for firearms and ammunition and exchanged fire. The magistrate of Carbonear, Mr. McNeill, was fired upon but was not injured. The author of the piece in *The Standard and Conception-Bay Advertiser* described the extent to which military reinforcements were needed to contain the riot. The government of Newfoundland sent the steamer *Ellen Gisborne* from Portugal Cove to Carbonear, which contained a portion of the Governor’s army, the Clerk of the Peace, Mr. Lilly, the Inspector, Mr. Mitchell, and five of the St. John’s police. This was said to have cost two thousand pounds. The editorial gives the reasons for the riot: “There is no doubt but mumming was the cause of the riot; but there has been a very angry feeling between the people of Carbonear since last spring’s election, arising, we may say, in the first place from politics, but now looked upon in the light of a religious question by each party.”

Although this incident took place in the 1860s, just after the ban on mumming had been enacted, it was certainly not the only time that Carbonear saw mummers in blackface showing their discontent with upper class members of the community. Thirty years earlier, in 1831, magistrates wrote to the governor detailing an attack by “the lowest order of persons”:

Since the commencement of Christmas, many complaints have been made of assaults and batteries as the lower order of persons are mostly accustomed to spend twelve days in idleness and pastime, that of Mumming has for many years prevailed here, and Carbonear particularly, also in other parts of Conception Bay, some persons in Carbonear have had lime or flour thrown on their clothes by such disguised persons when going to attend divine service. These mummers appear in the streets with their faces blackened or covered, also men dressed in women’s clothes, and of the lowest order of persons. (Dawson and Buckingham in Sider 1976).

Although Dawson and Buckingham do not state this explicitly, the Anglican-dominated government would have been referring to the Irish

Catholics as the “lowest order of persons.” Speaking of the period between 1820 and 1834, Greene reports, “Roman Catholics, according to customary thinking amongst the upper class, were the dregs of society” (1999: 32). As Sider states, “The urban mumming that developed in the larger towns, and flourished in St. John’s, took the form of parade and performance. The parade was both an orderly procession and the movement of a crowd through the central streets — a display of ritualized disorder that hovered on the edge of *mêlée* and violence between Catholic and Protestant, workers and upper class” (1976: 116).

Although these riots and protests occurred during the Christmas season, I would argue that they were less a celebration of a calendar custom than they were an opportunity for public protest. If the evidence suggests that most of the nineteenth-century mummers were of Irish descent, it makes it difficult to classify this tradition as exclusively English. It was the English officials who documented the majority of the nineteenth-century mummering. Perhaps they were using the names of customs that would be familiar to their upper class, English readers.

Although these two examples appear at either end of the rise and subsequent banning of mummering in the nineteenth century, such parades were not isolated. Greene (1999) writes about a number of street riots and protests initiated by the Catholics under Bishop Flemming. The Christmas riot of 25 December 1833, for example, began as a public celebration by working class Irish Catholics in honour of the successful boycott of Timothy Hogan’s store. Hogan was a conservative political candidate. Although he was one of the few Catholic merchants, he was opposed to Bishop Flemming’s liberalism and his confrontational tactics of preaching politics from the pulpit. It escalated into an attack on the property of Henry Winton of the local newspaper the *Ledger*, a paper with blatantly anti-Catholic leanings (Greene 1999: 84-85). Although, as Greene states, the adult men were “generously lubricated with more than sufficient quantities of Christmas spirits” (85), it seems to me that the season had little to do with this public celebration, save for the fact that perhaps many of the large number of working class Catholics might have been off work in observance of the holiday. Winton ran to the magistrates and begged for the troops to be called in. The military met the crowd’s cheers with pointed bayonets. “Dozens were wounded and the retreating injured people were spilling their blood all over the white snow” (85).

This riot appears similar to that initiated by Irish Catholic darkies in 1862. What is significant about the 1862 account is that the riot

took place a year after mummering had been banned, which indicates that the darkies could have known that they were breaking the law. Such an act could have clearly sent a message of dissent, one that was well known by the Protestant government by that time.

