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# Tradition, Modernity, and the Enmeshing of Home and Away: *The Shipping News* and Proulx's 1990s Newfoundland

DERVILA COOKE

HERB WYILE, DRAWING ON Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk*, writes that much of recent Atlantic-Canadian literature "both exploits and subverts the mythological aura of the Folk" (34). I would like to apply this idea to American writer Annie Proulx's 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Shipping News*, which depicts Canadian and Newfoundland realities. These realities include the near exhaustion of the groundfish stocks, the effects of the oil industry and globalization, the Smallwood resettlements, the Confederation debate, the sense of administration from afar, and even the Home Boys saga. Tracey Whalen points out that it is commonplace to criticize the novel for a caricatural portrayal of Newfoundlanders (Pierson; Hammett and Barrell; Porter). However, I see the novel as closer to Wyile's terms above. I hope to show that it plays on, while also subverting, a certain idealized and romanticized notion of the quirky and close-to-nature "Folk," in its representation of the challenges of (post)modernity that affect the fictional outport community of Killick-Claw.

Proulx has a strong connection with marginalized rural communities. She wrote *The Shipping News* after falling "madly in love" with Newfoundland and buying a house in Gunners Cove (Cox; Gilbert), though she was primarily based in the United States while researching and writing the novel. She is not immune to the prevailing representation of Newfoundlanders as quirky and colourful, which taps into what James Overton calls "the quest for quaintness" in portrayals of Newfoundland culture, by locals and non-Newfoundlanders alike. As Overton remarks, the desire for quaintness accompanies the hunger of modern North Americans for "pristine wilderness and the qualities of a primitive society" (23).<sup>1</sup> The novel does, of course, gain much of its force from its descriptions of wild and remote coastal landscape, and it certainly portrays the inhabitants of Killick-Claw as colourful and "folksy."

Indeed, much of its commercial appeal has arisen from these elements. However, I argue that Proulx can be somewhat excused from the charge of stereotyping because of her sympathetic and often nuanced treatment of economic, social, and ecological issues affecting Newfoundland and also because of the fable-like qualities of the novel (bordering on magic realism), which are discussed towards the end of this essay.

A related aim of mine is to analyze Proulx's concern with what she described to Christopher Cox in 2009 as "the fringe edges of dissolution and construction of societies." One of the most significant currents in the novel is the tension between tradition and modernity, including questions of ecology. Another is the interplay between Home (the local, the homegrown, the community-based), and Away (the global, the federal, and even the regional in the opposition between St. John's and Killick-Claw). While Proulx's treatment of Home and Away might seem polarized to some, the novel, in fact, stresses the growing number of outside influences on Newfoundland, as well as the manner in which the community must — and does — deal with change. Away has filtered deep into Home, and Proulx documents many recent upheavals in her Killick-Claw community. I hope to demonstrate how the text underscores the challenges facing Newfoundland in the early 1990s, in terms of globalization, identity, and ecology. I will also discuss Lasse Hallström's 2001 film adaptation, which essentially simplifies the text, focusing, as Proulx's publishers did, on the quaint and the sublime.

The title of *The Shipping News*, while polysemic, primarily underlines the idea of change inherent in the word "news." It refers most concretely to the shipping log kept by the harbourmaster of Killick-Claw, which now mainly lists the factory-freezers, oil tankers, and giant trawlers that arrive and depart. It also refers to the column authored by Proulx's main character, Quoye, in the local paper, *The Gammy Bird*. Quoye's column develops from an initial list of ships to fuller analysis of local sea-related concerns, as he becomes increasingly preoccupied with oil spills, the crisis in the fisheries, and also with what he calls "powerful shipping interests" (220). The title also refers to the practice in times past of *gamming*, where news was sociably shouted along as vessels pulled up alongside one another; indeed, it is from this practice that the newspaper takes its name. When read in the light of the concerns of the novel, the title thus encompasses notions of change, modernity, and tradition.

