

"YOU DEAL WITH WHAT SHE SENDS": MASCULINE PERFORMANCES AMONG NEWFOUNDLAND OFFSHORE-WORKING FATHERS

Nicholas Hartmann

ON A FREQUENT BASIS IN the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, a father, knowing that he will not be able to say goodbye to his children in the early hours of the morning, gives them a more intense goodnight hug before putting them to bed. He does this for multiple reasons, but mainly because it makes the transition easier for all involved. He will not see them, or his wife, for anywhere from three to six weeks; usually, it is around four. For many working fathers in the province, this happens six to eight times a year: leaving early to get on a helicopter, boat or airplane to work in the offshore oil industry. At any time, there are hundreds of people, mostly men, working offshore in the province, and the industry is a lifeline for a region that is recovering from economic decline and outmigration, a task that long defined the province in the minds of many. While the industry takes people to Alberta, the Gulf of Mexico, and even to sub-Saharan Africa, these workers are often rooted in the communities in which they were born and raised, and such a livelihood has helped keep long-declining communities afloat.

The marine-centered life of Newfoundland and Labrador has resulted in the creation of a myth of masculinity in which men are perceived as hardy; sociologist Marilyn Porter suggests that "the ethos of 'fishermen' is a rugged *male* identity and it is clamped firmly over of the image of outport life" (Porter 1995: 106). The dominance of the fishery meant that such an idea of masculinity carried on as the common image of what a Newfoundland man is and does. Fishing, along with logging and mining, were traditionally considered ideal jobs for men in Newfoundland; Lisa Sullivan's examination of work in the province "is reaffirmed by representations that brand as effeminate outsiders to a community of resource-extractors" (Sullivan 1994: 202). In this sense, men work to bring parts of the earth to others, and prove their manhood by doing so.

The cod moratorium that began in 1992 and caused a massive decline in both the economy and population of Newfoundland put forth a challenge for those who were suddenly without work and without a chance to prove their masculinity in the traditional way. For many men, working in the oil industry became that chance to support their families, and themselves, as well as potentially remain tied to their home. Stories about families returning home from elsewhere after several years are a major part of local culture, but the stories of the processes involved in working itself are something that has not

been examined as strongly. Furthermore, the question of how, if at all, the traditional models of masculinity are carried on in the present-day oil and gas industries has yet to be discussed. This paper will do so by examining how the occupational narratives of Newfoundland men in the offshore industry a) fit into traditional examinations of occupational narratives; b) bring forth new concepts in such narratives; and c) reflect upon ideas of masculinity and performed manhood in Newfoundland society.

Regarding the fieldwork process for this research, I interviewed several families through the Avalon Peninsula between April and August 2012, with a total of nineteen informants dispersed throughout seven communities. Of these nineteen, five were fathers with offshore experience, either in the present or in past years, and all but one of them had children under the age of ten. Due to the nature of having to re-acclimate to home life, interviews were difficult to schedule, and could not always be done in a timely manner. Much like folklorist Jack Santino's research on occupational narrative (Santino 1978), my interviews were conducted while the men were off from work, usually for a four-week period.

The question of how one gets started in such an industry is a complex one that often reflects upon the economically unstable times in Newfoundland following the cod moratorium. Of the five fathers I interviewed, four had been working away from home, either in Alberta or in British Columbia, while the other originally worked in Russia, his home country, before arriving in Newfoundland. Rather than being a typical "first day on the job" story in which informants discuss initiation and experience on their very first day of work, the origin story surrounding offshore work is often a story of returning home to Newfoundland, as "Tom" suggested:

I never considered myself an Albertan- I'd always considered myself a Newfoundlander, and I'd always wanted to come back here to live, and that was always the goal. I wanted to come back and make a good living- I'd had opportunities over the years to come back and just get by, but I wasn't happy with that, and when the opportunity came up, I came down for a year, just to try it out and see if I enjoyed it, but I ended up taking a full-time job after. (Tom 2012)

Similarly, another informant, Renew's native Mike Chidley, emphasized the importance of coming back as crucial to family life:

