

**Fishy Fragments:
Trans Women's Worlds in Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland**

by © Daze Jefferies

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Abstract

This portfolio-style thesis and work of autoethnographic research-creation explores the historical lives of trans women in Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada. Working with an assemblage of archival remains, felt knowledges, and poetic imaginations – what I call *fishy fragments* – of trans women’s worlds in Newfoundland, I reveal how the past five decades of our lives have been shaped by loss, sex work, and oceanleaving. Loving and honouring fishy fragments as a way to seek more heartfelt modes of inquiry in trans historical studies, this thesis offers a creative counter-archive of Newfoundland trans women’s worlds by thinking with trans+oceanic emotional geographies.



Keywords:

trans / sex work / fishy / archives / research-creation

General Summary

This portfolio-style thesis is made up of artistic and academic essays, poetry, visual art, and a soundscape that together explore the fishy historical lives of trans women in Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada. Questions of history, creativity, and ancestral kinship shape the way I approach this work. Using what I call *fishy fragments* – a collection of archival documents, embodied experiences, and poetic imaginations – I highlight how our contemporary and historical lives are shaped by loss, sex work, and oceanleaving. My affinities with North Atlantic waters and my artist heart, as well as my desires for imaginative kinds of Newfoundland scholarship, bring me to make creative sense of trans women's worlds on the far East coast.

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Chapter One was commissioned by Eastern Edge Gallery and published in May 2020 as a community resource on their website: www.easternedge.ca. The two micro-essays that make up Chapter Two were previously published in *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory at the Water’s Edge: Unsettled Islands* (2018). Chapter Three was recently published in the Reimaging Breasts special issue of *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* (2020). Chapter Four contains visual art, life writing, and an oceanic soundscape from my most recent creative and scholarly project, *Capturing Trans-Atlantics* (2020), for which I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of ArtsNL.

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Unless otherwise credited, all visuals in this thesis, including the mermaids that open each chapter, were created or captured by me. In my work, I imagine mermaids as spectral trans ancestors in Newfoundland, which I explore in Chapter Two. Their presence throughout the thesis comes to represent trans+oceanic unknowns, and they remind me that imaginations make the world anew.

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Preface

For several years, my research-creation has been informed by the fishy effects of missing archives in trans women's worlds. As a trans woman sex worker born and raised within a rural island geography where archival traces of women like me are few and far between (Drake 2019; Hilliard, *The Telegram*, August 8, 1999; Hoenig and Duggan 1974), I have longed to know more about the historical lives of my kin, and this desire has shaped my approaches to art and scholarship. Since I first read feminist scholar Viviane Namaste's (2000) transformative text *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* as an undergraduate student, my thinking has been guided by her critical argument that trans archival gaps – the institutional erasures of trans people from the historical record – are intimately connected to the social realities of trans communities here-and-now. Following her extensive research on the many ways that intellectual projects have historically failed trans women (2005, 2009, 2015) – alongside the work of Black, Brown, and Indigenous trans artists and scholars who have illustrated the impossibility of settler colonial archives capturing the beautiful known unknowns of trans historical worlds (Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017; Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018) – I have spent my time in graduate school developing poetic and theoretical imaginations into more creative and heartfelt trans studies (cárdenas 2016; Raha 2017; Santana 2017).

I originally thought that this thesis would look quite different. Before *Fishy Fragments*, I had spent the better part of two years thinking through a project I had provisionally titled *Flankers Inside Us: Oral Histories of Embodiment, Health, and Resistance among Trans Women in Newfoundland*. This initial interview-based project sought to center the social health of trans women islanders within the field of emotional geographies (Davidson, Bondi and Smith 2005) in order to contextualize our embodied knowledges and everyday health work. Because trans

women's bodies and lives have been seen only as disposable and diseased, as well as historically produced as non-female, within the fields of community health and epidemiology (see Bauer et al. 2009; Namaste 2015; Sevelius 2013), I wanted to visualize the health of Newfoundland trans women in a different way. I also longed for cisgender researchers working in trans studies to become more aware of the many bodies they fail by using pathological methods and tools of writing that are emotionally detached from trans women's worlds.

Ultimately, I sought to explore trans women's social health through the qualitative lens of emotional embodiment in order to critique the unhelpful/unhopeful clinical and white feminist scholarship written about trans women's lives (Namaste 2009). Much as I acknowledge that interviews and oral history recordings can be useful for contextualizing trans worlds with diverse voices, in this thesis I argue that poetic and emotional methodologies of autoethnographic research-creation have the potential to fundamentally change how trans women's bodies, lives, and worlds are understood. While I recognize the significance of a scholarly project like *Flankers Inside Us*, I know that in this temporal moment, after a series of complex traumatic events throughout graduate school – including the unexpected loss of my lover and colleague Yuvraj to the opioid crisis – I simply have not had the strength or support to be ethically engaged in an ethnographic project that would require me to destroy my boundaries by being fully accountable to the lives of research informants. As I have worked through the afterlife of my grief and traumatic loss, my research focus and approach to writing this thesis have also necessarily shifted.

While changes in topic, methodology, and study design have ruptured my academic timeline as a graduate student, I see them as opportunities to tell more intimate and imaginative stories about the lives and histories of Newfoundland trans women. Without carrying the weight of qualitative ethics that would require my life to be complexly bound together with informants at

a time when I can hardly be accountable to myself, I have felt a little healthier and happier. Following Namaste (2000), who argues that matters of poor mental, physical, and social health among trans women are facilitated by lacerations of institutional and structural violence – including the ways that qualitative scholarship has been historically unsafe for women like us – I believe that my decision to embrace an intellectual shift, and to work outside of interview-based relational ethics, has been a way to imagine a liveable future for myself as a young trans sex-working scholar.

Nonetheless, this shift has required that I engage with a network of different ethico-political concerns that emerge in autoethnographic research-creation. My conceptual framework for undertaking an alternative project of heartfelt scholarship in the Newfoundland context has been shaped, among other factors, by the late Carl Leggo’s incredibly touching forms of poetic inquiry (1995, 2008). Leggo’s educational poethics might be understood as a foundational example of what artists and qualitative scholars in Canada call research-creation (Manning 2015, 2020: Loveless 2019). Following artist and philosopher Erin Manning’s claim that “movement qualitatively alters the body” (2007: xiii), my practice of research-creation – a multidisciplinary, embodied, and living approach to making sense of my archival and ecopolitical response-abilities – privileges evocative ways of knowing through poetry, visual art, sound, theory, and archival play.

In my life, research-creation is a fundamentally autoethnographic endeavour that employs living ephemeral knowledge in the form of creative practice to ask after non-representational modes of qualitative study (Hartman 2008; Salah 2017; Spry 2011). In other words, my scholarship hopes to resist methodological enclosure – an echo of my resilience as a trans woman sex worker trying to survive and find joy in the marginal throes of late liberalism and worldly collapse.

Autoethnography is an evocative methodological framework for dismantling and experimenting with research fictions in the qualitative paradigm (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Denzin 2003; Henay and Ginton 2019; Stryker 2008a). Embodied and ecological entanglements condition my use of autoethnography to explore cultural, historical, political, and social matters that give shape to my world as a trans woman sex worker.

My practice of autoethnographic research-creation is fostered by the possibility of pursuing a portfolio-style thesis that finds meaning and value in an array of creative and scholarly works. Putting this thesis together from an assemblage of my multidisciplinary experiments in graduate school allows me to explore the labour of my artistic and academic pursuits in therapeutic ways. Having a voice in poetry, visual art, sound, theory, and archival play thus helps me think more critically and deeply about scholarly representations of marginal lives (Lather 1997; Raha 2017). As such, the heart of this simultaneously playful and precarious performative text (Leggo 1999; Spry 2001) comes alive through questions of trans embodiment, archival ephemerality, and oceanic ecology. The critical potentiality of this relationship between creative and scholarly production is what matters most in my work.

Now that I have had significant time to reflect on my decision to pursue a portfolio-style thesis between mid-2018 and early 2020, I see how the labour of this new fishy intellectual endeavour has fundamentally changed me in unexpected ways. Engaging with archival collections that have revealed so much loss, invisibility, and deathmaking in the lives of Newfoundland trans women has been a challenge that I simply could not be prepared for, and it has thus been a slow process for several reasons. Being a trans graduate student who is also a full-time sex worker, while balancing a full-time creative practice, and simultaneously managing emotional and embodied grief, has been incredibly difficult. I have needed time to navigate through all of my

responsibilities, all of my pain, all of my hopelessness. I have needed time to step away from academic writing and to pursue other ways of exploring what archives have shown me. I have needed time to shut everything down, to question my history as a graduate student, to fail. And then I've had to get going again.

In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, critical theorist Kaja Silverman (1996) suggests that being “good enough” is always a matter of becoming situated between encounters of corporeal self-love and abjection (1996: 4). Embracing failure, being good enough is an act of surviving and loving across transcorporeal ruptures; it is an embodied complex of pushes and pulls across the borders of ideality and insufficiency (Hüser and Silverman 1997: 10). To be good enough is to try and resist psychic capture from the traumatizing affects of failure; being good enough is a process of coming to know how to live in more ethical relation with our failed and failing bodies (Halberstam 2011; Sturm 2014). Although I have struggled to feel good enough about my ability to complete this thesis while managing intense pain, I know that making peace with my undoing as a kind of failure that I cannot relinquish helps me find scholarly meaning in my suffering (Raha 2017). Even though my graduate studies as a grieving trans woman sex worker have been shaped by psychical and physical brokenness – and even though this has been the worst ride of my life – I keep pushing myself to believe that beyond each systemic failure holding on to me, I am and have been good enough this whole time. As trans philosopher Jules Sturm suggests: “Let us imagine our bodies in layers, densities, expansion, brokenness, potentiality, recession, and multiplicity in order to make bodily failure useful for theory” (2019: 4).

I want to argue that, as a heartfelt figuration of trans women's worlds in Newfoundland, this thesis is a failed archival project because my methods of inquiry and knowing cannot fully account for the vibrant and violent realities of my kin. I have asked many questions about

Newfoundland trans women's histories throughout my time in graduate school, and my re/learning has been complexly rewarding. I have experienced powerful intellectual breakthroughs in moments of archival intimacy, and yet there are still so many unanswered questions that haunt my inquiry. Withholding the pastpresent I have so desperately longed for, missing archives can be known as grievous unfamiliars that challenge my survival in this oceanic world. As my trans sister Violet Drake argues, "the erasure of [Newfoundland] trans history must be understood as a particular kind of trauma that has consequences for generations of trans people with and beyond us right now."¹

Throughout this research journey, I have asked myself: Am I good enough – am I well enough – to see this work through? Am I strong enough to handle what I might continue to find as I swim deeper into the known unknowns of queer and trans life that have become detritus within our changing island ecology (Guzmán and Jefferies 2019; Jefferies 2020a)? Am I patient enough to give myself time to ache, to continue practicing slow scholarship (Hickey-Moody 2015; Mountz et al. 2015), to craft a new world from ruins (MacLure 2011; Stoler 2008; Tuck and Ree 2013)? Working through these questions, this intellectual project confronts bodily failure on multiple levels: failure to escape capture from psychical and sexual violence, failure to be finished my degree in the imagined timeline of two years that is often beaten into young graduate students by institutional forces, and failure to give in to the structures of transmisogyny and ableism that challenge my survival.

Across Newfoundland outports, the phrase "*good enough 'den,'*" is a linguistic exchange which signifies a moment of disconnection – breaking away – with love. It is spoken body to body:

¹ In an artist interview with Samantha Fitzpatrick for Not Your Boys Club, an independent feminist collective devoted to the work of emerging marginalized artists and musicians in Atlantic Canada, Violet talks about what her creative practice and trans poetics come to represent in present-day Newfoundland. To read her interview, see: <https://notyourboysclub.com/2018/08/12/out-of-earshot-interview-4-violet-drake>

in doorways, during phone calls, at car windows, on the sides of gravel roads. At times, it suggests disbelief in acceptance, like when I showed my grandmother my septum piercing for the first time at age fifteen, and she simply responded: “*Well, good enough ‘den.*” In another way, when two bodies communicate until they have nothing left to say – running out of time or patience – ending a conversation with “*good enough ‘den,*” is an act of those bodies tearing apart while remaining psychically bound to one another by a mutual desire to meet again: in an elsewhere / turning in on itself / somewhere outside of the body.