Like the title, the sea itself embodies tensions between tradition and modernity, and between the local and global. As a locus of heritage in the novel, it is, to use the term of French anthropologist Marc Augé, an “anthropological place,” but it can also be seen as a postmodern space (Augé would call this “supermodern”). For Augé, anthropological places are invested with notions of history and belonging, arising from social interactions between people. Through such practices as gambling, small-boat fishing, and seal hunting, the sea has long been a place of social interaction for Newfoundlanders, with legends and knowledge handed down through generations (for example, Billy Pretty’s sea skills and his poetic aids to navigation). Proulx’s publishers exploited these ideas of heritage and locale in the cover art for various editions of the book. These covers — often featuring an expanse of wild water with images of rocks, seabirds, and small fishing boats; or timber houses on headlands; and lighthouses — foreground the sea in a way that is idealized and nostalgic, and sometimes quaint. However, as the harbour-master’s shipping log attests, the Newfoundland seas are now also governed by technology and global capitalism. For Kazys Varnelis, this is “a constant condition, produced by the forces of mobility, capital, and globalization” and stems from “the modern disconnect with the environment.” Yet Proulx’s publishers have understood that it is more profitable to highlight the nostalgic, pre-lapsarian qualities of the sea. As Quoye writes in his article on the *Golden Goose* oil spill at Cape Despond, “Nobody hangs a picture of an oil tanker” (214). We could just as well say that “nobody puts a picture of an oil tanker on the cover of a novel” — even a novel that features numerous references to ecological decline and to the dangers of an overly profit-driven approach to the resource sector. The sublimation of these elements is, I argue, part of a prevailing desire to see Proulx’s novel as epic, romantic, amusing, or indeed caricatural, and not as substantially environmentally concerned or critical of big business, or even concerned with the tensions and overlap between tradition and modernity.

For Robert Scott Stewart, the issue of groundedness in community underlies the novel, and it is certainly true that the growth of a sense of local identity encourages Quoye toward self-articulation. Through such characters as Wavy Prowse and Jack Buggit — and ultimately Quoye himself — Proulx shows the power of individuals to reinforce communities and even to transform them in small but significant ways.

However, the connections between local life and forces farther afield are also made clear. At first sight, Wavey seems highly “local.” She forages for food, plays an accordion, and is deeply rooted in the community. Yet she depends on external buying power, as she and her family rely on touristic woodcarvings for a good part of their income. Interestingly, both her first name and surname link her to the trope of the sea, which, as we have seen, combines local and global aspects. Jack’s newspaper, though it arises from a local initiative (his own), is initially funded and assisted by administrators in Ottawa. By the end of the novel, Quoyile has indeed become locally integrated — heading up the Killick-Claw newspaper and assimilating some boatbuilding and navigation skills — but he is also more aware of external forces that affect his community. Even Billy Pretty, who, like Wavey and Jack, is deeply rooted in the area (despite the fact that his father was a Londoner), has recently come to an awareness that the “Home Page” of the newspaper needs to reflect the globalized life of its readers. These are just some of the ways in which Proulx points out the connectedness of the community to the wider world.

Big business, and to an extent big government, are powerful forces affecting the residents of Killick-Claw, along with ecological decline and the lack of sustainable or fulfilling work. The issue of worker safety is another area of concern. It is worth noting that Frederic Jameson’s seminal writings were first published as a book (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) in 1991 — just a few years ahead of *The Shipping News*. Jameson includes as a key aspect of postmodernity the internationalization of business, writing of “new forms of business organization (multinationals, transnationals) beyond the monopoly stage” (xvii-xviii) and “the global restructuring of production and the introduction of radically new technologies that have . . . displaced new kinds of industry to unexpected parts of the world, and recruited work forces different from the traditional ones in a variety of features” (318). All of these aspects of internationalization are realities in Killick-Claw. Jameson writes that bureaucratization of daily life and state involvement in business are often taken for granted as part of postmodern society, as opposed to globalization, which is relatively new (xvii). For the Newfoundland of *The Shipping News*, however, state bureaucracy and interference in local life remain thorny issues. While Jack’s newspaper shows the potential of some types of local-federal partnership, most of

the jobs created by the federal government are temporary, as are those created by global bosses. Local initiatives are portrayed as more sustainable and more in tune with the needs of the community.

Ecological decline is a related wider-world force informing the plot. Proulx's novel was published at a time of heightened environmental awareness, with the Canadian government imposing a cod moratorium in 1992. There was also a rise in the popularity of ecocriticism as a critical approach to literature in the 1990s, attested by the success of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996. Glotfelty writes that ecological criticism is driven by "the fundamental premise that all human nature is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). This statement clearly applies to much of Proulx's writing. In a 2009 essay, Dan Flores called her an "environmental historian." *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002) focuses on the putrid smells of industrialized hog farming, *Red Desert* (2008) criticizes the gas industry for its impact on the fragile ecosystem of the Wyoming desert, and *Bird Cloud* (2011) decries the electrocution of eagles by power lines owned by enormous companies. In *The Shipping News*, the greed and mismanagement of industry, with the collusion of big government in certain cases, lead to over-fishing and the headlong exploitation of oil without regard to either environmental concerns or to human safety, or indeed to the impact on the local social matrix. As befits a historian (she completed part of a PhD in history in Montreal), Proulx is very interested in documenting societal upheaval; however, as she commented to Cox, she is also aware that "fiction can bring about change."