The reported cause, the spring elections, happened months before the riot took place in January 1862. Yet this was not the first time that darkies protested the election. *The Telegraph* editorial states that the Protestants anticipated the behaviour of the group based on “the conduct of those scoundrels last spring.” According to a personal journal held in the Provincial Archives, the riot in Harbour Grace surrounding the May first election was so severe that voting was cancelled (“Musty”: 22). This would suggest that the 1862 riot was an extension of the one that took place during the spring elections. They were held after the Protestant Conservative governor ousted the Catholic Liberal majority from the lower house of elected representatives (Webb 2001). Why did the rioters seemingly take a break from their protest during the rest of the year? Perhaps the Catholics in opposition to the new government might have gauged continued protest too risky a venture — especially if they were employed by or depended upon the business of the merchants to feed their families. According to Greene, this was the most likely motivation.

A fishery restructuring that had been under way for some decades quickened to the extent that, by the early 1850s, the bulk of cod harvesting rested in the hands of individual fishermen. Together with the poor markets for fish and the high prices for supplies, changes in the fishery led the traditional firms to withdraw entirely from the industry, especially in the bays to the north, south, and west of St. John’s. New firms centered in the capital arose to take their places, this time placing their emphasis on providing supplies for the fishing trade (1999: 272).

Not only were many working class men engaged in the seal fishery during the spring months, the summer months were busy times for fishing and farming. It appears that the protestors had to walk a fine line between fighting the Protestant ruling class and biting the hands that fed them. It is possible that, like in the riot of 1833, the carnival spirit of Christmas created an environment in which suppressed anger was more likely to be freely expressed. However it also appears that the economic realities of the Irish Catholics having to work for the same people they publicly despised could have been a determining factor in the timing of these protests. While the use of blackface obscured the

identity of the mummer protesters, they were no doubt known members of the community.

While the darkies or blacks in nineteenth-century urban Newfoundland were mummers in blackface, in twentieth-century outport Newfoundland they took a different form. As the strangers and the outsiders, they were the anthropomorphic manifestation of any threats to a community's wellbeing. Consider the following description of one such event in a community on the Great Northern Peninsula:

The most successful piece of janneying [or mummering] that was ever carried out in Savage Cove illustrates the similarity between mummers and strangers. This was brought off by a man who armed himself with an old breech-loading musket, put on old clothes, blackened and rouged his face, but did not otherwise hide it. He went up to one house and told the inhabitants that he was the man who had been dragging the boom log. There was a story going around that a man had been pulling a forty-foot boom log throughout the country, and it was thought that this was the Devil or a spirit. He then asked them to direct him to a certain man's house, and they fearfully told him the way and slammed the door. At each house he asked for things that he knew would be there and that would be no mean loss. People thought he was a runaway and were completely intimidated. Here was a man who came along painted up during Christmas, when everyone expects janneys, and was so successful in his mummery that people who had known him all his life thought him a real stranger, or rather the archetype of the stranger — unpredictable, threatening, malevolent (Firestone 1969: 73).

Curiously, one element of this figure, widely reported as being associated with evil and the Devil, was omitted from Firestone's description of the archetypal traveling stranger, despite it being a crucial element of the transformation by disguise: blackness.

Some of these black threats to communities were not quite so fictional, but instead took the form of white residents who were considered to be outsiders due to their peripheral and tenuous relations with other members of the community; they did not belong to the community. Faris described how the community of "Cat Harbour"<sup>28</sup> was originally settled by Irish Catholics, but was overtaken by Protestant migrants from Harbour Grace. After the events of the 1883 Harbour Grace Affray, when a group of Catholics fired upon, and killed, several

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28. Cat Harbour is a pseudonym for a community located on the northeast coast of the island.