To my trauma I say: *Well, good enough ‘den.* I accept it, and I write with it. I recognize how much sadness, how much pain, how much suffering each shape the thesis that I have written. I understand that my suffering might be turned against me to invalidate my work as a scholar. But listening to the aches of my wounded body-mind helps me recognize that I want to feel and live better as I navigate through traumatic ruins. Subsequently, I have to work, think, and write differently as I learn to feel good enough while embracing the new trauma time that shapes how fishish I move through the world (Morrigan 2017). This is the body I am – I have been – and if I am good enough, so too are my fishy fragments. Following Silverman, in this thesis feeling good enough is a way to acknowledge how each of our bodies as Newfoundland trans women “are ‘thrown’ into ... a given set of historical, social, economic, and geographical circumstances ... from the moment of birth given over to death ... [and] we have absolutely no agency until we have acknowledged these forms of finitude and determination” (1997: 4). Feeling good enough is a way to care for our bodies as we live through so much loss and trauma. It is a framework for thinking with hope.

Like Silverman, philosopher Monika Rogowska-Stangret conceptualizes the body as “a moving threshold between subject-object-bject” (2018: 62). As a material-semiotic formation that

is fated to disappear, no matter the life-giving power of our hope, the body is an assemblage that comes to matter in the contact zone between positionality and temporality. Existing across place and time, it is impossible to understand our bodies outside of their relationship with the unknown and elsewhere (60). Bound to become-multiple with the things we love and hate, as failed and failing bodies we are always already good enough. The body as assemblage is, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections” (1987: 8), which means that the kind of scholar I have become through closeness with traumatic loss was unavoidable.

In this text, I learn how to become hopeful through sensuous engagements with fishy beings whose ways of knowing this island world have been shaped by oceans of loss (Jefferies and Drake 2020). A milieu across which I am able to measure the emotional corpographic relations of ecological closeness, distance, and vulnerability, my body holds out for a new temporality that might provide some healing and release. What I offer here, in fishy fragments, is an embodiment of my own hope through suffering toward a better world. I hope that this thesis might come to matter as a lifeline for trans women in Newfoundland who are holding on by a thread, who have no idea where our origins might begin or where our futures might lead, and who refuse to let our goodness be stolen away by all the precarious shit that we endure. Thinking with hope encourages me to envision so much more beyond the confines of loss, sex work, and oceanleaving. I believe in hope. I believe in oceans. I believe that this work isn't over.

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Introduction – Feeling Fishy



I find what's left of your story filed away in a basement cabinet at the QEII Library. It reels right out in front of my dead tired eyes, the sound of moving microfilm an unsettling comfort. Soft and scratchy textures onscreen pull me back into a world I cannot say is yours or mine. It's the fall of 2002 – there are only parts of you here. A name, a trauma, and the psychic impact of leaving an island that just couldn't love you. So very little that shows your soul, and there's nothing about your affinity with water. Somehow, I know you are determined to find a better future where dreams touch care, touch faith. This diminished and diminishing feature in *The Telegram* leads me on a path to learn more about your life. A few years later, in 2005, an obituary with your name emerges online. Silent, drowning, momentary – I follow it to a point of no earthly return. Now I ache and disappear with you – believing that you tried your hardest, keeper of Kilbride, to press on as a young trans Newfoundlander. From another time and position in our fishy homeland, I struggle now to understand what you could not survive as I dream of something bigger than the hurt in us. Wanting to hold you and whisper that the failure will end, perhaps even against your dying wishes.

Who am I to desire that?

Born and raised in the Bay of Exploits on the North East coast of Newfoundland, much of my world as a young trans woman islander turns upon the historical labour, organizing, and visibility of trans elders from this oceanic place, as well as the weighty archival silence that lingers all around me. Over the past six years, my longing to learn more about trans, non-binary, and two-spirit histories on the far East coast has sent me flying through many difficult and touching pasts. From canoes of L’nu healers drifting across the Cabot Strait with lifegiving spirits of water and fire, to centuries of mermaids and sex workers surviving and disappearing at the mouth of the Waterford River, to decades-old community networks of transsexual mutual aid and loving support on the Avalon, to all the young t-girls over the past 50 years whose migrations have carried them from Gambo to Toronto, Port au Port to New York, Nain to St John’s, and so far beyond – the emotional weight of trans historical pasts in Newfoundland and Labrador, hidden and withheld like a painful secret, brings resistance to bear upon the slippery scale of our everyday social and institutional displacement (Hilliard, *The Telegram*, August 8, 1999).

Indigenous artists, activists, and land/water protectors like Jude Benoit, Denise Cole, and Anita Kora have also taught me that these historical life-worlds have been shaped by a loss of belief, ceremony, and language through the forced cultural assimilation of Inuit, Innu, and Mi’kmaq peoples into colonial and Christian gender roles (Cole 2017; Jefferies 2019a). For instance, in Benoit’s (2019a) short story “Boy Girl Berdache Child” they recount the life of a young Mi’kmaq two-spirit dreamer and “wild child” who is stripped of their beliefs and relations by the “tame people” who cannot feel the spirits of land and water. Like other island and coastal geographies whose cultures of gender variance and Indigenous flourishing have been complexly fissured by the violence of white settler colonialism (Besnier and Alexeyeff 2014), the trans+oceanic world we know as Newfoundland can never be the same after centuries of conquest

and erasure. But what might a possible future look like where the pain of missing histories, as well as lost trans and two-spirit ancestors, can be set free within our collective dreams? How can both two-spirit kin and trans settlers hold on to the conflicting wounds of our historical past while envisioning radical shifts that might help us survive together-apart?

Attending to the need for counter-archives of trans and two-spirit worlds in Newfoundland and Labrador reveals how many of our histories have been shaped by colonial ruin as well as intergenerational ruptures of outmigration, secrecy, and traumatic loss. Together with the haunts of suicide and other ends of life that have carried us adrift into unknown spectral waters, many trans elders have gone silent and missing on the mainland for decades, while a number of other community members have chosen to part ways for quiet and safer lives in isolation. Given the realities of violence and trauma, abandonment and disposability that have been documented in local archival collections – within which suffering is synonymous with gender and sexual transgressions (Jefferies 2020a; Love 2007) – engagements with Newfoundland’s trans historical past require a belief in something greater than eternal desolation. For all the passing over and problems of our historical presence, what might these losses communicate about the lifeways of our ancestors? When can suicide be reconceptualized as a kind of unsettling but hopeful release that exceeds devastation? How does outmigration – oceanleaving – become an imagined movement toward a future and dreamworld otherwise?

This portfolio-style thesis begins to take account of the many ways that Newfoundland trans women’s worlds have been shaped by loss, sex work, and oceanleaving over the past half-century. Given the weighty gaps within both institutional and community archives that leave so much of our past illegible (Namaste 2015), forming spectral and speculative (fishy) counter-archives of Atlantic Canadian trans historical knowledges is thus foundational to my creative and

scholarly practice. In my research-creation, refusing an all-knowing gaze of intellectual validity is a way to reject the epistemic violence of settler colonial archives that capture, enclose, and index sacred knowledge (Gill-Peterson 2018; Hartman 1997; Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018; Snorton 2017). Following critically imaginative historiographic refusals from scholars like Saidiya Hartman (2008) and Sonja Boon (2019), both of whom acknowledge the Atlantic Ocean as an archive of loss, the impossibility of a “comprehensive” trans historical research project is an opening for me to imagine more creative and heartfelt ways of encountering, knowing, and writing the fishy lives and worlds of trans women Newfoundlanders.

Further, using felt knowledges and poetic imaginations, alongside troubling archival remains, is a way to approach the ephemerality and invisibility of Newfoundland trans history with touching artistic and academic tools. For a/r/tographer Stephanie Springgay (2019), felt knowledges are ethical and political ways to encounter, through touch, the many environmental bodies in the world around us. Some artists and scholars use felt knowledges to privilege bodies as sites of intense knowing whose modes of being fluid and vulnerable might help us understand what it means to live up to changing and complex structures of feeling (Tremblay 2019). As Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million (2009) illustrates in her research with Indigenous women, felt knowledges can also open embodied worlds that eschew the dualism of rationality and emotionality in many colonial knowledge projects. In this thesis, by understanding the bodies of Newfoundland trans women as ephemeral others, alongside fishy felt knowledges of my own resilience, I come to know how the slippery historical and contemporary realities of my archival kin move through time.

Poetry as method comes to represent a “heartful” (Ellis 1999) mode of creative and scholarly production that allows me to understand my relationality with trans women from

Newfoundland's historical past in compassionate and vulnerable ways. Many artists and researchers continue to interrogate the roles and uses of poetry within the qualitative paradigm (Lahman et al. 2010; Raha 2017). In this work of research-creation, I am moved by fragmented and mosaic approaches to poetic scholarship vis-à-vis artist-researcher-teachers like Carl Leggo (2010) and Patricia Leavy (2010), who blur lines of scholarly dissonance between the personal/political and challenge the dualism of scientific/artistic production in their work. Following Leavy, who suggests that "research poems expose the false separation of science and art, which itself is maintained within a web of complex power relationships" (2010: 240), I argue that poetic imaginations allow me to meet archival gaps and historical ruptures with heart. Like trans poet Quinn Eades, whose hybrid text *all the beginnings* offers incredibly moving poetic embodiments of fragmentation at the domains of psychic and corporeal transition, "ruptures are where I find strength, and relief, and even, love" (2015: 204). Fishy fragments – archival remains, felt knowledges, and poetic imaginations – are thus emotional knowledge holders of Newfoundland trans women's worlds.

Fishy Epistemologies

My research-creation is positioned within the fields of trans history, blue humanities, and Newfoundland studies. In my work, I take up the relationship of oceanic ecologies with trans bodies and histories in order to illustrate the creative and critical potential of watered engagements with Newfoundland trans lives (Jefferies 2020a; Neimanis 2013). This is to say that my conceptual framework holds on to the oceanic world that shapes and remakes our fishy beings in order to illustrate entanglements of the social and ecological. Much scholarship in Newfoundland studies has articulated the profound effects of the ocean upon the lives of both Indigenous peoples and settlers who call these lands and waters home. The work of Vicki Hallett (2010, 2016), Sonja Boon

(2018a), and Cyril Poole (1978), among many others, shows me how scholarly interrogations of social, cultural, and political lives in Newfoundland must give voice to the Atlantic Ocean's powerful formation of East coast nature-cultures.

A lifegiving force, a great spirit, a provider and taker away – the Atlantic has been and will be ever-present in my life as a rural white settler Newfoundlander. For me, a fishy framework is an opening into broader discussions and theorizations about oceanic worldmaking in Newfoundland. Thinking with what I understand as trans+oceanic emotional geographies (Jefferies 2018a, 2020a) – and building upon a large body of creative and scholarly works that reveal the effects of the ocean on Atlantic Canadian culture and history (Charman 2010; Ennis and Woodrow 1996) – my work attempts to make sense of Newfoundland trans women's histories as fluid and slippery matters that have been held by and lost to the waters around us through waves of social and ecological change. Research-creation is a critical methodological approach for undertaking this endeavour: it allows me the freedom to dream, the sensitivity that is necessary to evoke fishy and watery beings as ancestral unknowns, as well as the heartfelt schema to imagine trans women's worlds in ways that are non-violent and non-pathological (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012; Loveless 2019; Raha 2017).

Given the archival ephemerality of trans women's worlds throughout much of Newfoundland's historical past, I wish for this thesis to be understood as an assemblage of imaginative historical production that might help reconfigure what lies at the heart of Atlantic Canadian trans knowledges. Working across several time periods – from 1610 to 1974 to 1999 to 2020 – with queer, sensuous, and watery imaginations, this body of work becomes a creative trans history in fishy fragments. A form of what postcolonial studies scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the ghost dance – “an attempt to establish [an] ethical relation with history ...

ancestors real or imagined” (1995: 70) – my play in this thesis is thus an attempt to trace the slippery absence and presence of Newfoundland trans women across historical and temporal waters.

Writing with/in fishy fragments is a loving labour on behalf of the many human and more-than-human bodies who bring me into historical presence as a trans woman Newfoundlander. In the words of interdisciplinary philosopher Dan Mellamphy, who imagines fragmentality as a never ending becoming, “to think the fragment is to think the eternal return of a rupture, to get the drift of a rift, a fundamental fissure” (1998: 83). This is to say that fragments hold the gaze of critical comprehension in crisis – they can only be known on their terms alone. In my artistic and scholarly practice, watery and fishy forms of fragmentation are informed by relational waves that push and pull between selves/others, feelings/textures, pasts/futures. My fishy fragmentation is visceral, emotional, and embodied; it is about painful creative and intellectual movements – across bodies, species, temporalities, and worlds. It has no beginning and certainly no end, only knowledges eroded by oceans of loss.