As I will demonstrate, Proulx's writing is both postmodern and regionalist. As Alex Hunt has noted, Proulx shows that "distinctions and differences are worth fighting for" (1) in the face of crushing homogeneity. While Killick-Claw must, and does, adapt to the "supermodern" spaces of technology and globalization, especially as concerns its seas, the community also still fits Augé's notion of anthropological place. Proulx's postmodernism is thus both constative and performative: she describes the effects of postmodernity while also, to an extent, challenging them. As such, her writing fits with Riegel and Wylie's notion of postmodernism as part of a cultural shift with "counter-universalizing and decentralizing tendencies" that can "favour the local, the regional, and the specific" (xiii). I will start by looking at how the Killick-Claw community is presented and the challenges it faces before turning to the

elisions of the film version and to the fable-like elements of the plot. I will then reflect on what these fable-like elements might mean, in terms of literary self-consciousness and of the social, ecological, and economic realities underlying the text.

### Resisting “damaging isolation”

In an issue of *The New Yorker* in 2000 (later published online), Proulx gave the following account of what compels her to write: “For me, the strongest influences are the varied landscapes and bare ground of the hinterlands, rough weather and rural people living lives in the pincers of damaging isolation, ingrained localisms, and the economic decisions made by distant urban powers.” This idea of living in “damaging isolation” is represented graphically in *The Shipping News* through the character of Cousin Nolan. Cousin Nolan is old and withered and lives apart from the rest of the community. Having refused to be “resettled” during the Smallwood era, he is aided with gifts of food and fuel by the community at the onset of each winter but remains immured in the past, obsessed with the green house that was dragged by his outcast ancestors from Gaze Island to Quoyale Point. To assert his sense of self, he ties knots in bits of string to conjure up storms and curses on his nephew who now occupies the homestead. It is tempting to see Cousin Nolan as symbolizing “primitive” and perhaps irrational aspects of the Killick-Claw past. He is certainly the most culturally isolated of all of the characters. Yet, importantly, he is not representative of the community, and the memory of the barbaric Quoyale relatives diminishes in strength when the house on Quoyale Point finally blows away. Unlike Cousin Nolan, the Killick-Claw residents have moved with the times and have benefitted from Canadian and global interests, notably through a new repair dock and a truck terminal. They have also experienced the positive effects of job creation on the oil rigs and giant ships (although this is, at times, a poisoned chalice) and in the setting up of *The Gammy Bird*. It is clear that Killick-Claw cannot, and does not, survive independently of outside influence and that the lives of the residents are tied up with the regional, the federal, and the global. Interestingly, Cousin Nolan, the character who most resists outside influence, is ultimately confined to a mental institution — evidence indeed of “damaging isolation.”

While Cousin Nolan represents some of the more inward-looking

aspects of the Newfoundland past, tradition and heritage are nonetheless presented as important. A close relationship with the sea seems bound up with the very identity of the community, as is clear from the impressive navigational skills of Billy Pretty and Dennis Buggit, Alvin Yark's boatbuilding prowess, and Jack's seal-hunting skills. Other ways in which the novel celebrates heritage include the value placed on the tradition of communal pulling together and the joy Wavey's accordion brings to her son. Yet while Newfoundland historian Stuart Pierson describes the novel as "a pastoral," claiming it portrays a vision of "a gentle, humane, bucolic past" (153), the novel is more complex than this. Proulx does admire traditional work and skills and the ethos of helping one's neighbour (and indeed self-help), but she also approaches the notion of heritage with some irony. In her characterization of the American blow-in Quoye, she seems to be gently mocking the urban (North) American quest for heritage, and perhaps even the fantasy that she, as an American herself — or at least as a non-Newfoundlander — has built up around the island. When, for example, Quoye seeks to integrate himself into the community, to "seize his heritage" (93), by learning to navigate the seas in a small boat, he capsizes and nearly drowns because he has not had the sense to buy a proper rodney, as any Newfoundlander would have known to do.

For Pierson, the novel portrays a "violent, harsh Americanized present" (153), but, again, I would like to nuance this view. It is true that Proulx presents the model of rugged individualism immersed in nature in attractive terms, and inserts several important foils in the text. Bland Mockingburg in Vermont, which has been deforested in the name of progress, is one such foil. Another is Los Angeles, with its race riots and rampant consumerism, which seem very alien to the Killick-Claw community despite the increase in consumer products available there. As a pragmatist, Proulx does not, however, condemn or dismiss all aspects of modernity. For example, elements of North American technology such as computers and snowmobiles are accepted, even welcomed, and integrated into Killick-Claw life. Dennis Buggit can handle a snowmobile on dangerous ice as well as he can handle a boat. As Ted Card remarks, moreover, antibiotics may have saved Billy's life. Even Jack Buggit, as he makes his anti-Confederation (and anti-provincial government) declamation (68), recognizes that some of the benefits promised by the Confederation lobby have materialized: electricity,



roads, telephone, radio, health care, mail service, and education among them. The novel thus steers a fine line between promoting tradition and accepting the need for openness to modernity and the outside world. What seems clear is that the old ways must not be jettisoned entirely. Significantly, and sensibly, the shipping news at the harbourmaster's office is recorded via a labour-saving computer *and* an old-fashioned log book, in case of power cuts or technological breakdowns. We will see, however, that other aspects of modernity are less welcome, such as government administration that is either detached from local realities or overly focused on profit, or the greed of industrial giants.