parading Orangemen, the Catholics of Cat Harbour were forced out of the community and made to resettle on Fogo Island (Faris 1969: 135). He writes: "The Catholic in Cat Harbour became the stereotype stranger, potentially dangerous, polluting, evil and even today one can hear Catholics referred to as 'pretty dark'" (135). Women, especially those who married into the community, were named as witches and practitioners of black magic (Faris 1969). This concept of blackness did not exist on its own, but as part of a dichotomy, an example of what Gubar calls "oppositional identities predicated on black *Others*":

Associated with the concept of the stranger in Cat Harbour is a general black/white symbolism operative in the community. The archetype stranger, the Devil, is the "Black Man" or "Blackie" and things dark by nature, such as the crow, have evil associations and are regarded as malevolent omens. A particularly saintly individual, who must, of course, "belong to the place," is spoken of as "pure white;" and, other things being equal, a white sled-dog or horse is regarded as more dependable, trustworthy, stronger and worth more than a black one (Faris 1969: 138-139).

In addition to being an illustrative example of how whiteness is a socially constructed category (Frankenberg 1993), it raises an interesting, but not entirely surprising, connection between Irish Catholics and blackness, especially given the blackface mummering that took place in the nineteenth century. I cannot help but wonder if the association of Catholics with black in Cat Harbour can be traced to the fact that it was the Irish Catholics in Carbonear who marched as darkies in 1862.

Another puzzling aspect of the concept of blackness in twentieth-century Newfoundland concerns the entry in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. Curiously, the entry for the word "black" in the dictionary does not associate blackness with being Catholic. It states that the term black is used to refer to Protestants, e.g.: "saucy as the black." This is one accurate definition of the word as it operates in Newfoundland, especially St. John's. However, it is not the only way in which blackness was used to indicate ethnicity in Newfoundland. Further, although Faris' work is cited in the dictionary entry, he is referenced only to provide scholarly evidence of how black meant stranger. Why the editors chose only to use this portion of his work to illustrate this concept is unclear to me.

Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman state, “with the rise of blackface minstrelsy in the 1830s, ‘whiteness’ specified a class position for the most vulnerable to association with African-Americans — notably, Irish immigrant workers” (2000: 20). According to David Roediger:

[T]he Irish-American workers helped to solidify a conception of racial whiteness as a means of distinguishing themselves from those racially and socially beneath them. The means by which these same workers accessed whiteness through the performance of blackness revealed the contradictions inherent in a racial ideology that limited identification to only a portion of humanity (Roediger 1991: 20).

While I am certain that there is truth in the statements made by Radano, Bohlman, and Roediger, the connection between blackface and whites of all socioeconomic strata, including the working classes, is not quite that simple. Consider the motivations of the Irish Catholic mummies in Carbonear: the mummies in blackface in 1831 and the darkies of 1862. Yes, they masked in order to distinguish themselves from another ethnic group. But I would suggest that this was done in an effort to demonstrate their power and strength over the *ruling* class (white Protestants), *not* over a black underclass.

According to a recent work by Lhamon (2003) which explores the social meanings of early blackface in the form of Jim Crow, created by T. D. Rice and credited, in 1830, for starting the international popular culture craze that was (is?) blackface performance, we now may understand a more complex picture of how white audiences and performers figured into early blackface. According to Lhamon, the original Jim Crow was an underclass hero *created by the lower classes for the lower classes* — people of diverse ethnicities who lived in close quarters in poor areas of New York City and other burgeoning frontier seaports. Lhamon argues convincingly for a separation between the minstrel phenomenon, and the early Jim Crow character.