From geographies of femme queens (Black and Latina trans girls) in urban American cities (Brown 2017; Ridley 2019), to Métis trans women sex workers on Canada’s West coast (Hamilton 2016; Ross 2012), to rural white settler trans women in Newfoundland (Drake 2019; Jefferies 2018b), feeling fishy embodies the slippery kinship that many trans women form to survive and resist together-apart through ecologies and temporalities of struggle. According to Urban Dictionary user fish trap,² trans fishy vernacular emerged in the 1970s among Black and Latina trans women/femme queen sex workers in urban American geographies as a way to playfully and problematically acknowledge the different niche markets of cis and trans women’s sex-working

² <https://tinyurl.com/fishtraps>

bodies. A collective creation and a playful performative, in its original context feeling fishy materializes as a production of trans women's pleasure and joy.

For some trans women, feeling fishy embodies a sensual politics of endearment or an essence of surreal beauty (see Chapter Three). To feel fishy is to experience an embodiment uncontained, not captive to the dregs of impossible existence. Complexly entangled with realness, as well as with desires to belong – somewhere, elsewhere – feeling fishy is a loving performance within which we imagine ourselves as unsinkable beings and see our dreams take form in the distance (Ridley 2019). As our lives, bodies, and histories are shaped differently by intra-actions of race, colonialism, and socioeconomic class (Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018), feeling fishy is enmeshed with slippery and iridescent ways to survive within colonial and cisnormative worlds. Following Black queer scholar Marlon M. Bailey, feeling fishy might be understood as a method “to unmark [ourselves] as gender and sexual non-conforming subjects” (2011: 366) in a world that threatens our survival.

Dreams of feeling fishy are also failed longings: to pass or to go unnoticed, to resist the troubled conditions of trans visibility and as a result to perhaps escape a particular kind of ontological capture from transmisogynistic and anti-Black violence (Santana 2017). For instance, in the Newfoundland imaginary, fishy embodiments are often suspicious. To be a “strange kind of fish” is to know intimately a displacement that characterizes oneself as an unfamiliar body situated outside of folk groups that, for decades, have buoyed white settler islanders in a sea of anti-Black, settler colonial, and Islamophobic fear and ignorance (Manning 2018). In other ways, to be a strange kind of fish is to become abject kin who just doesn't live up to the standards and restrictions of a colonial imagined community here at the Atlantic edge (Hallett 2016b).

In our current algal bloom of trans visibility, artists and scholars know that gender identities are always already caught up in complex cultural, geographic, and temporal webs (Aizura 2006; Tourmaline, Stanley and Burton 2017; Hayward 2010). As I have previously suggested, feeling fishy is a dynamic point of encounter between embodiment, ephemerality, and ecology – one that allows me to imagine the lives of Newfoundland trans women in emotional research-creation that grapples with my sex-working body as a fishy being in order to complicate trans women’s geographies (see Chapter Three). In my creative and scholarly practice, I interrogate ‘fish’ as a slippery vernacular term of both embodied trouble and intimacy for trans women/femme queens across geographic, racial, and temporal diasporas. Learning to ask challenging questions about Newfoundland trans archives, bodies, and ecologies, I encounter several fishy beings (trans women, mermaids, and bodies of water) in the depths of my work. Feeling fishy, then, is also about trans+oceanic solidarity; we tread these waters holding on to each other, a step closer to surviving together.

Because my subject position as a trans Newfoundlander in the geopolitical imaginary is shaped by social and institutional precarity, but my whiteness offers me critical safety as I move through the world as a body at the margins, feeling fishy is both a methodology to live through loss and suffering as well as a poetics to slippery belonging. It is most significantly a way to think otherwise about trans embodiments, geographies, and temporalities that escape archival capture. As a figuration of queer displacement in Newfoundland, feeling fishy is haunted by Black poetic mappings of the Atlantic’s geographic and historical knowledge. This project is formed in conversation with the creative work of Black queer and trans women, particularly the transatlantic poetics of Dionne Brand (2001) and Dora Santana (2017), in which displaced bodies, geographies, and histories continue to drift through spectral oceans of becoming and belonging, and archival

knowledges remain floating within wounded ancestral waters. In my visuals and poetics throughout this thesis, I think toward a grammar of fishy relationality within which Black, Indigenous, queer, and trans ways of knowing Atlantic geographies might offer critical wisdom into the spectral entanglement of embodiments, environments, and epistemologies (Jefferies 2020a, 2020b).

Archives of Water

At the beginning of my graduate studies, the work of Viviane Namaste (2000, 2005) guided my experiments with trans women's histories. A trans woman scholar deeply connected to community, her research exploring the historical lives of transsexuals in Toronto and Montreal gave me hope that I might be able to do similar work here on the Atlantic Canadian coast. I held fast to the belief that I could make a significant scholarly difference by piecing together what I imagined as a chronological Newfoundland trans history. But I soon began to discover that this endeavour would be incredibly challenging due to differences in trans livability and intergenerational networking between central Canadian urban centres and small cities at the edge of the world like St. John's.

At first, my inability to locate trans archival sources from both institutional archives and community knowledge sent me on an imaginative journey through 400 years of Newfoundland history. Jumping into the archives of early European colonization and finding mermaids with outstretched arms, so deeply situated in the historical record, touched my marginal life profoundly (Whitbourne 1620; Wakeham 1967). Certainly, artists and scholars have illustrated a spiritual and surreal connection shared between trans girls and mermaids (Gerber 2017; Thom 2016). As a child, I spent much of my time with water and began to envision myself as a sea creature washed ashore. Imagining mermaids as trans ancestors thus became a creative and emotional strategy to refigure

how trans histories might be understood at the oceanic borders of a coastal geography (see Chapter Two).

Of course, as Horace Beck describes in his 1996 book *Folklore and the Sea*, critical inquiry has tried to misconstrue the weight of mermaid encounters in Newfoundland as the work of deception from seals and other strange creatures. Alternately, like Beck, I believe that imagination is all the more significant in a world undone by scientific denial. For me, the figuration of the mermaid remains as an ancestral link through centuries and decades of trans historical loss. The water in St. John's Harbour – a keeper of mermaid ghosts, deposits of sex workers, and dreams for better futures – can thus be understood as an archive of feeling that haunts the contemporaneity of Newfoundland trans+oceanic worldmaking. With all of its mess and weighty presence, it is worthy of critical and creative attention.

Currently, my practice of creative historiography owes much to recent experiments in queer and trans of colour critique, particularly the work of Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) – as well as to Black feminist artists and writers like Tourmaline (2017) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2018). Tourmaline's work in particular imagines how the Hudson River is a ghostly archive of queer and trans histories in New York City. Her film, *Atlantic is a Sea of Bones*, speaks to the work of M. Jacqui Alexander (2006), Christina Sharpe (2016), and Saidiya Hartman (2008) – among others – who have learned to think with haunted waters when archival collections offer failure alone. Tourmaline describes her affinity with water in a 2020 virtual symposium organized by the Barnard Centre for Research on Women: "Water is central to holding memory. The oceanic continues to offer tremendous haunting possibility for transformation ... Water as a place that is haunted, water as a place of transformation, water as a place that holds feeling."³ Poets from the

³ Learn more at: <https://youtu.be/QmDlCaxT8Ok>

Carribean like Dionne Brand (2001) and Kamau Brathwaite (1999, 2000) further illustrate how Atlantic waters hold generations of loss and resilience. Interrogating complex ways in which fluid archives of movement – forced migrations, diasporas, longings – come to matter in oceanic temporalities of resistance and survival, their thinking allows me to position Newfoundland trans women’s worlds within an ecology of fishy relations.

The violence of the transatlantic slave trade, through which millions of African peoples met their unjust ends in cold seawater, stays with me as I think about Newfoundland’s role and position as an actor in histories of racial capitalism.⁴ The language and logics of capture and enclosure from Black feminist scholarship and trans of colour critique speak directly to my fishy engagements with trans ecologies, histories, and temporalities in Newfoundland. The cod moratorium – a product of capital extraction and expulsion – always already entangled with constructions of race and class. Sex workers wooing clients in old St. John’s Harbour where the politics of fish trade have reared a violent coastal nation. Early European colonizers whose scummy twin forces of sexualization and violent desire altered the futures of mermaid trancers – remaining unaware that they might change the course of fishy trans history for many worlds to come. The shores of this island are marked with blood. African, Beothuk, L’nu, mermaid. The Atlantic has always been an archive. Alive to millennia of Indigenous migrations and centuries of unwanted colonial arrivals, the Atlantic holds its own knowledge of transition as it carries our lives into unmapped eras. Following Tourmaline, by way of Hartman, the Atlantic as knowledge holder continues to reveal the necessity of “displacing the archive as a place of truth.”⁵

⁴ *What Carries Us: Newfoundland and Labrador in the Black Atlantic*, curated by Bushra Junaid. The Rooms, St. John’s, NL. February 29 to September 7, 2020.

⁵ <https://youtu.be/QmDICaxT8Ok>

This thesis, then, articulates the role of embracing “narrative restraint” in the writing of missing histories (Hartman 2008: 12). Privileging fragments and figurations in archival research-creation thus becomes a way of reclaiming historical matters that elude archival capture. The paucity of trans historical traces in Newfoundland allows me to imagine more heartfelt intellectual motivations. Resisting the extractive nature of much archival inquiry (Fraser and Todd 2016; Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017), my writing is shaped by a desire to rethink how archival practices can influence touching modes of creative and scholarly production. In this temporal moment, I am not well-positioned to further chase historical narratives of Newfoundland trans elders whose oceanleaving has shaped archival gaps for decades. I believe that this particular kind of endeavour might be better suited for doctoral study, and I hold on to the possibility of such a project as I consider where to go next in my work. At the same time, I do not wish to disturb the ghosts of Newfoundland trans history in ways that are irreparable (Tuck and Ree 2013). I do not wish to be undone by what I might find in such a creative and scholarly project.

How might the ruptures of trans archival absence in Newfoundland be productive? Violet Drake suggests that for trans women Newfoundlanders, “acknowledging how we are ruptured in place and time is just one way for us to meet [our] hurt and answer to it.”⁶ I believe that my practice of research-creation does this by centering the power of creative historiographic inquiry. Learning to find significant critical and creative value in archival traces that may not form a coherent historical narrative allows me to privilege fishy fragments as historical actors that honour the Atlantic as a knowledge holder. Fragments and figurations leave me dreaming and drowning – seeking powerful relationships between trans histories and oceanic ecologies. Fragments and figurations offer just enough archival weight to bring the trans historical past into emotional

⁶ Learn more at: <https://notyourboysclub.com/2018/08/12/out-of-earshot-interview-4-violet-drake>

resonance with the contemporaneity of Newfoundland trans worldmaking. Which is to say that understanding who we are as fragmented beings in the present (Jefferies 2018a) is made easier by encountering a wake of trans historical remnants that might always linger as beautiful and brutal unknowns.

How to Sea Another World

I want more imagination – more risks, more dreams, more emotion – in Newfoundland studies. The desire to rethink how a colonial historical record is always connected to water. The necessity of meaning-making that resists institutional demands for validity. The power of story to position us as lifeforms in non-dominant relation with oceanic ecologies. Storying Newfoundland trans women's fishy histories as always already entangled with water, ever and far forth trans+oceanic, allows me to expand on the role of creative and therapeutic approaches to trans historical scholarship (Gilliland and Caswell 2016). As trans women artists and scholars like Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) and Tourmaline (2017) might suggest, trans histories and temporalities are forever known unknowns insomuch as the breadth of our beauty, resistance, and desire cannot and should not be captured by archives. It is thus impossible, in all cases and places, to offer a chronological account of the trans historical past. We are tasked with imagining what might have been.

Chapter One was commissioned by Eastern Edge Gallery in 2019 as one of a series of essays within the year-long queer curatorial project, RetroFlex, that was organized by visual artists and performers Jason Wells, Kailey Bryan, and Jason Penney. This essay lays out the speculative and spectral conceptual framework that shapes my current creative and scholarly practice. Positioning this essay as Chapter One is a way for me to effectively summarize my practice of historical production: one that both contextualizes and dreams about the weight of the past without

giving away every painful secret and lifegiving pleasure held in community and familial knowledge.