After spending time in Ontario... Kitchener, for three years- I came home, and my dad died in '72. The next move was to British Columbia for seven or eight years, and then moved home after Michelle was born. My wife was teaching out there, so we decided that [we're] loading up and trucking it, we're moving east to bring our little girl up in Newfoundland. And basically, [I] got into the offshore game in the eighties on the Grand Banks, supply boats, and went and did my marine ticket. (Chidley 2012)

For my informants, the opportunity to work offshore is one that is often highly desired and part of a strategy to return to Newfoundland; folklorist Debora Kodish states that it is a long-standing tradition, suggesting that, "In the real outport world, they [men] stayed close to their Newfoundland homes and were incorporated early into family modes of production" (Kodish 1980: 140). Thus, being able to be back in the home community, as well as back in Newfoundland, is a highly desirable situation. For those growing up on the Avalon Peninsula, this is especially the case, as it makes it possible for men to simply drive from their home communities to either the respective harbour or airport where they embark for their time offshore.

The airport, for many, brings up the notions of risk and danger involved in the offshore industries surrounding the province. The 1982 sinking of the Ocean Ranger platform which killed all 84 men aboard, as well as the more recent disaster, the Cougar Flight 91 helicopter crash that took the lives of 17 of the 18 individuals en route to their jobs on the White Rose and Hibernia oil fields, are heavily commemorated and discussed in Newfoundland and Labrador, and stories of either knowing someone, or having direct experience with those who lost their lives, are quite common. Sociologist Nicole Power, in her study of risk and masculinity in Newfoundland, suggests that, "Masculinity is not only, if not at all, a personality trait that causes risk-taking behaviour or shapes risk perception" (Power 2008: 567). In the case of my informants, it is more of the latter, focusing on the realities of the job. Mike, who himself witnessed the issues surrounding the Ocean Ranger, expresses this need to understand nature:

The first helicopter that went down was in the eighties, in Placentia Bay, and I spent a night on a fast rescue boat looking for any bodies, survivors. They happened to be out there on a job, and she left the platform, and went six feet down. [...] And before that, the Ocean Ranger was one of the biggest

tragedies of marine life. [...] When you're dealing with Mother Nature, and machinery, you're sort of at their mercy- not much we can do. The night the Ocean Ranger went down, I suppose a snowball of occurrences and faults- we had sixty-foot seas that night. Unbelievable, yeah, but that was what was there; friends of mine were on supply boats, trying to pick up the lifeboats in the sixty-foot seas. [...] I suppose that you park it somewhere in the back of your mind and try not to think about it, and deal with [what] Mother Nature has to throw at you; that's with going to sea, dealing with it and there's not much else you can do about it. You go to sea, you deal with what she sends. (Chidley 2012)

Mobile native Gerry Murphy, who was actually on the last successful run of the helicopter that crashed during Flight 91, spoke about the constant fill of accidents in the industry:

It depends on your job- if you're in the line of fire like a roustabout. If you're doing physical work out there, there's a lot of stuff that can bite you. Pretty much every month, every hitch offshore, you're getting alerts from other rigs- someone gets hurt, someone gets killed, someone gets their legs broken, someone gets maimed for life, a couple of people get killed, the helicopter goes down. This is because we're in the offshore industry [...] and if there's any big incidents, they have to send them out to all of the rigs. So you're working in the industry, and say they're all over the world, there's maybe 10,000 rigs, land and offshore. And once a month, you're hearing about someone getting seriously roughed up or killed. There is obviously a lot of danger out there, but your own safety is your own, looking after yourself. But that's with any job- you could get hit by a bus crossing a road in St. John's- that's just the way it is. [...] You're your own person, you just take it and you watch your back. (Murphy 2012)

Mike and Gerry's stories differ from the typical "cautionary tale" in the fact that accidents discussed are not necessarily specific, but persistently present and on the minds of those working. Rather than being constantly expressed, such stories are kept, as Mike pointed out, in the back of one's mind; as anthropologist Dona

Davis's research on the crisis pointed out in 2000, "it was a woman's duty to worry about her fishing men at sea...In a sense, her worry freed a man to fish" (Davis 2000: 347). Disaster is close, but work must continue nonetheless, and Mike and Gerry have had to keep the worry restrained in the best interest of staying on task.