### Jim Crow and Christmas Mumming

Jim Crow was a comedic black character created in the late 1820s by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a poor, white actor who grew up during the early nineteenth century in the one of the most ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in New York City. In the early 1830s, Rice “activated this black folk figure by performing it as a song and dance in blackface, bare toes out, with a worn, torn costume — pretty much as he imagined

a runaway field hand might have done it" (Lhamon 2003: 9). Although for many, the name Jim Crow is synonymous only with laws that legislated American racism against blacks, the early social meanings of the comedic blackface antics performed by Rice were initially much different than other blackface characters who both pre- and postdated the Jim Crow sensation (8).<sup>29</sup>

Rice's Jim Crow was a symbol of underclass revolt: a "wheedling and extravagant stranger," one who was able to escape the control of the ruling class through performance: his exaggerated black dress and dialect, his subtly witty and deeply cutting remarks, his ridiculous presentation of the upper-class dandy, and his limping, unpredictable dance (Lhamon 2003: 8). Lhamon argues that the disdain for Jim Crow among the upper classes was not only due to the fact that the Crow character was essentially poking fun and challenging the authority of the ruling class, but also that this character symbolized the unpredictable procreation of racial minorities as well as racial mixing, seen by influential thinkers such as John Quincy Adams and James Henry Hackett as a "gross outrage" (11-12).

After developing his career in America (1827 -1833), Rice traveled to England (1836-1844) and brought his character to the European stage. It was at the end of this period that circus entertainers were starting to merge "the newly forming racism gelling in society with some conventions from blackface" and started to present them as "the quite distinct minstrel shows" (Lhamon 2003: 31). It was at this point in history that the meanings of Jim Crow and blackface performance took divergent paths and minstrelsy began.

The social misreadings began to overshadow the original counter-hegemonic meaning of "Jim Crow." As Lhamon writes:

[T]he meaning of Jim Crow passed into the hands of the very salesmen the figure initially challenged. What had been radical in Jim Crow

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29. Rice was certainly not the first person to perform in blackface or to attempt to act out the racial Other on stage. In addition to characters such as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Lhamon describes pre-Jim Crow, American blackface characters, like "Sambo," who were represented as "marginal, laughable, and ephemeral" by comedians such as Edwin Forrest (Lhamon 2003: 8). Further he cites the post-Jim Crow (1842) Christie Minstrels as an example of what Eric Lott has termed "white ventriloquism through black art forms" (1993: 95) and a degradation of the complex and counterhegemonic social meanings attached to Jim Crow.



was now warped into the Jim Crow car on the train, the Jim Crow water cooler at the bus station, the Jim Crow elections and schools, the ethics of living and lynching Jim Crow. If there was any hope for the original trickster Jim Crow that Rice had transferred from African American performance, it lay now in *underground transmission*. It lay in *gestures and impulses of a subtextual lore cycle* (2003: 32; emphasis added).

The phrases “underground transmission” and “gestures and impulses of a subtextual lore cycle,” describe folklore and its processes of transmission. It is possible that some of the original social meanings of Jim Crow, as well as the associated modes of dress and masking, merged with, and *revived or intensified*, a contemporaneous, European-derived, lower-class Christmas parading tradition — a tradition that had a similar “get-one-over-on-the-upper-classes-through-performance” ethos as the original Jim Crow songs, dances, and plays. According to data I have collected, it appears that Jim Crow continued to live on through this calendar custom.

Susan G. Davis, in her article on the history of the Philadelphia mummers parade (1982), cites numerous primary sources for documented accounts of mummers dressing up specifically as Jim Crow as well as other racial stereotypes in the 1830s.

Blackface was a popular theme in street Christmas from the 1830s. Here there was an intimate connection to performances in city theatres and their most successful form, the Negro minstrel show. Jim Crow began to march in parades and processions almost immediately after his debut in 1832. Like transvestism, blackening-up was quick and cheap, but could sustain elaboration into a stage character or a marching minstrel troupe (1982: 189).

This evidence strongly suggests that American mummers incorporated early Jim Crow into their parades. It does not, however, relate directly to the Newfoundland tradition. I was initially skeptical about the extent of the possible connections between Newfoundland and Philadelphia in the early to mid nineteenth century. However, Philadelphia was counted, along with Boston or New York, as one of the most influential seaports in America. Further, it appears that Philadelphia was a common port of call for vessels going to and from Newfoundland.<sup>30</sup> Given the infamy of the Philadelphia parade and

30. According to advertisements in early editions of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* magazine printed in the early 1900s, Philadelphia was one of the main ports of call for the Allan Line, a steam shipping company that moved packages for the

associated riots, and the political environment in Newfoundland, I cannot help but think that it was the topic of many conversations at the time, especially among the working classes of these seaport towns, many of whom would have spent a considerable amount of time working on or around ships.