The two micro-essays that make up Chapter Two are meant to be self-contained, but together take up myths and intimacy in the fishy lives of Newfoundland trans women. They were written and published in my co-authored book *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory at the Water's Edge: Unsettled Islands* in early 2018 – a time in my intellectual life when I had been struggling to locate significant archival traces of Newfoundland trans women. Barely anything related to trans history had been catalogued, and several institutional and personal factors were permitting me from dragging myself through archival depths with precarious hope that I might actually find historical fragments of my community. This work informed both my everyday troubles as a young trans woman who didn't have many elders or role models, as well as the way I understood the unsettled contemporaneity of trans women's social lives on Canada's Atlantic coast. Coming up short in my attempts to uncover archival traces of women like me thus shaped a particular kind of imaginative framework within my creative and scholarly practice.

I would soon come to find out that there has been so much more to Newfoundland trans women's historical lives than painful archival invisibility, which might also be read as modes of surviving and eschewing the violent colonial archive (Hartman 2008; Snorton 2017). A few months later, in late July 2018, I uncovered a document that changed the course of my research-creation. A newspaper clipping that I had somehow missed, a fragile trace hidden inside the *HOMOSEXUALS* Vertical File at the Centre for Newfoundland Studies. This document contained the names of two trans women who were using media visibility to highlight the realities of medico-legal gatekeeping and trans suicide in late 1990s St. John's. Soon after, I found myself lucky enough to get in touch with each of them – neither of whom were still living in the capital city –

to ask questions about their historical and present-day realities. From these conversations, as well as a convergence of other archival and community sources, my creative and scholarly practice has flourished in innumerable ways.

Chapter Three was written a whole year later in July 2019 and published in the Reimaging Breasts special issue of *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* in May 2020. Interrogating my lived realities of breast augmentation, survival sex, and transmisogyny as a trans woman sex worker in St. John's using a fishy conceptual framework, this article was informed by geographies and histories of trans care in Newfoundland. Given the journal's limit of 4,000 words, I did not have room to elaborate on just how much the historical nature of trans health care in Newfoundland has changed from the early 1970s to the present. I do however hope to write more about this process in my future work, particularly how Newfoundland's rural island geography has shaped access to trans care. While this chapter explores my own access to and afterlife of trans health care, it is undoubtedly connected to the lives of trans women who came and fought for better futures before me, including those two special women who I discovered hidden in the archives.

Chapter Four, a presentation of my recent multidisciplinary project *Capturing Trans-Atlantics* (2020), expands on both my struggle of coming to terms with the archival absence that shaped my research-creation between 2016 and 2018 alongside the abundance of historical knowledge that has found me over the past two years. *Capturing Trans-Atlantics* is an attempt to make sense of my responsibilities as an artist and scholar to care for the difficult histories of a marginalized trans community. I work with the outmigration – oceanleaving – histories of two young trans women whose lives were stolen by an array of social and institutional violence and neglect. Obscuring these histories in poetry, sound, and visuals comes to represent a deep love and respect for my lost, missing, and recovered archival kin who refused to abandon their resilient

dreams in times of austerity and social collapse that echo from the past into the present. Choosing to keep their names hidden is an act of refusing an institution that demands knowability as a form of legitimacy. Knowing that these girls fought very hard to survive and that the world had its tortuous way with their futures stays with me as I continue to imagine the most effective methodological approaches for doing trans historical work in Atlantic Canada.

Each of these chapters represent different modes of feeling fishy as a kind of oceanic worldmaking in my research-creation. Chapter One offers up a series of fragmented theorizations that hold on to the fishy interplay of Newfoundland trans women's oceanleaving and historical loss in a time of social and ecological collapse. Chapter Two grapples with loss through the entanglement of oceanic ecology, rural desire, and trans archival absence in order to dream about fishy trans worlds at a time when the archival record remained hidden from my gaze as a grief-ridden and vulnerable researcher. Chapter Three expands on the relationship between oceanic ecology and trans women's social lives using the embodied origins of the term *fish* in communities of trans women across Turtle Island⁷ over the past 50 or so years. Read through my positionality as a sex worker, feeling fishy comes to be known as a form of queer displacement and slippery embodiment that buoys me through social and sexual encounters. Chapter Four considers the limits and effects of oceanleaving in order to trouble the ways in which historical traces of Newfoundland trans women's lives on the mainland have somehow washed back to the East coast with and beyond their will. As an assemblage, these essays argue that feeling fishy is a critical and creative approach

⁷ Turtle Island is a vernacular term used by some Northeastern Indigenous nations for what are known as North and Central America in the settler colonial context. While the term Turtle Island is non-representational of a pan-Indigenous approach to belief and ecology, I have chosen to use it briefly in this thesis because a number of my Mi'kmaq kin in Newfoundland make use of such vernacular. See the Steffi Retzlaff article titled "Power Over Discourse: Linguistic Choices in Aboriginal Media Representations," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 26, no. 1 (2006): 25-52.

to better understanding how trans women's past-present-future worlds in Newfoundland are entangled with oceanic ecologies that carry and hold us through changing waves of our resilience and survival.

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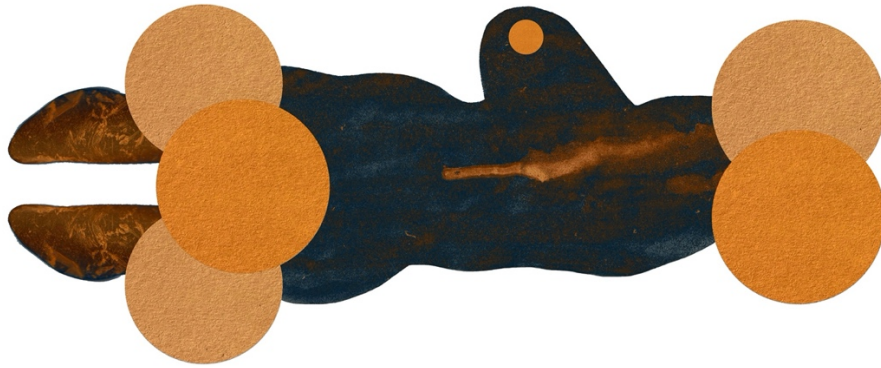
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Chapter One – Trans Women’s Archives in Fishy Fragments⁸



Listening to traditional knowledge keepers and engaging with the work of artists and scholars in Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland reveals how histories of these lands, waters, and atmospheres are inseparable from ecological relations with fishy beings (Benoit 2019b; Hall 2013; Lawrence 2018). What is this place and who are we without fish? How do we know ourselves as island bodies beyond the lifegiving and worldmaking relationality to our oceanic kin? How do rural fishy island environments shape queer and trans archives? Informed by my positionality as a rural settler trans woman sex worker, I think that studying and playing with trans, non-binary, and two-spirit histories in Ktaqamkuk requires multiple methods that are able to make creative sense of gender diverse worlds (Guzmán and Jefferies 2019). Specifically, working with what I call fishy fragments – an assemblage of archival remains, felt knowledges, and poetic imaginations – helps me privilege embodied and heartfelt modes of historical production that are entangled with oceanic ecologies.

Much of my recent creative and scholarly inquiry has been influenced by the effects of transatlantic outmigration on trans women’s archives in Atlantic Canada. In my work, I understand

⁸ This chapter was commissioned as one of a series of queer curatorial essays by Eastern Edge Gallery and previously published on their website in May 2020. To view the original article, please see: <https://easternedge.ca/retroflex/trans-womens-archives-in-fishy-fragments-essay-by-daze-jefferies>

outmigration as an ecological force and a complex process of unsettled worldmaking that is bound up in issues of geography, temporality, and hope. Engaging with fishy fragments – multiform ephemera, reels of microfilm, digital wastelands, and oral histories from community elders – has shown me how many young trans women have left this place searching for better futures. Believing in imagined communities beyond the colonial and sociocultural constraints that have historically shaped gender and sexual diversity at our Atlantic edge, choices made by these women to escape archival capture have rippled through time to inform the changing contemporaneity of our lives here and now (Jefferies 2018a, 2019b).

As I share intimate engagements with fishy fragments that are always already queer, trans, slippery, and fluid, I am caught up in my thinking about the many bodies, stories, and relationalities that are lost to outmigration (Bowering Delisle 2013). Left to sort through disparate traces of trans life that are shared with me by out-of-the-way archival collections or word of mouth, I try to make peace with unfinished historical narratives about lives and worlds that are just in reach yet so far away from who and where I am in this time of troubled visibility (Brake, *The Independent*, July 22, 2015; Risdon, *The Telegram*, June 26, 2018). I think about the nameless young girl who wanted a better life for herself so she moved to Toronto and cut all ties to home at the birth of the new millennium; the confused and isolated teenager who fled from the Port au Port peninsula to New York City in the late 1970s searching for community; the queen from Labrador named Madonna who, in the mid-90s, became a star of showgirl performance in Vancouver; the many visiting TS sex workers who have flown back and forth over the past 20 years. Who am I to know these fragmented life histories? How do they shape my trans archival logics?

Grappling intimately with the ephemerality of queer and trans archives is a way of coming to know the textures and contours of gender and sexual diversity that make invisibility and

spectrality all the more necessary for our own comfort, protection, and survival (Gill-Peterson 2018; Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017). Additionally, the work of making trans women's archives visible is a slippery encounter with ethics of accountability and care. Because the labour of my creative and scholarly practice is interconnected with my survival, I realize how variations of absence and presence in trans, non-binary, and two-spirit archives are political matters that are worthy of sensitivity and love (Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018). In my thinking and creation, complex theorizations and poetic analyses become tools of honouring the lost and missing lives of my archival kin – women whose voices haunt our pastpresent as their fishy disappearances inform our historical longings.

Brought into being within the contact zone of embodiment, ephemerality, and ecology, the fishy fragments of trans women's archives help me think more critically about issues of colonial violence and erasure, geographies of community and care, as well as our dreams for livable futures. Although I sometimes believe that this oceanic place is incapable of embracing and celebrating trans women's worlds, fishy fragments remind me of the melancholic and hopeful conditions that have altered our modes of survival over the past 50 years (Hilliard, *The Telegram*, August 8, 1999). I don't think for a second that these traces are all that's left of our fluid genealogies, but I trust in their ability and agency to become known on their terms alone. Fishy fragments have revealed themselves to me in moments of crisis and despair. Helping me imagine trans archives, bodies, and temporalities in ways that are fundamentally entangled with oceanic worldmaking, they are reformed into ancestral lifelines when I need them the most.

Dreaming about invisibility, and keeping so many secrets of my own, I question how my schema of imagined belonging shapes the way I undertake this kind of research-creation. Loving and honouring the fishy fragments of trans women's archives is a challenging response-ability to

meet my ancestral kin within alternative contact zones of oceanic place and time (Brathwaite 2000; Santana 2017; Todd 2017). What might have started as a quest to piece together a chronological trans history of Atlantic Canada has slowly become an intense theoretical experiment that refuses the legitimacy of my desires to fully know our vibrant and violent historical worlds. Even if limitations of longing for trans histories trouble how I am able to access archival knowledges (Cifor 2015; Rawson 2009; Gill-Peterson 2019), I believe that the known unknowns of trans women's lives are held in place by ecological structures that shape how we resist and survive together-apart through geographies and temporalities of struggle.

Feeling fishy as a failed but necessary method of survival as I allow trans women's archives to unsettle my life, I choose to stay within the watery borderlands that buoy us as we hold out for better futures. In another world, I am missing and forgotten. I am oceanleaving. These spectral positions become counter-archives as queer and trans afterlives are ruptured by social and ecological collapse. Everything we know is returning to water. Little by little, our bodies are washed over as memorials and palimpsests drown around us (Alexander 2006; Lethabo King 2019). Caught between the rough currents of outmigration, violence, secrecy, and stealth, histories of trans women in Ktaqamkuk drift between impossible timelines to keep our stories safe. Somehow we survive through the traumatic loss – we do it over and over as the waters rise. We do not abandon hope.

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Chapter Two – Myths and Intimacy⁹



Myths: Fishy

In January 2017, I first discovered a well-known archival engraving of mermaids in St. John's harbour. With exquisite detail, it presents an encounter between three mermaids and a group of European colonizers at a Newfoundland shoreline. Even though the colonizers appear to be terrified, the mermaids reach toward them with open arms, as if to introduce their watery ways of being to the terrestrial strangers. The work itself has slippery origins: while it is attributed to Theodor de Bry, who died in 1598, it is based on a violent account described in *A Discourse and Discovery of Newfoundland* (1620) by Sir Richard Whitbourne, the grandfather of Newfoundland and Labrador's settler colonial history.