Some might see a parochial side to the community in the fact that characters such as Mavis Bangs and Billy Pretty rail against what they see as the moral and/or environmental degradation seeping in from industrialized, Americanized societies. Similarly, Tert Card, as managing editor of *The Gammy Bird*, likes to include articles that play on "the lunacy of those from away" (120). Yet the community also has something of a tradition of welcoming outsiders — Quoye, for one, although it is true he is of Newfoundland descent. The English globe-trotter Nutbeem, who works at *The Gammy Bird*, stands out as another character from Away who becomes integrated into the community. Nutbeem brings with him foreign dishes and music, and it is from his tapes that Quoye thinks his children have learned the African song they sing for the Christmas pageant (absent from the film). Importantly, the townspeople do not want to let Nutbeem leave. Through Nutbeem and Quoye, Proulx shows that one does not need to be born in Newfoundland to be welcomed there. Nor does one need to have deep roots in the island in order to develop a strong attachment to the place (this applies to Quoye, to Billy and his father, to Proulx herself, and to a lesser degree to Nutbeem). Interestingly, Billy, who is one of the most local-seeming of all the characters due to his tightly honed navigation skills, is the son of an immigrant with no Newfoundland connections. Pretty senior was a marooned Home Boy and son of a printer from London, who discovered that he was a natural farmer once he was gathered into the community on Gaze Island. All of these details make it clear that the Killick-Claw community is both able to look outward (to an extent) and to absorb new elements. It should be remembered, however, that the place remains ethnically homogeneous. Quoye is of native stock, Nutbeem is probably Caucasian, and while Mockingburg

and Los Angeles are home to the black character Partridge, Killick-Claw has a fleeting African song and *partridgeberry* duff.

Quoye in particular moves away from “damaging isolation” on several different levels. Initially, he is mentally isolated, through his shyness, his memories of family humiliation, his grief following the death of his self-obsessed wife, Petal, and later through his shame at family/ancestral abuse and barbarism. He manages to emerge from this psychological prison by unravelling the knots of the past. Part of Quoye’s personal redemption stems from his interaction with the local community, through his newspaper role, and his connection with traditional practice in his sea trips. Yet his reflections on outside forces also influence the blossoming of his Killick-Claw identity — for example, when he decries the effects of fuel spills on the local wildlife in the personally transformative column on oil tankers that he writes for *The Gammy Bird*. His previous newspaper work in Mockingburg was far more parochial and inward-looking. As Proulx’s narrator states, “He abstracted his life from the times” (11). In Quoye’s case, then, “damaging isolation” is negated through a restorative sense of community and attachment to place, both the human and the natural environment, but also through his growing engagement with global issues (albeit because of their local effect).

### “Canada Manpower” and local initiative

In the same 2000 *New Yorker* piece, Proulx singles out as another rural hardship “the economic decisions made by distant urban powers.” The absurdities and even tragedies engendered by faraway, bureaucratic, centralized systems of government are among the most negative aspects of modernity depicted in the novel. One amusing manifestation of this decision-making-from-a-distance is the federal government’s construction of a glove factory, despite the fact that an earlier tannery built by these same powers has been forced to close down and that no-one knows how to make gloves. This example highlights the lack of connection between administrators in Ottawa and those affected by their decisions. As a result, it does not seem unreasonable for Nutbeem to include stories from “Canada” in his “Foreign news” section, although Tert Card does point out that not all Newfoundlanders think of Canada as “a foreign power” (259-60).

By contrast, Jack’s success with *The Gammy Bird* shows the value of grassroots initiatives. While Canada Manpower offers him one unsuit-

able job after another, he ultimately creates his own sustainable employment (with their funding, admittedly), in response to a real local need. His style of management shows what might work well in the relationship between Ottawa and Newfoundland. It is the opposite of “top-down,” in that he allows all of his staff to influence the direction the newspaper takes. While his hands-off approach is at times inadvisable, given the despotic personality of his managing editor, Jack listens to his workers and ultimately even favours the stance of new staff member Quoyle over the more senior Card. Jack’s paper also seems to be a sustainable economic unit, in that it reflects local needs and concerns. Local initiatives are also important in the community transformation brought about by the volunteer work of Wavey Prowse and Beety Buggit. Wavey’s passionate advocacy of classes for Down Syndrome children positively transforms local life, as does “Saving Grace,” the Women’s Aid organization she sets up with Beety.