One might be tempted, as I was initially, to assume knowledge of the Jim Crow character in Newfoundland would extremely limited. No evidence known to date suggests that Rice visited Newfoundland as Jim Crow. According to Harbour Grace court documents and recollections of the sealing industry in the 1830s, Jim Crow was not only well known by urban dwelling Newfoundlanders early in Rice's career, but was also part of the costuming of blackface mummers in the Harbour Grace area just after Rice's death in 1860. Court documents held in the Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial archives concerning the murder of Issac Mercer by mummers in Bay Roberts in 1860 (a year before the mummers ban was enacted) show witness Stephen Courage testifying on 31 December 1860, about a row that took place between Daniel Brennan and Joseph Bray. Joseph and John Bray were dressed as mummers. "They had their shirts out over their trousers and had veils on their hats but they were not over their faces.... John Bray had kind of a Jim Crow hat on and Joseph Bray had a sou'wester" (Provincial Archives of Newfoundland).

From this account, it appears that the Brays tried to dress in a similar fashion. If their goal was to create costumes with similar meanings, it is interesting that they equated a "kind of 'Jim Crow' hat" with a sou'wester. The image of a sou'wester is an icon of working class Newfoundland (fishermen) and has been extensively used in caricatures of Newfoundland ethnicity. More specifically it is often an icon of Newfie ethnic jokes.

This account suggests that the character of Jim Crow was well enough known in 1860 for people to recognize when others were trying to imitate him. It also indicates knowledge of Jim Crow at the very end of Rice's career (and life) and after he had visited and performed in England. But what knowledge of Jim Crow existed in Newfoundland during the early years of Rice's rise to stardom?

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Newfoundland postal service. It is reasonable to suspect not only that a similar passenger service existed at that time, but also that this sea route was a well-established one. Therefore, it is also probable that there was some cultural exchange between Newfoundland and Philadelphia.

H.F. Shortis, a contributor to the 1902 and first volume of the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, shared his recollections about the arrival of a peculiar vessel that landed in St. John's in 1835 — a ship that was built by the Pittman family of New Perlican.<sup>31</sup>

The Pittmans of New Perlican are equally [masters of their art of shipbuilding]. It was old Mr. Pittman, of New Perlican, who built the brigantine *Jim Crow* for Mr. Richard Howley, the merchant, in former years, and which vessel caused such a commotion upon her arrival about 1835, but inducing hundreds of people of St. John's to visit Mr. Howley's wharf to view the figure-head of the nigger — *Jim Crow* — bedecked in the well-known hat, red jacket, white pants with patches and the fingers and thumbs extended from his nose. In a manner that...<sup>32</sup> placed upon it in those days, and which was looked upon as a marvel of artistic skill in the above days. A talented Scotchman was the artist, having carved the figure from a solid block of wood and painted it to represent the famous negro minstrel. (Shortis 1902: 9-10).

In addition to the fact that Shortis explicitly stated that *Jim Crow* was well known, this account is outstanding in a number of other ways. First, 1835 was the year that, according to Lhamon (2003), *Jim Crow* was cresting his popularity in America. This was early in Rice's career: the year before he traveled to Britain. Although it is possible that the author is estimating the exact date, it suggests that Newfoundlanders had intimate knowledge of *Jim Crow* as an *American* popular culture icon, at least early in Rice's career. They had enough knowledge of him to craft a figurehead in a likeness that was widely recognizable. This, again, could be related back to the fact that many Newfoundlanders traveled to work in New York and Boston.