Mermaids are queer figures in Newfoundland and Labrador history; they appear only in tiny bursts and then disappear for centuries. They are misunderstood, physically assaulted, and forced to vanish (Whitbourne 1620). In this place, mermaids and trans women are connected. We mutate across species and sex (Hayward 2010); we are hybrid and hyphenated kin (Wah 2006; Haraway 2016). Captivated by our shared histories (erased, fishy, and imagined), I interrogate my

⁹ This chapter was previously published as two micro-essays: "Myths: Fishy," 17-23, and "Intimacy: Torn," 129-34, In *Autoethnography and Feminist Theory at the Water's Edge: Unsettled Islands* (Cham: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

own hybrid body—a trans, island body—and its place in Newfoundland’s historical past. As I continue to encounter what can be read as a confluence of mermaid realities, legends, and archival touches, and building on Astrida Neimanis’ argument that humans have “fishy beginnings” (2017: 109), I suggest that hybrid embodiments of Newfoundland womanhood (fish woman or trans woman) have watery pasts and potentialities. Ultimately, however, I arrive at a moment of questioning where these pasts may lead. Forming linkages between the labour of Atlantic women islanders, Black queer vernacular in diaspora, Indigenous human-animal relations, and trans phenomenology is, I argue, one way to highlight and trouble posthuman fishy futures for trans women’s lives in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Settler relations with fish in Newfoundland stretch back hundreds of years. On and offshore, fish are political and economic beings (Probyn 2016), and they can be mapped most significantly through a series of historical coordinates and positions: the island’s initial colonization at the close of the fifteenth century, merchant trade and commerce right up to the 1900s, everyday labour and life in coastal communities, and the collapse of the Atlantic cod fishery in 1992. Fish have shaped slippery ontologies (Law and Lien 2012; Todd 2014) for white settler islanders. Indeed, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage states that “it was fish that brought Europeans [here], it was fish that dictated the pattern of their settlement, and it was the catching, salting, drying, and marketing of fish that laid down the forms and structures of the society they built” (2015: para 1). Although the labour of fish relations in Newfoundland has historically been associated with settler masculinities (Hallett 2016b), feminist scholars have recently recorded women’s multiplex ties to fish, including the catching, preservation, and preparation of cod (Cullum 2003; Ennis and Woodrow 1996; Grzetic 2002; McCay 1995; Murray 1980; Power 1997; Robbins 1997).

Indigenous relations to fish have been documented primarily in Labrador, the ‘other’ portion of provincial space that is home to the Inuit and Innu peoples, as well as to the Southern Inuit of NunatuKavut (Arendt 2010; Calder et al. 2016; Samson and Pretty 2006). As a white islander and settler, I cannot make claims about Indigenous worlds and worldviews; rather it is my anti-colonial responsibility to engage with, learn from, and share Indigenous theories and perspectives. My reading of human-fish scholarship in Labrador makes connections with Zoe Todd’s “‘fish pluralities’ (multiple ways of knowing and defining fish)” (2014: 217), in Paulatuq, Arctic Canada. For Todd, situating fish as environmental and historical actors, and understanding “fish-as-political-citizens” (2017: 109) opens up an arena for theorizing the political kinship of human and more-than-human lives in Northern Canada (2014: 217). Todd suggests that everyday life for the Paulatuqmiut (people from Paulatuq) is fishy: it ranges from catching and preparing fish, to forming art and philosophies with fish (2014: 222). From this posture, I question how fishy realities might be understood for both settlers and Indigenous peoples, particularly trans or two-spirit women, in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As I have grown to learn what trans subjectivity and corporeality mean in my life, I have encountered vernacular terms and various forms of cultural production that shape the way I move through the world. ‘Fishy’ is a term I first learned from engaging with Black drag/queer/trans media, and it has morphed into a linguistic trace I use frequently with other (settler) trans women in Newfoundland. To ‘be fishy’ or to ‘serve fish’ involves passing as cis women, or performing an ambiguous or suspicious ‘ultra-femininity.’ While the use of ‘fish’ as an ontological performative has been critiqued in and outside of Black queer and trans communities, Philip Hayward notes that there are unresolved debates about the many queer, slippery, and problematic uses of ‘fish’ (2017b: 49). Even though there is a small body of scholarly material exploring explicit relations between

‘fish’ and trans/gender variant embodiments (Hayward 2008, 2011; Hayward 2017b; Rosario 2014; Simmons 2014), I have not discovered any scholarship concerned with ‘fish’ as a vernacular measure of trans women’s subjectivities, or as a posthuman representation of trans lives.

How might ‘fish’ be trans through their wave-like flux and movements across racial and spatial borders? Writing a racial poetics of transatlantic water, Dora Silva Santana (2017) weaves together enslaved ancestries, trans embodiments, and wet ways of knowing. When she writes of “ancestors who transitioned through the water, into the water, from the water” (2017: 187), she illustrates the diasporic and interstitial ontologies of the Middle Passage, wherein millions of African peoples were entrapped and transported across the Atlantic Ocean – like fish – to be traded. Becoming animal and becoming enslaved, in this way, contemporary uses of ‘fish’ are haunted (Brand 2001; Tuck and Ree 2013) processes of “l/anguish”-ing (Philip 2015: 56). They reflect upon both a foreign, diasporic language (Sheth 2014), and the continuous racist lacerations endured and resisted by queer and trans people of color.

Black theorists illustrate that the category ‘human’ has, since the Enlightenment, not been accessible to those with African ancestries. Consequently, a growing body of Black theory engages with questions of the hum-animal, articulating racial post- and inhumanisms for Black futures (Bey 2017; Hayward 2017a; Warren 2017; Wynter 2003). On these grounds, can Black futures be fishy? For white trans women, to ‘pass’ with an appropriated fishy ontology – to be seen as cisgender – is to be recognized as ‘real.’ However, as Santana argues, ‘passing’ promises no safety for Black trans women (2017: 185). If we, white settler trans women, are to understand ourselves as being fishy, we must recognize our own performances of what Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément call “surreptitious slippage” (1986: 79) across species, race, sex, and history—keeping our own slimy secrets of trans being, while many Black trans women face violence and death (Hayward

2017a; Krell 2017), and Indigenous communities, ecosystems, and worldviews are threatened, poisoned, and destroyed (Calder et al. 2016; Cruikshank 2005).

Certainly, scholars and writers have examined affective, hybrid, linguistic, and transgenic cross-species encounters between humans and fishy beings (Bahng 2015; Hayward 2011; Kelley and Hayward 2013; Lai 2002; Todd 2014, 2017). Fishiness is manifest with linguistic dilemmas: the use and appropriation of Black queer vernacular, discursive divisions between Indigenous and settler conceptualizations of nature, and the misclassification of various aquatic creatures (jellyfish and starfish) as fish. For instance, Eva Hayward writes connections between the sensuous, immersive matters of jellyfish, starfish, and trans embodiments, illustrating a permeable form of (non)fishy being (2011: 265; see also Hayward 2008). When she writes of sensual connections between humans and jellies, and the shared technoscientific transness of jellies and trans women (2011: 267, 271), she draws parallels with Todd's fish pluralities – showing that trans as a coordination, as a way of mattering, or as a sensuous and reflexive figuration, is performed, in part, through multiple movements across species and sex in varying nature-cultures.

Attentive to these movements, a *fishy subjectivity* for trans women in Newfoundland and Labrador must be an expression to “turn, bend, or reflect back upon” (Turner 1988: 24) colonial and settler relations with fish in provincial history. It must also engage with Indigenous and Black conceptions/dialectics of fish. In my life, writing, theorizing, and living with a fishy subjectivity forms a cartography of belonging (Butler 2018a, 2018b), whereby creatively mapping ‘fish’ across history, race, species, and sex changes the way I navigate life as a trans woman islander. A fishy subjectivity recognizes an assemblage of (non)fishy slippery ontologies: queer fish, trans fish, serving fish, fish-as-beings, salt fish, feesh, transgenic fish, entrapped fish, performative fish, phallic fish, fish woman, starfish, jellyfish, disappearing/dying fish (Boon 2018a). Alongside

Neimanis' stretching back to oceanic pasts, and Santana's wet sensibility between oceans and optics – "eyes see, eyes sea, see, sea, see-sea-eye" (2017: 188) – I envision a fishy formulation between sense, settler, self, sex, and species, through which trans women in Newfoundland can imagine futures that continue to swim against the current.



Intimacy: Torn

For Dr. Yuvraj Gill (1992–2017)

When my lover passed away in late 2017, I grieved by spending time with the ocean. Both centered and unsettled by the crashing of waves – drawn into the instability of the harbour – I relied on the water to guide me, to help take the edge off my reality from which he had vanished. Like trying to measure the changing distance between wave troughs, adapting to everyday life without my darling next to me seemed hopeless. I wanted to drift just under the surface, feeling weightless for a moment. I wanted my ears to flood with water and then pop, forcing me to wake up from a nightmare. But everything was real.

I had been gutted like a fish. Sliced, cut, torn. Next to water, I was finding my way back home. Breathing in the salt, hearing the soft drones of waves churning, and sending my deepest, soul-aching love out to the sea, I promised him I would work twice as hard for the both of us. One night, the moon shone across the surface of the calm water in a long, silver streak like a rip from

the dark horizon to the edge of the wharf where I stood. I imagined it as a rupture in time. If I dove into it, where would I end up? Could it pull me through to a better place?

Carved by oceanic, historical, hormonal, and surgical interventions, my life as a trans woman Newfoundlander might best be understood as torn. Situated within an emotional landscape of history, place, and sex, I envision the torn as a cartographic framework (Braidotti 2011) for creatively navigating the dissonance between Newfoundland's historical past and trans women's health in the present. A tool for pulling the self across place-based relations that shape trans lives, the torn rips its way beyond the corporeal limits of women like me and invites others into the ruptured geography (Brand 2001: 5) – the elsewhere (Rogowska-Stangret 2017) or “ecology of belonging” (Braidotti 2014: 167) – within which we, trans women islanders, live.

Who am I as a Newfoundland trans woman? How can I seek out or map where I belong as I yearn for trans history (Brand 2001)? How does not knowing my place in the historical past affect my health? I stand at a precipice that extends no longer, wishing to jump into the ocean to find room for living within the island's fishy trans past (Jefferies 2018b). As if I am reading a genealogical record with frayed edges and missing pages, I recognize no traceable origin or roots (Boon 2018c; Butler 2018c). I accept that I must write the text I ache to know. As I grow torn, I question: How, or who, can I become without a history of trans women islanders?

While I cannot find archival traces of our lives, I use my imagination to feel less displaced (Jefferies 2018b, 2018c). Then I experience the ruptured materiality of my presence tearing through the archival fabric of island womanhood. As I push forward through torn cartographies, I write an opening – a split – to consider how trans experience changes what it means to ‘do’ womanhood (Butler 2004) in rural places. Trans women islanders are postmodern subjects, bodies in fragments (Eades 2017). Our subjectivities are shaped in spaces of hyphenation (Wah 2006).

Thus, as impressions of embodied sociality (Connell 2009), and schemas out of historical erasure (Brand 2001) toward better-documented trans futures in Newfoundland, torn cartographies trace the relational and shifting positions that we live.

As I become-with, be-with, and live-with other women like me, I develop emotive and textured understandings of the mental and physical labour required for us to thrive at the water's edge. Through our entanglements, I come to know also a range of necessary choices trans women islanders make to survive. Theorizing torn cartographies is an act of my own mental labour as I work through notions of history and loss to contextualize my body and health as becoming-with others, both cis and trans islanders. Bound within an imagined community and by spatio-temporal shifts across and relations to sex, we become-together. We are skin to skin, we are torn. As such, the close and intimate intra-active (Barad 2007; Bettcher and Goulimari 2017) life narratives of trans women islanders open up possibilities for understanding linked politics of labour and health in rural places.

“Becoming-with,” suggests Kate Wright, “offers a metaphysics grounded in connection” (2014: 278) whereby our relations to others, both human and more-than-human, are expressed through affective touches and textures (Vaccaro 2010). With and alongside others in liminal spaces of transition, trans women islanders engage in ruptured processes of becoming-with geographic, historical, and sexual spheres. Therefore, torn cartographies are sites and processes of erosion (Boon 2018d). They tear and gnaw at the smooth and striated spaces (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) within which we survive.