**The resource sector: big business, big government, worker safety, and ecology**

Questions of Home and Away, and of tradition and modernity, come to the fore again in Proulx’s treatment of the oil industry and the fisheries, especially the interrelation between globalized big business and big government and the effects on worker safety and ecology. Jack is more concerned with the immediate effects on his self-sufficiency, however. In a furiously “anti-foreign” outpouring, he hints at collaboration between government and industry, of the type the Frankfurt School theoreticians called “state capitalism” (Jameson xvii). For Kent Blades (qtd. in Wyile 37), close collaboration — and indeed collusion — between government and big business were key factors in the fisheries crisis. Jack himself blames Ottawa, international fishing companies, and, by implication, foreign government fishing boards:

And the fishing’s went down, down, down, forty years sliding away into nothing, the goddamn Canada government giving fishing rights to every country on the face of the earth, but regulating us out of business. The damn foreign trawlers. That’s where all the fish is went. (68)

Jack presents a highly polarized vision of Home versus Away here, ignoring the fact that Newfoundlanders also played some part in the overfish-

ing. He is more interested in, and incensed by, impositions from “Away.” Even though the action of the novel takes place before the 1992 moratorium, he feels — as many Newfoundland fishers would a few years later — as though he has lost control of his life. Quoyale, for his part, is conscious that such diminished self-sufficiency has become the norm in postmodern society. Reflecting to himself on Jack’s lament that “we lives by rules made somewhere else by sons a bitches don’t know nothin’ about this place,” Quoyale comments “that’s how it was everywhere. Jack was lucky he’d escaped so long” (308).

Until very recently, the Grand Banks area to the south and south-east of the island was home to the most fertile cod fishing grounds anywhere in the world. Yet, at the time of writing, the harvestable stock of northern cod has almost disappeared. In the novel, Herold Nightingale’s boat sinks, symbolically, under the weight of empty traps (234). This crisis arose partly due to technological advancements: echo-sounding to find the fish, drag nets to trawl the ocean (resulting in vast amounts of overkill, with immature fish being thrown back, dead, into the ocean), efficient boats that could travel farther and faster, and the development of the factory-freezer ship.<sup>2</sup> Compounding the problem, the Ottawa government tended to overestimate the number of fish and how quickly stocks could be replenished, while also allocating quotas based on economic rather than ecological criteria. Lack of regulation until 1977 — the year in which Canada restricted foreign fishing around most of the island — meant that large overseas fleets were free to exploit the ocean. “Extractive” practices, the Frankenstein effect of technology run riot; distant, sometimes ill-informed, administrators; and large-scale international profiteering were, thus, all key to the crisis.

As regards the oil industry, several oilfields have been found in Newfoundland since the 1970s and have provided significant economic growth in the region; however, while recognizing that oil brings jobs, Proulx highlights issues of worker safety, precarious employment, and pollution. As with the crisis in the fisheries, a laissez-faire approach by government arguably compromised worker safety in the oil and gas industries until the Royal Commission investigation into the 1982 *Ocean Ranger* oil rig disaster, in which all eighty-four crew members perished. Wyile discusses the self-serving nature of some oil companies’ notion of “acceptable levels of risk” prior to this disaster. He also highlights the provincial and federal squabbling over oil rights before

the event and the low priority given to training and safety regulations (75, 82), as does Jenny Higgins ("Response"). In *The Shipping News*, Proulx appears to have based her *Sevenseas Hector* disaster on the *Ocean Ranger*, as shown in Wavey's account:

The government didn't have any safety rules for these things. The design of the rig was bad. Nobody on the rig knew who was in charge. Was it the tool pusher or the master? Most of the men on board didn't know nothing about the sea. Geologists and cementers, derrickmen, mud watchers, drillers, welders and fitters, they was after the oil, no attention to the water or weather. Didn't even understand the weather reports that come to them. Didn't know enough to close the deadlights when the seas worked up. (207)

Proulx draws strongly on the *Ocean Ranger* here. The Royal Commission investigation into the real-life disaster substantiates this, painting a very similar picture to Proulx's fictional one (Wyile 79). However, Proulx does not openly suggest that provincial-and-federal-stake-holding quarrels deflected attention from proper regulation or safety controls. Nor is the *Sevenseas Hector* specifically linked with the dangers of globalization in the text, although its real-life model was built in the Gulf of Mexico; had drilled in New Jersey, Ireland, and Alaska; and was run by the transnational companies of Odeco and Mobil Oil. Some readers (especially Newfoundland readers who are aware of the parallels) may nonetheless attach these associations to the *Sevenseas Hector*, especially given the novel's overt concern with state capitalism and globalization in the fishing crisis.