The need to carry on work in the face of potential disaster is one that is expressed through the assertion of individual responsibility, yet the fact that all of my informants stated this, without consulting each other, is an interesting one. Folklorists Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen's study of Lake Erie fishermen pointed out that "Each individual fishermen saw his occupation from his own point of view, which was itself influenced by group concerns" (Lloyd and Mullen 1990: xii). Also pointing out that such fishermen "are usually portrayed either as hardy individualists, working with (or against) nature in ways that those who do other kinds of work can only dimly imagine," (Ibid: 4) the balance between individual and group worldview is not only noticeable in occupational folklife, but also transferable to those working in the offshore oil industry. Individual safety is an individual and group concern, and risk and its perception are likewise; while the development of safety culture in the last two decades has resulted in a public image that safety is an organizational responsibility, research has shown that, quite often, the burden lies on the individual.

Outside of the occupational community in which they work, my informants were also family men, tied to their spouses and children back home and in constant contact with them, whether via a Skype call or a Facebook post expressing how much they are missed. As both a part of an occupational and family folk group, the need to be aware of individual safety concerns and the trials involved in working offshore is intensified; they are not only performing a job, but also providing a family with support. The fathers are constantly there in some form or another; as sociologist Esther Dermott points out, the act of simply "being there" is one that is either physical or emotional, yet "is continually invoked as a significant, if not the most significant component in defining good fathering that benefits children" (Dermott 2008: 56).

In regards to fatherhood and masculinity, however, the unilateral path that shaped the definition of manhood in Newfoundland for so long does not have the same effect on males in the province. Folklorist Martin Lovelace, in his look at masculinity in Newfoundland folktales, pointed out that formal education "was considered to make a man unfit, or disinclined, for 'real' work" (Lovelace 2001: 157). As real work was synonymous with resource extraction, the introduction of technology, whether in fishing, timber, drilling, introduced great challenges to the status quo that Lovelace claimed to be shaped more by folk culture than by formal education. Several of my informants have had to

attain some form of post-secondary education to be involved in the industry, and when asked about whether or not they desired the same sort of lives for their children, firmly stated that they worked to help their children attend university someday, rather than jump straight from high school into a job like theirs. The occupational narratives of men like "Tom," Gerry and Mike are the stories of a generation who, in witnessing major changes in Newfoundland and Labrador, have had to simultaneously break from traditional notions of masculinity; yet, at the same time, through their focus on remaining close to home and refusing to focus heavily on the dangers of work, they are maintaining some of those aspects in order to provide for families in a place where, for many generations, doing so was a never-ending cycle of struggle and danger.

Nicholas Hartmann is a PhD Candidate
in the Department of Folklore,
Memorial University.

References

- Chidley, Mike. 2012. Interview with author. Renews-Cappahayden, Newfoundland and Labrador, 8 August 2012.
- Davis, Dona. 2000. Gendered cultures of conflict and discontent: Living 'the crisis' in a Newfoundland community. *Women's Studies International Forum* 23.3: 343-353.
- Dermott, Esther. 2008. *Intimate Fatherhood: A Sociological Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Kodish, Debora. 1980. Fair young ladies and bonny Irish boys: pattern in vernacular poetics. *Journal of American Folklore* 96.380: 131-150.
- Lloyd, Timothy and Patrick Mullen. 1990. *Lake Erie Fishermen: Work, Identity, and Tradition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lovelace, Martin. 2001. Jack and his masters: Real worlds and tale worlds in Newfoundland folktales. *Journal of Folklore Research* 38.1/2: 149-170.
- Murphy, Gerry. 2012. Interview with author. Witless Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador, 18 July 2012.
- Porter, Marilyn. 1995. "She was skipper of the shore-crew:" Notes on the history of the sexual division of labour in Newfoundland. *Labour/Le Travail* 15: 105-123.
- Power, Nicole. 2008. Occupational risks, safety and masculinity: Newfoundland fish harvesters' experiences and understandings of fishery risks. *Health, Risk & Society* 10.6: 565-583.
- Santino, Jack. 1978. Characteristics of occupational narratives. *Western Folklore* 37.3: 199-212.
- Sullivan, Lisa M. 1994. No part of our life: Local and official constructions of meaningful work in contemporary Newfoundland. *Labour/Le Travail* 34: 189-209.
- "Tom." 2012. Interview with author. Conception Bay South, Newfoundland and Labrador, May 2012.