Torn cartographies weave theory from texture, but unlike Sonja Boon's theory in/of/through stitches (Boon 2018b), the meaning of the torn is found in rips. An affective simulacrum of fragmentation, the torn is a space to map fractures, margins, splits, slashes,

borderlands, and the troubles they create. Like Donna Haraway with her string figures, who seeks “a knotted analytical practice ... [where] the tangles are necessary” (1994: 69), I recognize the torn as both an affective response to absence, and a transcorporeal (Alaimo 2010) becoming-with to understand the body in transition navigating frictional geographic and historical positions.

I call for others to embrace the torn. In so doing, we can engage together in a process of becoming-minoritarian (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), a practice of enfolding our selves to recognize – to live-with and be-with – a myriad of trans ontological positions. By investing emotional attention into the multiplex ways trans women’s lives are lived, as well as the ways we understand our fragmented or eroded positions within the geographies of our home, each of us can know how it feels to be torn.

Most significantly, to become-with trans women islanders is to open up space for a touching methodological venture into our bodies and health (Thien 2012: 423). However, while forming affective relations to the study of trans health is necessary to contextualize the social underpinnings of trans matters in Newfoundland, I also argue that this process requires an intimate reflexivity from those who do not experience the labour of transition in this place. Our lives in the present become torn in relation to several missing pieces of the past: a lack of research, a lack of archival documents, and therefore a lack of representation (Namaste 2005). Displaced yet resilient, we long to know our place within the island’s historical and physical landscapes.

Though intimately connected to the undocumented past, the torn is also a configuration for understanding our health in the future. Torn and fragmented approaches to trans health studies offer something critical to a tradition of Newfoundland scholarship: they unsettle topographies and gendered interrelations by which islanders have been carved and eroded for centuries, and they become reference points to both acknowledge and grieve over tattered and uncertain histories. In

this moment, I move through temporal landscapes, a past-present-future becoming (simpkins 2017) with the torn. Surrounded by ruptures and tears, I am “half-in and half-out, coming and going, opening and closing: becoming” (Eades 2015: 232).

The torn has been most helpful to me as a tool to research and articulate suffering (Frank 2001). Across these pages, I burst with feeling. The weight of my heart leaks out like the light of the moon breaking the water’s surface, but unlike that solar reflection, my life is dimly-lit. Here in this body, this geography (Rich 1994; Stryker 2008a), the torn is a fold for grieving: first over archival invisibility and historical absence, but most powerfully and painfully over the loss of my wild lover, Dr. Yuvraj Gill, who passed over these earthly borderlands into the unknown much too soon.

I have poured a thousand briny questions into the ice-cold waters that surround my home, and I have allowed myself to be fragmented and undone as I hold on to our love. In the intimate spaces where memory and landscape overlap (Jones 2005), I fold back toward my time spent with Yuvraj and ache as I learn from the love we made, kneaded, and harboured. I feel him near the ocean and long to meet him there. In a dream, I see myself hitting the water and sinking, traveling soaking wet through a rough undertow and becoming tangled in a seine net. I am almost out of breath when he frees me. And although I begin to fade out, I am propelled to the surface and float in a pool of silver. He’s here with me: it’s alright now. I’m in pain, but it’s the good kind. I am torn in his arms and I am bleeding theory. I am covered in cuts that will turn to silver scars.

By bringing critical and emotional attention to trans women’s lives in Newfoundland, I ask each of us to consider the complex interplay between trans history, health, and belonging on this island we call home. A torn approach to rural trans health studies can help visualize currently hidden inflexures of the health, bodies and lives of trans women islanders. If, as Deborah Thien

argues, “the emotional self or feeling subject is ever forming ... always becoming intelligible synchronously with places ... encountered” (2012: 433), then becoming-with trans women Newfoundlanders is one way that others can begin to experience the push and pull of torn cartographies in sensuous and emotional geographies.

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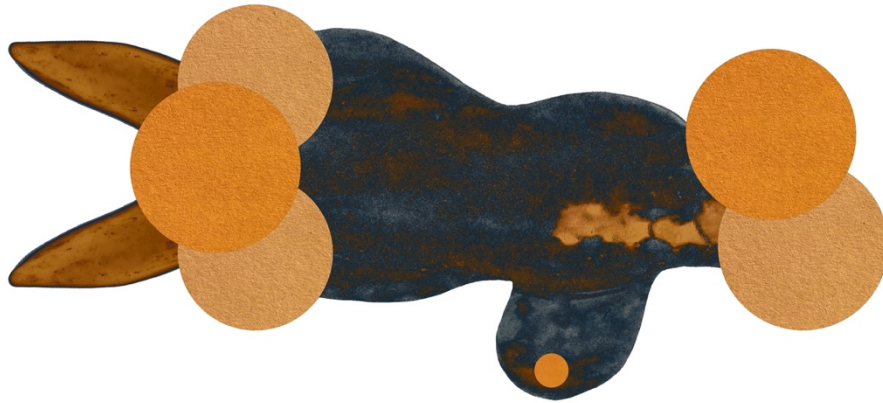
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Chapter Three – Seawater/C-cup: Fishy Trans Embodiments and Geographies of Sex Work in Newfoundland¹⁰



Introduction

Dry-swallowing preciously mint-scented turquoise and peach cream pills, the growth of my breasts began in late 2014. One morning, two weeks into hormone replacement therapy (HRT) with estrogen, I squeezed my right nipple and a milky clear substance (pathologized as galactorrhea) shot out for the first time. More exciting than alarming, this experience symbolized the female leaking out of me. Over the next few months, while new kinds of tingles and feelings figured into my embodiment as a young trans woman, my body began to shift. Textures of my coarse skin, hair, and nails became thinner and softer while breast buds pushed through. Fleishy interactions and sensuous engagements with the environments around me grew out of my chest. All my growing pains became corporeal guides through sex change and the nippy island weather systems of Ktaqamkuk/Newfoundland, Canada.¹¹

As I moved further away from an embodiment that could be read as male, my medical transition became intimately connected to my experience as a sex worker. Many of my Johns

¹⁰ This chapter was previously published as “Seawater/C-cup: Fishy Trans Embodiments and Geographies of Sex Work in Newfoundland,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 17-35.

¹¹ I include both geographic regions of the province Newfoundland and Labrador in my writing only when referring to medico-legal policy and access to care on a provincial scale. When working with trans women’s creative geographical and ecological relations to the island of Newfoundland, I do not make reference to Labrador.

would inquire about my interest in surgeries: breast, facial, and genital. While some of them sought my companionship for a one-time fling and realized that I could not yet provide the ultimately troubled transsexual fantasy they desired, recurring clients would remark about the beauty of my “transformation” as my face softened and my breasts began to round out with each passing month. These clients formed two kinds of affinity with my breasts: while a number of them loved my A-cup boobs, and preferred small and perky tits over a large and pillowy bosom, the rest had shown excitement at the idea of fondling big, soft breasts on my body. I too had a complicated relationship with my breasts. Eight months into my medical transition, as my fishy social body became increasingly read as female, a lack of boobs that were big enough to balance out my physical frame triggered a growing experience of dysphoria with my chest. In my longing for gender pleasure, and in the realization that breast implants would also be an investment into the unknown timeline of my future as a sex worker, I knew that I desired breast augmentation.

After consulting with a physician in late 2015 about my needs for top surgery, a single plastic surgeon in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) welcomed me as a patient without hesitation. A year and a half into my medical transition, while balancing my undergraduate studies, creative practice, and survival sex work, I had saved enough money for breast implants. In July 2016, two months before I started grad school, my \$8,000 augmentation mammoplasty was performed at the Health Sciences Centre in the capital city of St. John’s. My first surgery of any kind, it signified a major step in my transsexual body project, but I had absolutely no idea what to expect. A fish out of water, I didn’t know any other trans women islanders who were able to access top surgery. The only critical knowledge that I could find about trans breast augmentation came from documentary YouTube vlogs of both pre- and post-operative surgical bodies, as well as from discouraging articles within the medical archive.

While feminist scholars have used qualitative research to explore issues of desire in trans women's sexual, surgical, and social embodiments (Bauer and Hammond 2015; Vartabedian 2018), there is a significant gap in the qualitative literature regarding trans women's breasts. For several decades, our breasts have been objected to primary study by clinicians and medical researchers in order to illustrate a variety of complications (Kanhai 1999; Pritchard et al. 1988). From conditions of breast cancer to skin necrosis to symmastia (breast confluence at the middle of the chest as a result of implant displacement), the study of trans women's breasts within the clinic has warned both patients and physicians to be forethoughtful of uncertain risks associated with hormones and surgery. While this body of scholarship draws attention to very real exceptional outcomes of breast augmentation, and it demonstrates the importance of grappling with medical risk, I am unsettled by the way it dangerously frames trans women's desires. Recognizing how trans women's bodies have been grossly objectified and inappropriately examined—with our desires made invisible—in much academic inquiry (Namaste 2000: 1), I argue that there is a critical need for creative and heartfelt figurations of trans women's breasts beyond the clinical theatre (Ross 2004).

Using creative methods of inquiry (research-creation) to explore the breasted embodiments of trans women's lives is one way toward such an artful transsomatechnics (Stryker 2008a; Sullivan 2009). Following the curious interest of medical professionals to study the effects of breast augmentation upon trans women's "work and artistic production" (Weigert et al. 2013), this essay furthers intellectual conversations about the use of creative practices to situate trans women's embodiments within social and geographic environments (Arsenault 2012a; Plett 2018; Ross and Karbusicky 2001). In the next section, I briefly outline the current medico-legal landscape of trans care in NL to illustrate how trans women's access to coverage for breast augmentation is made

troublesome by medical policy. Calling attention to my sex work as a domain that made accessing top surgery possible on my own terms, which in turn fundamentally changed my social embodiment and marketability as a trans escort, I suggest that trans women's breasts must be imagined otherwise. Within the context of a rural island geography, I ask: How might creatively working with breasts, beyond the medical archive and away from the clinic, be one way of doing transsomatechnics in Newfoundland? How might breasts be central to trans matters in this place?

From letters written to MHAs (Members of the House of Assembly), calling for the accessible coverage of transition-related surgeries (TRS), to protests at Trans Marches to sex-working ads to a range of life writing, visuals, and performance art—embodiments and figurations of the breast have been used by trans women, trans men, and non-binary Newfoundlanders to negotiate with our body projects and politics for a number of years.¹² For example, in my piece, *Some Numb* (Fig. 3.1), layering my bosom upon pans of harboured sea ice is a way to map the titillation of my incredibly sensitive post-operative breasts within Newfoundland's difficult climate and island geographies (an assemblage of sensuous socio-spatial relations). Guided by trans scholar Viviane Namaste's ways of producing trans knowledges beyond the medical archive, I think with my breasts as an inquiry into trans fishy embodiments and geographies of sex work in Newfoundland (Namaste 2015). Using visuals and poetics, I begin to creatively map how my breasts have reframed both my marketability as a sex worker and my social embodiment as I navigate through this island world. Engaging with my breasts as a contact zone of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence, I suggest that paying creative attention to trans women's breasts might reimage notions of trans sex-working desire.

¹² See my self-published poetry collection *Milky Moksha* (2016), which explores embodiments of my sex work to interrogate the complexities of island trans womanhood in Newfoundland. The poem *CAME THROUGH*, in particular, interrogates my relations with clients during the first two months after my breast augmentation: "two great circles intersecting / float me on / absorb me into the culture of another / out on the water" (73).

Geographies of Trans Care in Newfoundland and Labrador

While trans people in NL have been able to access HRT with informed consent for over a decade, and we have recently gained increased access to affirming gender markers on medico-legal documents, until a short while ago we have been stuck in the only Canadian region to still require an out-of-province assessment for transition-related surgeries (TRS). Before late 2019, in order to access surgical care funded by the NL government, trans patients were first required to obtain a referral for surgery at the CAMH (Centre for Addictions and Mental Health, formerly the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry) Adult Gender Identity Clinic in Tkaronto/Toronto, Ontario. An arena of erasure, gatekeeping, and negligence in which trans bodies are selectively authorized to access care, this clinic has been critiqued by trans activists and community members across Canada (Namaste 2000: 190). Actively seeking to avoid the drama of this clinic, many trans folks in NL have chosen to fund surgeries with our own labour, on our own terms. At the same time, community members and our allied physicians have continued to push for accessible trans care, and the result is a changing landscape of TRS that are eligible for provincial coverage. While breast augmentation has long been mis/understood as a cosmetic surgical practice, as of early 2019, it now qualifies as an insured procedure for transfeminine patients under NL's Medical Care Plan (MCP), but only when there is breast aplasia (non-development of breast tissue) after 18 months of HRT. This means that most trans women who desire breast augmentation will not be eligible candidates for surgery if the slightest bit of breast tissue exists.