Proulx also highlights industrial negligence in her portrayal of the *Rome*, a transnational cargo ship registered in Panama with a crew of workers from Myanmar, which suffers a fire leading to two casualties. Inadequate safety measures or deliberate insurance fraud may be to blame. In any case, Proulx hints that its owners seek to get around safety standards and to exploit cheap labour available globally (247).<sup>3</sup> Industrial malpractice is even more blatant in the article Quoyale writes on the Plimsoll line. This is a safe loading mark, introduced after much lobbying by Samuel Plimsoll, M.P. — whom Quoyale terms "a single concerned individual" (220) — to combat the murderous practices of nineteenth-century shipping magnates who overloaded their ships in order to reap insurance rewards. In the case of the *Golden Goose* oil spill, there is no clear indication of industrial malpractice, but the

spill suggests that the ship may not have been built to withstand the Newfoundland seas. (This was in any case true for the *Ocean Ranger*, which was built and tested in the Gulf of Mexico.)

Despite the various oil-related disasters, not all of the residents of Killick-Claw are anti-oil. Tert Card is strongly in favour of the industry — accusing Quoyle of “bloody American pinko Greenpeace liberalism” (215) — while Quoyle and Billy are more critical. Proulx seems to wish to provide an authentic spread of opinion, by including a chapter on the oil debate between Card and Billy. The debate shows an even divide in local views: Card and the cook see the future of Newfoundland in oil, while Billy and the fish plant supervisor represent the traditional reliance on fishing. Billy is furiously anti-oil, partly due to the devastation caused by spills, and as such provides an example of homegrown environmentalism. Some aspects of his stance, however, are excessive, including his association of the modernity heralded by the oil industry with all sorts of degradation, including the advent of prostitutes “waggling their red behinds” (212). Card’s wholesale embracing of oil is equally caricatural, though, as it is very short-sighted ecologically. Given the near annihilation of the groundfish stocks, it is difficult to contest his comment that “there’s too many men fishing and not enough fish” (214). Yet while it might seem reasonable to view the oil industry as a stopgap for several decades, neither Card nor the cook articulates any vision for allowing the fishing industry to recover and managing it in a sustainable manner. By current estimates, each oil field may last approximately twenty years, and, of course, other fields may be discovered. However, ultimately, oil drilling is a finite activity that has no real chance of sustainability, unlike small or mid-scale fishing.

Proulx also raises the issue of oil profits bypassing outport communities — another tension between Home and Away. Billy remarks that foreign businesses will profit the most and that the hotels, shops, and supply companies in St. John’s will also benefit, but that Killick-Claw itself will see little return (211-12). By contrast, even in its reduced glory, traditional fishing gives back to the community. It is also linked to aspirations of continuity, symbolized by the passing of the lobster licence from Jack to Dennis Buggit. Despite the huge decline in the groundfish stocks, the Buggit and Prowse families continue to try to fish or hunt on the sea. To some extent, Jack’s lobster pots and nets and the skilled and demanding nature of seal hunting allow him to repair

his fractured sense of self. Seafaring is also linked to continuity via Alvin Yark's tutoring of Quoyale and is deeply enmeshed in the identity of Dennis Buggit, who is willing to work on any boat, including a factory-freezer ship, as long as he can stay on the water. Significantly, it is only after Quoyale's immersion in the sea that he becomes editor of *The Gammy Bird*, thus entering fully into the community.

### Screening the text

Lasse Hallström's film omits much of what makes Proulx's novel interesting from the point of view of the challenges posed by (post)modernity. Focusing less on the issues facing Killick-Claw as a community and concentrating more on the personal transformation in Quoyale, the film compresses and simplifies questions relating to the environment and the economy. What explicitly ecological content the film contains is encapsulated in the stand-off between Card and Quoyale, where Card talks of "petrodollars" and "a golden flow of jobs," to which Quoyale replies that this will mean "less fish and less fishermen." The threats to the fishing industry are portrayed here exclusively in terms of pollution from oil exploitation, with no attention given to the problem of over-fishing and the groundfish crisis, or indeed to the frequent loss of life on oil tankers, oil rigs, or huge ships. The film thus over-simplifies the trope of the sea by minimizing the effects of industrialization on it. Hallström's adaptation also pays less attention to the visceral rawness of the sea in Proulx's novel, which gives a much stronger sense of the battle for survival and of the sometimes devastating human losses in the outport regions.