Secondly, it suggests that the arrival of this vessel made a lasting impression in the author's memory. Shortis wrote this account sixty-seven years after it happened and in an article that recounts the highlights of Newfoundland sealing history in the old days. Thirdly, it describes a possible instance where the working class of the province creatively incorporated a popular culture icon into the occupational folklife of the sealing industry in the form of an entire vessel including

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31. New Perlican is a rural community on the northeast tip of the Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland.

32. This word was illegible due to damage of the original document.

its figurehead. This was an act of folklore, or an example of how a folk group can use popular culture to "select and appropriate mass-produced texts for their own purposes" (Narváez 1992: 20). In this case, the shipbuilders might have made this choice.

However it is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that Mr. Howley made the request to have his ship named and adorned in such a manner. Given Lhamon's interpretation of early meanings of Jim Crow, Howley's motivations for selecting such a name and figurehead probably lay in his attitude towards the crew he would employ on his vessel. Most of the sealers, during this time frame, were recent Irish immigrants from Kilkenny. These "sealers were a landless, property-less class and the true frontiersmen of nineteenth-century Newfoundland society" (Greene 2003: 64). Given this information, it appears that Howley's intent was most likely to disrespect the Irish sealers by comparing them to slaves by choosing to name his vessel (and their place of work) after a pathetic, runaway black slave, thought, among the upper classes, to be the epitome of a fool. If Howley made this choice, he could have inadvertently made himself the butt of a joke, understood only by the working class. According to Lhamon's interpretations of Jim Crow as a resistant figure during this time, the arrival of this vessel could have been seen by the working class as the unintentional practical joke of the decade.<sup>33</sup> This certainly could explain why so many came to see it in the mid 1830s, a time during which detailed accounts of mummering began to appear more frequently.

As Story writes, "by the fourth decade of the nineteenth century descriptions of unusual fullness and interest begin to be recorded, especially accounts of the practices of the mummers in St. John's" (Halpert and Storey 1969: 170). According to Lewis Anspach, there is evidence which suggests that, before this period, mummering was relatively unpopular compared to the English Yule log tradition.

The ancient British custom of the Yule, or Christmas log or block, is universally observed by the inhabitants of Newfoundland. On

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33. This brings to mind Robert Darnton's essay about the Great Cat Massacre in eighteenth-century Paris and the practical joke played upon the master of a printshop by his poorly treated apprentices. Darnton's analysis shows how the workers successfully rebelled against the master of the house without risking their jobs by using comic/folk symbolism that the upper class did not understand because of the cultural divide between the classes.

Christmas-eve, at sun-set, an immense block provided on purpose from the adjoining woods, is laid on the back of the fire-place, to be left there till it is entirely consumed; the ceremony of lighting it is announced by the firing of muskets or seal guns before the door of each dwelling house. This, among them, is the prelude to a season of joy and merriment.... This custom is said to be of great antiquity and still prevalent in the north of England.... Christmas dinners are in general practice; so are likewise Christmas boxes or presents, not in coin, for this is not in common use there, but in eatables, from a turkey or a quarter of veal...down to a nicely smoked salmon. This custom ... is said to have originated with mariners....

Another custom, which is said to be still observed in the North of England, prevails in some parts of Newfoundland, although not with general approbation: it is called mumming; men and women exchange clothes with each other, and go from house to house singing and dancing on which occasion Christmas-boxes are expected, and generally granted previous to the performance, in order to get rid of them. The author must, in justice to the native inhabitants of Conception Bay, observe that frequent attempts have been made to introduce this practice among them, but they have been generally resisted, and publicly reprobated (Anspach 1819: 475-477).

Story suggests that Anspach might have played down the popularity of the mummering tradition among Newfoundlanders in order to paint an inaccurate and rosy picture of the colony. He states two problems with Anspach's account:

to determine to what extent Anspach's desire (natural, perhaps, in a man who belonged to the Anglican "Establishment") to present Newfoundland to English readers as an eminently respectable and orderly society led him to minimize the prevalence of Christmas mumming and the period of its introduction to Conception Bay; and to determine also whether his half-confessed unfamiliarity with more distant settlements makes his generalization reliable (1969: 170).