How might physicians measure breast aplasia differently across the diversity of trans bodies? What doctors are willing to challenge this criterion as an act of transmisogyny? While I know many trans women islanders who desire augmented breasts, and a handful of local girls who are funding their own surgeries, the possibilities of accessing coverage for breast augmentation are

made troublesome by the work of erasure in medical policy that does not recognize top surgery for trans women as a more-than-cosmetic encounter. According to many trans women islanders, who are not sex workers and who do not have the income of an independent trans escort, this added coverage as it currently exists was a failed victory from the start. My social position as a highly desired sex worker made accessing breast augmentation a quick possibility at the age of 21. While often pushing me into a network of fetishization, secret desire, and disembodiment as a trans escort in a small city, the labour of my sex work has been an economic safety net within which I have been complexly tangled. In the context of my life outside CAMH's clinical theatre, as a way to better understand "the value of not assuming that official narratives of our clinical history tell the whole story, or real story" of trans women's lives and embodiments, I observe the relationship between my breast augmentation and sex work as a way of navigating through NL's messy medico-legal institutions (Namaste 2015: 43).

Following works in transsomatechnics that refuse colonial logics of gender to imagine trans embodiment otherwise (Benaway 2017; cárdenas 2016), this essay illustrates the significance of creative academic inquiry into trans women's breasts. If trans women's top surgeries are to be understood as embodied processes toward improved qualities of life, as well as acts of creative transfiguration (Ashley and Ells 2018), activists and physicians in NL must continue to challenge the ethics and medical discourse of augmentation mammoplasty as an unnecessary cosmetic procedure. Simultaneously, we must also recognize a series of fleshy, material, and social complications that can take form through breast augmentation. The second half of this essay grapples with some of these troubles by asking: How are pleasure, risk, sex, and violence complexly mapped upon trans women's social bodies by way of un/bearing breasts? Outside of the clinical theatre, and the genital-centric model of trans surgical care (Spade 2006), what might

become of trans women's breasts? Thinking with these questions, I creatively map a flux of fishy relations (disembodiment, microaggressions, and objectification) that have materialized through my breast augmentation in order to complicate the spatial politics of trans women's surgical bodies.

Fishy Felt Knowledges of Breast Augmentation

The visuals and poetics that guide my felt knowledges have been formed in relation with the larger conceptual framework of my current research-creation that I call *feeling fishy* (for more on felt knowledges, see Million 2009; Springgay 2019; Tremblay 2019; Vaccaro 2010). A dynamic point of encounter between trans embodiment, queer ephemerality, and Atlantic ecology, feeling fishy materializes in my work as a creative and critical mapping of the ways that trans women's lives in Newfoundland are entangled with the island's oceanic geographies (Jefferies 2018b). Informed by histories of the term *fish* in communities of trans women across Turtle Island—queerly endearing vernacular that emerged in the 1970s as a way to symbolize the different market niches of cis and trans women's sex-working bodies—feeling fishy, in this essay, represents a slippery embodiment toward livable futures (Ridley 2019). Following Black trans scholar Dora Santana, whose transatlantic poetics flow between body, water, and energy, and for whom “water is the embodiment of trans orientation,” feeling fishy is a way of coming to terms with a disembodiment that is in constant flux both at and in the hands of others (Santana 2017: 183).

“Fishy ... That's something we say amongst ourselves ... It means she looks real ... Two perfectly shaped D-cup breasts on a tiny frame. God damn it, bitch. Those are fishy,” articulates trans artist Nina Arsenault in her autobiographical production, *The Silicone Diaries* (2012b: 212-13). In my reading of this quote, feeling fishy speaks to the divine artfulness of many trans women's body projects. Both iconicized and made abject over her surgical transfiguration,

Arsenault's work offers insight into the effects of surgery upon her social body. In her article, *A Manifesto of Living Self-portraiture*, she describes the slippery complexities of sex work, surgery, and sociality upon the temporalities of her embodiment. She says: "Because I was personifying new social and sexual roles, people treated me accordingly. This quickly and radically altered my relationships to others and my environment—power, privilege, oppression" (2012a: 66). Arsenault's lived experience illustrates the coexisting disposability and desirability of trans women's bodies that shift with and across the spaces we inhabit. Feeling fishy, then, is also about queer displacement. Recognizing the different spatial relations of my breasted embodiment, one that is desired and objectified by Johns within the privacy of the home, and my social body, one that is often made spectacle and disposable by strangers in public space, I understand how my breasts continue to frame my fishy social location as a young trans woman islander.

Over the past three years, in the act of moving through public space in St. John's, my breasted embodiment has been subject to an array of social violence, including harassment and catcalling, transmisogynistic slurs, looks and expressions of disgust, as well as non-consensual touches from strangers. Frequently objectified by others, my large and perky breasts have facilitated gross harassment from men and continuous shaming from women, specifically in moments of uncontrollable nipple show-through. I generally find this ignorant behaviour more illuminating than disorienting because it offers insight into the workings of transmisogyny in social space. However, the unwarranted stares, scoffs, winks, whistles, and comments each shape a troubled relationship with the augmented breasts that I could not imagine becoming anything more than gender-affirming as a young transsexual. Although I am often able to ignore the weight of these environmental microaggressions, the most challenging part of moving through St. John's as a trans woman with visibly augmented breasts is encountering the smug misgendering and the

intentional erasure of my womanhood by strangers, primarily other women (I am left to wonder why). At the beginning of my medical transition, I had no way of knowing how much social violence would be directed at me simply by embodying trans womanhood with breast implants. Taken together as ongoing challenges that I continue to experience as I move through social space, these forms of ignorance influence the difficult temporalities of my breasted embodiment.

At the same time, as one of the few local trans women escorts in St. John's, whose current body project aligns with the archetype of erotic transsexual desire for many male clients, my bosom has ushered me into a new economic milieu. For Johns who specifically and only desire a trans partner with soft curves and big breasts, my body is a market niche. As these men fondle my chest and suckle my nipples, the fantasies of their trans-amorous desire corporealize in the act of synchronously touching my breasts and genitals. For a large number of these clients, whose hegemonic masculinities prevent them from thinking critically about their desires to share touching encounters with trans women, or from doing the work of opening up to the beautiful diversity of transfeminine embodiments, my breasts become erotic spectacles and the most significant markers of my womanhood. Read side by side, these brief experiences of disposability and desirability illustrate how, for both social strangers and sexual clients, the imagined geography of my body is fishy in different ways. As my augmented breasts incite violence from strangers in public space, and become spectacle to my clients in the privacy of our encounters, feeling fishy is a form of knowledge that comes to me like a slow berth,

washing over

jelly-like jiggles
of more-than-skin

and nipples suckled
by hundreds of men

whose
oil-stained hands
cling to my chest

as if they might drown

in the fiction
of my pleasure
while I wait

to escape
each other's capture.

Grappling with the fishy intricacies opened up by my bosom in sensuous socio-spatial relations, these poetic fragments attempt to reframe notions of pain and pleasure in my life as a trans woman sex worker. In her beautiful novel, *Little Fish*, writer Casey Plett interrogates the inevitable complexity of trans girl drama that shapes her protagonist Wendy's everyday life. Set in Winnipeg, a city with a significantly larger population than St. John's, she writes: "When Wendy first transitioned, there was someone to notice and comment every step of the way ... She had no language for it at the time. And she didn't think any of it out of place ... Like, duh, if you grew tits, your friends were gonna talk to you about your tits" (Plett 2018: 220). By recognizing how our many ways of moving through the world are structured by transmisogyny and gender-based violence, I identify with Wendy's awareness that trans women's bodies are bound together with the politics of place. And when Plett writes, "In every section of the city it seemed Wendy had a memory of someone who had treated her body with the casualness they would only treat their own" (221), I can't help but feel the touch of embodied memory on my breasts again.

Outside of the objectification and ignorance that have facilitated a difficult personal relationship with my bosom in social and sexual environments, my post-operative embodiment has also been refigured by sensory complexities beneath my skin stretched over silicone. In my piece, *Quare Tickles in Scum* (Fig. 3.3), the assemblage of water, light, breast, and moon jellyfish

symbolizes several imagined geographies and sensuous temporalities of my embodiment. Shortly after my top surgery, I lost all sensation in my breasts and nipples for half a year. As nerve functions slowly began to return, I experienced searing pain and electric shocks on the regular. From total numbness to incredible discomfort, I continued to do survival sex work with my recurring clients. Aside from the fact that moon jellyfish look like floating breast implants, drawing relations between the sting of a jelly and my post-operative bursts of searing pain is an attempt at mapping the sensory vulnerability of my breasts over months of being fondled by Johns. Needing to work with my sexual body for economic necessity, my negotiation of displeasure was a way to avoid the risk of jeopardizing my relationship with clients who secured my income each month. Feeling fishy, I creatively interrogate this transaction as a form of disidentification within which:

here
in transatlantic scum

my kind of whore
is known to sink,

make kin
with a rugged bottom

(the weight of
his body,
an ocean
to drown in)

and wait
for the stinging
to grow weak.

Reflecting upon a loss of feeling in my bosom for the first six months of my surgical recovery and the present erotic hypersensitivity of my nipples—both of which have complicated my sex work—allows me to take the fishy felt knowledges of my breasts elsewhere. In my attempt to trouble creatively what might become of trans women's breasts outside of the clinical theatre,

contextualizing the vulnerability of my skin stretched over silicone, alongside the disposability and desirability of my social and sexual body, helps me think more critically and emotionally about the influence of augmentation mammoplasty on trans women's lives and embodiments.

What might my breasted embodiment come to represent beyond the growing transmisogyny I experience as I move through and with this island world? How might I think about pleasure beyond the domain of survival sex work and the ways that my body has been clung to by hundreds of rural men with complex desires and rough hands? Acknowledging the assemblage of embodied dis/pleasure, economic promise, and social violence that has materialized with my breasts, my top surgery cannot simply be understood as an act toward the improved quality of my life. Certainly, it has troubled and influenced my embodiment as a trans woman sex worker in ways that I could not imagine before surgery. Three years post-op, I continue to question the oceans of felt knowledge that my breasts have opened up. I do not believe that being made spectacle by Johns in the privacy of the home, or by strangers in social space, fits into the schema of gender affirmation that I had imagined before top surgery. Nonetheless, these acts of objectification and transmisogyny shape a fishy embodiment that I am forced to grapple with as a trans woman in a small city at the edge of a dying world.

Conclusions

In the sublime isolation of my sex work, a geography of performance within which the fantasies of clients go unpoliced, the story of my gender dysphoria that has been lessened through breast augmentation is complicated by Johns who pay good money to co-create sensuous temporalities with me based on their imaginations of transsexual embodiment. In public space, the narrative of my top surgery as an act of agency is troubled by the fact that I have learned to keep my breasts concealed most of the time in order to avoid unwanted violence. In fishy relation with the social

and sexual environments I inhabit, working with the felt knowledges of my breasts—from social violence to bawdy fetishization to sensory numbness—reveals something slippery about the co-constitutive natures of trans bodies and sensuous geographies (Hayward 2010; Tourmaline 2017; Twist 2019). Using visuals and poetics to make sense of my embodiment helps me question: Who and what am I becoming with hundreds of hands and lips all over my bosom? How do I escape psychic capture from the economic marketability that has changed my life, and the social violence with which I have been faced, as a trans woman sex worker in Newfoundland? As a contact zone between bodies and worlds apart, what are the precarious temporalities and unknown futures of my breasts?

In this essay, I have contributed to a collection of creative and intellectual works that explore the embodiments of Newfoundland women using affective and sensuous engagements with place (Jefferies 2018a; Norman and Power 2015). By interrogating creative and emotional geographies of my sex work, I have tried to illustrate how my augmented breasts continue to shape and guide my trans self-in-creation through embodied, economic, and environmental troubles. Pulled back and forth through felt knowledges, thinking with my breasts has been both unsettling and therapeutic. As I write and visualize together the fishy entanglements of augmentation mammoplasty and sex work in my life, I feel the hands of clients, chasers, strangers, and lovers all over my body again. As I reflect on my painful disembodiment during the first six months after my surgery, I am tickled by the numbness of my body's reaction to jelly/fishy implants placed under my skin. As I continue to experience microaggressions and objectification, I think toward the future temporalities of my breasted embodiment in social and sexual environments. Returning to the fishy fragments of my research-creation, I acknowledge my position as just one body within a community of trans women islanders who, for several decades, have desired and fought for

surgical care that is medically necessary, complexly affirming, and fundamentally entangled with our survival (Hilliard, *The Telegram*, August 8, 1999). In the context of my social location as a sex-working trans woman islander, using creative methods of inquiry to make sense of fishy trans embodiments and geographies of sex work has allowed me to better understand the contemporary and historical natures of trans women's lives in Newfoundland. Mapping the felt knowledges of my breasts in slippery movements through sex-working time and social space, I am learning to embrace an ocean of unknown futures for this buoyant, fishy body.