Admittedly, cinema does have a tendency to seem more real than fictional prose, due to what Thomas Leitch calls the "high iconicity" that often accompanies cinematographic representation (157). Perhaps as an inevitable result of this, the film is less exaggerated in its depiction of some of the characters, including Quoyale. As played by Kevin Spacey, Quoyale seems, and looks, relatively normal. In the novel, by contrast, Quoyale seems more like a beast in some fairy story: a friendly giant of a man with a huge chin. Just as Proulx's hero is in many ways grotesque (the quantities of food he consumes are suitably gigantic), and exaggeratedly naive, his first wife, Petal, is quite extraordinary, selling her children to a video pornographer, apparently without qualms. As such, it is easier to suspend our disbelief when we read about her as a

literary character than when we see her as a real person in the film. This is because Proulx's text plays openly with fable, exaggeration, and other fictional devices, in accepted postmodern literary fashion. As Whalen has remarked, the novel displays an "overt theatricality" (57). Indeed, Proulx does not seem to have set out to be documentary or realistic in portraying a certain vision of Newfoundland, but rather to create what, at times, is a magical atmosphere in order to draw the reader into her net. Alvin Yark sees a storm approaching in "the trickster sky" (331), while Billy calls the cold wind "a stepmother's breath" (285). Wavey and the other female characters are described in terms of archetypes: "The Tall and Quiet Woman," "the Maid in the Meadow," "the Stout Hearted Woman," and "the Demon Lover." Just as Nolan is an ogre (200) to Quoy's friendly giant, the female characters are — like those in fairy tales — either monstrous, resourceful, spell-bound, or psychic. It is true that the film incorporates otherworldly aspects: the "magic" of Jack's resurrection, Jack and Bunny's second sight, the house that blows away, along with images of haunting and surreal scenes of Quoy immersed in watery prisons. However, the lack of a sense of the characters as literary entities based on folk-tale archetypes robs the film of much of the subtlety of Proulx's magical atmosphere.

### Magic realism, "real" magic, and reality

Maggie Ann Bowers has written of "the paradoxical aspect of magic realism," whereby events are presented both as clearly fictional and as strongly based in reality (72). Proulx's indication that Quoy and his kin are characters in a fable — but one based on important social concerns — underscores the sense of magic realism that often surfaces in the novel. Julie Scanlon has described Proulx's style of writing as a whole as "ambivalently realist" (90), and these terms are perhaps especially relevant to *The Shipping News*. Wyile has remarked that Proulx's deliberately odd characters and the appeal that their cultural difference has for the urban (non-Newfoundland) reader are, in part, an "eccentric remedy for the blandness and monotony of modern consumer culture" (24). Yet her use of strange or magical events perhaps has an added significance. Jennifer Andrews points out that "magic realism pays particular attention to places and communities that have been marginalized" and is often "a tool of resistance" against centralizing or compressing systems (3-4). Andrews's comments seem eminently applicable to *The Shipping*



*News*, which showcases marginalized traditional practices (fishing, boat-building, seal hunting, community self-organization, and self-help) as well as highlighting Newfoundland's economic marginalization. Here, the "compressing forces" stem from externally imposed economic models of globalized business and from the negative aspects of centralizing, or out-of-touch, government.

Magic-realist texts also tend to highlight oral tradition, and Proulx's text fits this bill in terms of its attention to dialogue. The most obviously magic-realist aspects can be seen in the various strange events and in the community's matter-of-fact acceptance of the notion of second sight. Yet there is a subtle but important contrast between these magical elements, which often requires a readerly suspension of disbelief, and a more realistic kind of magic is contained in the chapter entitled "Poetic Navigation." In that episode, Billy steers his boat through thick fog with the aid of a traditional rhyme and his intimate knowledge of the local coastline and sunkeners. His expert negotiation of the sea is amongst the most mystical elements of the novel. Importantly, it is also wholly believable. Here, the "magic" concerns navigational skills refined and handed down through the generations (or at least from father to son in Billy's case). Proulx seems to be pointing out that traditional practices involving age-old skill and knowledge are worthy of respect and even awe, especially when contrasted to the lumbering greed and negligence of powerful business interests that favour quick profit. (The "good giant" Quoye, one of whose functions is to represent the awesome physical immensity of the natural environment, is implicitly contrasted with the evil industrial giants.)

Fiona Polack is convinced of the transformative power of the uncanny and the abject in *The Shipping News*, especially in terms of Quoye's personal development. Polack is not pleased with what she sees as the novel's positive denouement, however, claiming it makes the text too "safely anchored" and causes the novel to retreat to "a touristic representation of the island" (107). While Polack's comment can usefully be applied to Hallström's adaptation, Proulx's text is surely more complex. As Karen Rood points out, the phrasing of the happy ending is hypothetical rather than absolute (85). In a BBC interview with Harriet Gilbert, Proulx herself stated that Quoye's happiness is "an illusion." In any case, the novel makes clear that the love story cannot efface the economic, ecological, and cultural challenges facing the community.