Although Anspach might have been in a position of considerable authority, he was certainly not the only person who had the opportunity to write something about the mummering tradition, especially if it had been as popular, as prevalent, and as English, as I, and others, may have originally thought. Even if he did play down mummering in Newfoundland, I am reluctant to believe that it is the only reason why no contemporaneous accounts appear in the printed record before 1831. I do not think it is a mere coincidence that the flourishing and subsequent banning of Christmas mummering in the urban centres of

Newfoundland (1831-1861) is synchronous with the rise and fall of Rice and his Jim Crow act (1827-1860). It is possible that the Jim Crow phenomenon reinvigorated and appended an unpopular and marginal folk custom that might have been destined for extinction or obscurity because the social contexts of this old-world custom simply did not exist in the New World. Consider the fact that the nineteenth-century mummering known to date took place in the context of tremendous civil unrest between the newly-emancipated Irish and the English establishment of Newfoundland who were vying for resources, educational jurisdiction, and political influence. This conflict occurred at the same time that the newly-freed black slaves of New York City were struggling to establish themselves by gaining access to the basics of living such as housing, food, water, employment, and education.

### Conclusion: Making Cool Things Hot Again

In his article concerning the concept of black meaning stranger in the community of Cat Harbour, Faris discusses how the black/white symbolism extends to include aspects of mourning practices.

At funerals, those classed as “mourners” — the closest being kinsmen of the deceased — wear black ribbons, and are regarded as being in a state of ritual pollution. They are *mourning* — a highly emotional (and therefore dangerous/sacred) situation. They are seated separately in the church, “parade” separately in the funeral procession, have a special and exclusive ceremony in the house of the deceased, and do not touch the corpse or coffin, dig the grave, or handle any of the logistics of burial. Instead, a category of persons (and things) wearing white ribbons — *close outsiders* in a kinship sense (kinship is the deciding factor in defining “mourners”) — take care of all the physical arrangements of the funeral. In this category are included the pallbearers, the horse and sleigh (or now, in good weather a pick-up truck) used to pull the bier, and the officiating minister or lay reader. Each of these displays a white ribbon, and is necessary in a very real way to make *hot things cool* (1969: 139-140; emphasis in the original).

Faris footnotes that he deliberately uses the terms “close outsider” (locals who are not kin) and “make hot things cool” (the corpse being hot and the burial making things cool) in order to highlight the fact that they are both “idioms of the African mortuary ritual” (see Goody 1959). He states “the striking parallels cannot be ignored” (Faris 1969: 140).

Similarly, I think that the “striking parallels” between mummering, Jim Crow, and blackface are enough to warrant exhuming the dead, so to speak, of a long cool aspect of Newfoundland folklore — Christmas mummering — to *make cool things hot* once again. I do not think it is a mere coincidence that Faris saw similarities between African and Newfoundland death customs, if we consider the flow of people, culture, and goods that were transported by the trade winds and associated ocean currents.

It is not enough to simply highlight the similarities between any cultural form, even those as distinctive and as edgy as blackface and minstrelsy within the Newfoundland mummering tradition. It is my goal that this essay will serve to reinvigorate scholarly interest in the Christmas mummering tradition. The data on Newfoundland mummering held in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archives is extensive. Given the amount of material accessible to scholars, there is much left to discover not only about Newfoundland mummering, but also about how the concept of blackness operates in a predominantly white society.

Newfoundland’s cultural connections to England and Ireland cannot, nor should not, be denied. Given the long-standing and intimate economic connections between Newfoundland and the salt fish trade made possible by ships which navigated the Atlantic according to the trade winds, it might do well for us contemporary researchers of Newfoundland folklore to do more than just look eastward across the Atlantic, as the crow flies. Scholars must also trace how the ships sailed so that we may investigate, from a historical point of view, the influence exerted by this current of culture which flowed between seaport towns all over the Atlantic.

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