One of the final images is a bird with a broken neck that disappears from the rock near Quoyale Point. Most adults would realize that the bird has probably been eaten by a more powerful animal; it is only Quoyale's pre-teen daughter, Bunny, who chooses to believe that it flew away. Aware of the challenges facing large parts of the Newfoundland ecosystem and economy, we know that Quoyale, Wavey, and the other Killick-Claw residents have the difficult task of balancing tradition with modernity. It remains to be seen whether this community really has a broken neck, or whether it can gather strength to cope with the powerful forces affecting it.

### Conclusion

Should we describe Proulx's text as "a tale of the Folk with important political and societal subtexts" or as a fable about important societal concerns, with a generous lacing of Folk? I favour the latter descriptor. While Proulx's characters do in many respects fit what Wyile has called "the touristic vision of Atlantic Canada," as "an antidote to alienating, consumerist modernity" (2), they are also *part* of that modernity. By the end of the novel, Jack and Billy have resolved to expand the "Home Page" section of the newspaper and to scrap the "Foreign News," which they can get "off the telly" anyway. Ironically, the expanded "Home Page" will now, in fact, include "foreign" material, focusing on what Jack calls "the two ways of living here now": the traditional family-centred "make do with what you got" way and the postmodern, commodified, splintered life, full of "Crock Pots and consumer ratings, asphalt driveways, lotteries, fried chicken franchises, Mint Royale coffee at gourmet shops, all that stuff," with family often working abroad (300-01). Life in Killick-Claw is now permeated by what Riegel and Wyile call a "cultural and political dislocation" (xiii) that has thrown attention back on regional concerns and on how the locality is dealing with change. The scrapping of the "Foreign News" does suggest a somewhat parochial attitude on Jack and Billy's part (although we should also remember that even Billy, like Dennis Buggit, has been on long-distance fishing trips abroad, including to Brazil, Cuba, and China). Yet this new "Lifestyles" section in the paper shows that Home is intricately linked with Away, whatever Jack and Billy may think about it.

The eddies of magic realism that surface throughout the novel serve to underline its postmodern regionalist quality and to reassert some

power, symbolically, on behalf of the local and the traditional. On this point, it is vital to remember that Jack's special power of second sight involves knowing the sea. As Quoye learns after capsizing in his poorly built boat, knowing the sea has, for generations, involved respecting it, in terms of its elemental force as well as its ecological needs. The multinational businesses in the novel do not respect the natural environment, either in its power or in its fragility. For its part, the federal government has sometimes colluded with transnational industry, or at least turned a blind eye to abuses, through encouraging an overly profit-driven approach. Paul Chafe has shown how the novel relates to Shakespeare's magic-infused play, *The Tempest*. For Chafe, Quoye, unlike Prospero, does not seek to shape his new dwelling place to his purposes but rather learns to "listen" to the island (89, 96). In particular, Quoye learns to listen to the sea, both as supermodern/postmodern space and as a place infused with tradition, memory, the toil of centuries, and a strong sense of belonging.

Tensions between Home and Away and tradition and modernity are thus held together by the complex trope of the sea. Just as the water Quoye gazes out upon is "lunging" and "clotted" (169), so, too, the future is unclear and fraught with obstacles. Ultimately, however, the sea is most strongly equated with the notion of identity: Billy says that so many of his family are under the waves that it is a "homey" place (174). Yet, as we have seen, home is not only about heritage or continuity with the past. While the novel presents many aspects of community-based systems and traditions as useful and life-affirming, it also rejects the type of "damaging isolation" embodied by Cousin Nolan. Symbolically, the latter is reputed to have slept with his wife when she was dead, an act that symbolizes an unhealthy obsession with the past. Present challenges must be faced: the old must be balanced with the new, sustainability must be addressed, and the ever tighter enmeshing of Home and Away must continue to be negotiated.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Proulx had to sell her summer house in Gunners Cove partly because certain local people made a living by bringing tourists to the dock at the end of her house (Gilbert). Islands are, of course, conducive to nostalgia, as shown by the romanticization

of Arctic life in the Belcher Islands in the 1922 ethnographic film *Nanook of the North*, by Robert Flaherty, another American outsider.

<sup>2</sup> On the fishing crisis, see Higgins's 2009 web article. See also Wyile (33-54), who discusses other recent fisheries-related novels.

<sup>3</sup> The internationally organized exploitation of the Myanmar crew of the *Rome* bears some parallels with the collusion between Canadian farmers and British orphanages described by Billy (179), in which destitute Home Boys were lured abroad to work in often horrendous conditions by the promise of an escape from poverty.

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