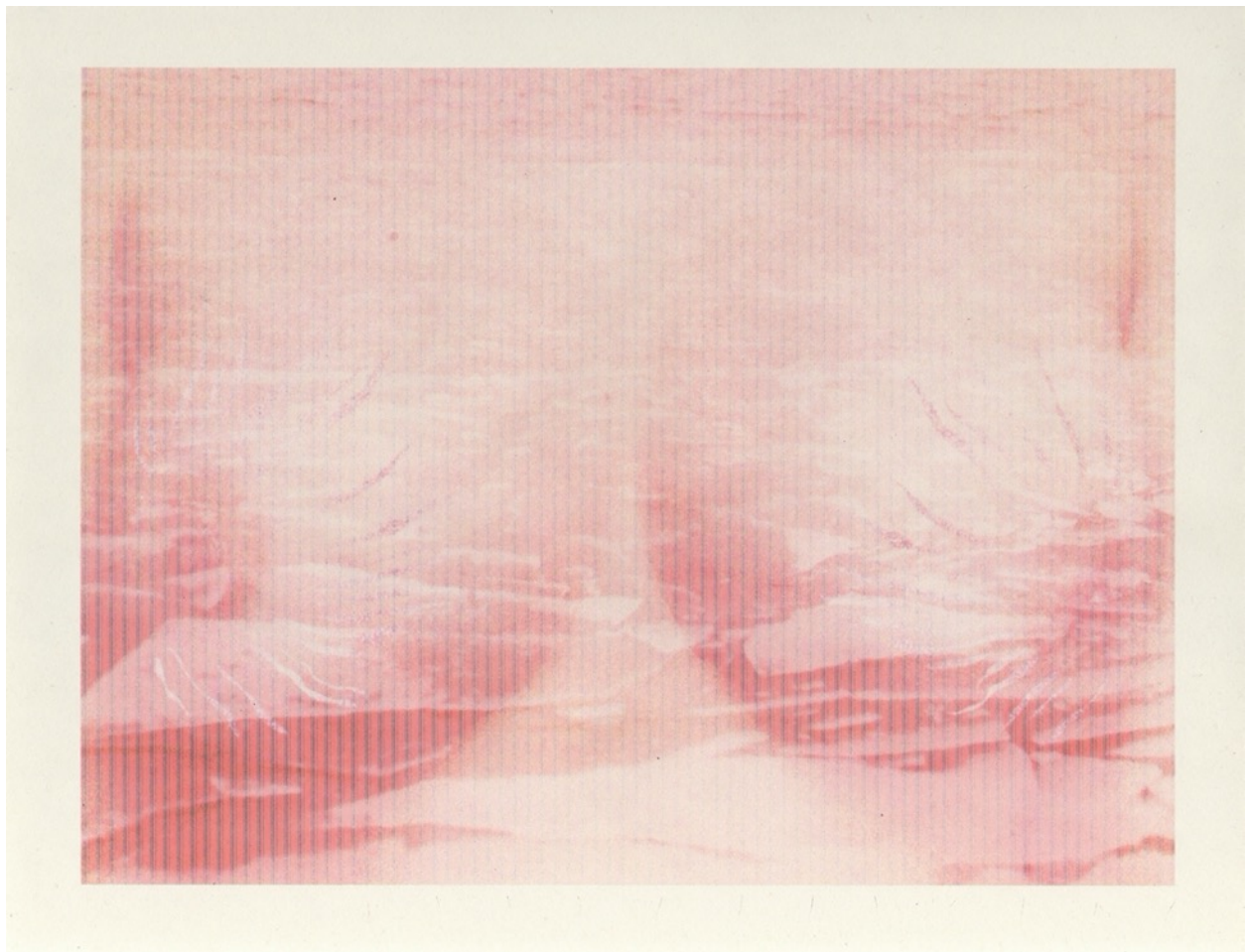


Fig 3.1. Some Numb (2019)
digital photography and illustration / printed with distorted ink on recycled paper



Fig 3.2. A Hundred Hands All Over (2019)
digital photography and illustration / printed with distorted ink on recycled paper



Fig 3.3. Quare Ticks in Scum (2019)
digital photography and illustration / printed with distorted ink on recycled paper

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Chapter Four – Capturing Trans-Atlantics



This chapter explores my most recent multidisciplinary creative and scholarly project, *Capturing Trans-Atlantics*, which was supported by a Professional Project Grant from ArtsNL between November 15, 2019 to March 15, 2020. As a work of research-creation, this project interrogates fishy histories of Newfoundland trans women in visuals, poetics, and sound to symbolize the significance and necessity of creative and heartfelt approaches to trans scholarship (Barbee 2002; Ellis 1999; Hayward 2010; Logie et al. 2019; Raha 2017). Working with an assemblage of mixed media illustrations, found objects from beaches in the Bay of Exploits, felt knowledges in four poems, and a spectral oceanic soundscape of field recordings and narrations¹³, I offer a melancholic approach to trans historiography that is watered by archival affects, kinships, and refusals.

Ultimately, as I navigate through a sea of so much historical loss, *Capturing Trans-Atlantics* tries to do the impossible. It is not my desire to capture any parts of Newfoundland trans women's histories without also releasing them in ways that make room for solace, silence, and secrecy (Boon 2018c; Hartman 1997; Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010). In this work, my refusal to visibilize trans women's histories in ways that can be easily engaged is an act of caring for archival kin whose lives were stolen by transmisogynist violence, but whose legacies have deeply touched me and ask me to call for justice in the contemporary moment. All these decades later, while their

¹³ The soundscape is available at this link: <https://dazejefferies.bandcamp.com/track/capturing-trans-atlantics-2020>.

presences, stories, and dreams continue to be shaped some way by so much more than traumatic loss, I choose to stay with melancholy as a methodological tool in order to illustrate the troubled necessity of trans archival silence when history is too much to bear. In so doing, I open up space to explore the heartfelt impact of undertaking this work as a young trans woman artist and scholar.

Following my fishy conceptual framework, *Capturing Trans-Atlantics* addresses the fluid relationship between oceanic ecologies and trans women's histories in Newfoundland (Drake 2019; Guzmán and Jefferies 2019; Jefferies and Drake 2020). Using critical stealth to creatively re-story and in/visibilize trans women's historical lives, this project contributes to a counter-archive of fishy trans knowledges here at Canada's most eastern oceanic edge (Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018). Shaped by the emotional weight of artistic and poetic inquiries as liberating and subversive practices for trans women scholars (Benaway 2017; cárdenas 2016; Raha 2017), I am called to this project as a way of making Newfoundland trans women's histories in/visible on slippery and complex terms as we touch across time (Dinshaw 1999) from different life-worlds.

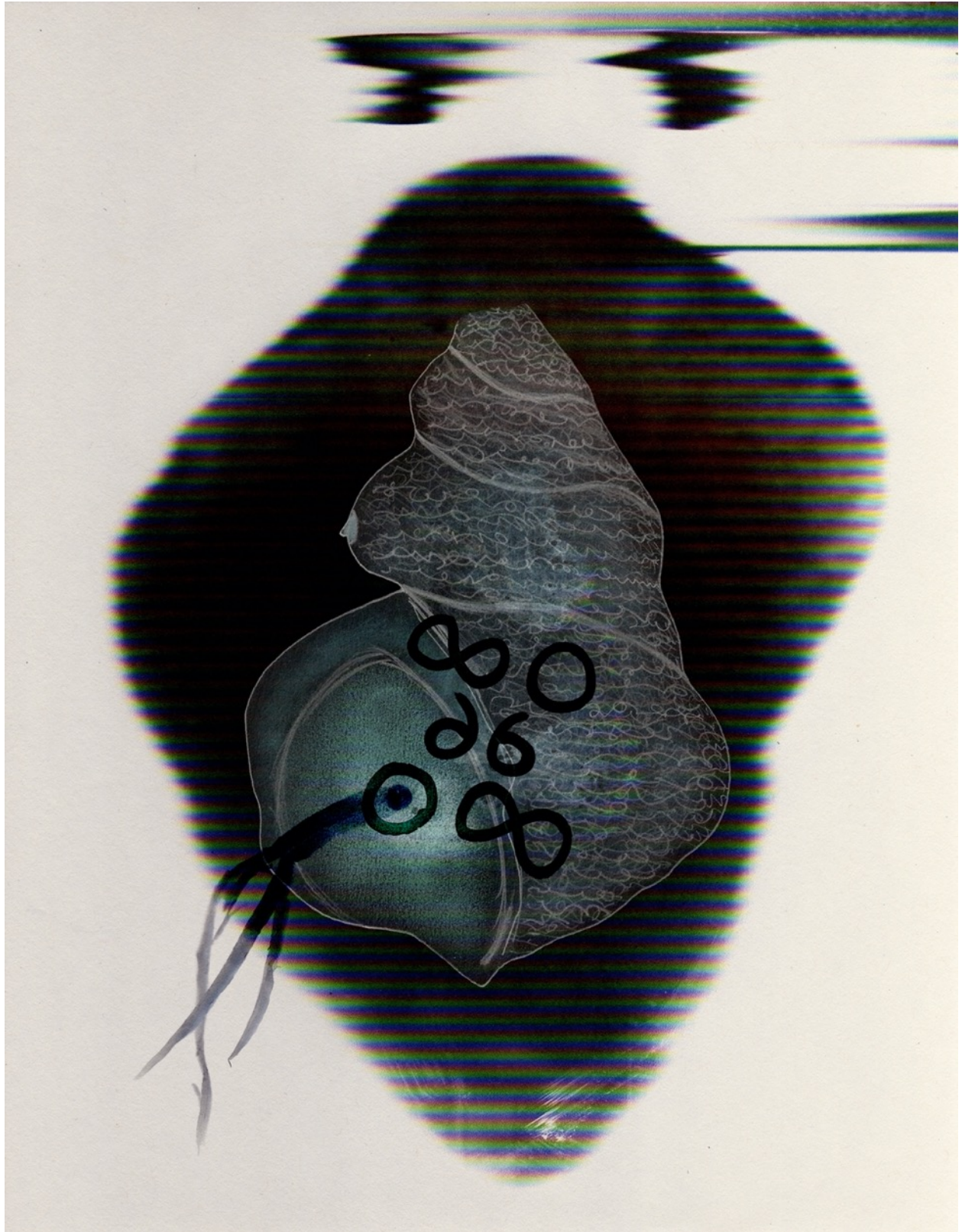
As anthropologist Michael Connors Jackman (2020) notes in his recent essay "Hole in the Dark: Archiving Queer Performance," the significance of queer art in Newfoundland has been highlighted by visual and performance artists like Mikiki (2007; see also Hehir 2002) and Irma Gerd (Wells 2016) for several decades. While the arts community in the capital city of St. John's has long been a supportive network for queer artists from our province, the work of Newfoundland trans, non-binary, and two-spirit artists – like Violet Drake (2018), Kailey Bryan (2014), Taylor Stocks/Doctor Androbox (Smellie, *CBC Newfoundland and Labrador*, March 26, 2018) and Jude Benoit (2019b) – is only just recently starting to become visible in the cultural domain. Newfangled community organizing and artistic projects, such as the critically-acclaimed production

transVersing, produced by Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland in 2017, and its subsequent publication from Breakwater Books (For the Love of Learning 2018), have showcased the voices and talents of young trans artists at a time when acts of transphobic violence and hate continue to affect the lived realities of trans, non-binary, and two-spirit Newfoundlanders (Maher, *The Telegram*, September 28, 2018).

Reflecting on and working with archival remains that display the weight of violence in Newfoundland trans women's lives, this project employs arts of melancholy to think toward fluid temporalities of recovery and release. As with the archival endeavours of other trans women artists and scholars who have been engaged with painful documents and traces from the trans historical past (Gill-Peterson 2019; Twist 2020), undertaking this project has been both emotionally challenging and enriching for a number of reasons. Gazing desperately into digital and institutional archives for traces of my community and subsequently finding so much loss but such little joy has not been an easy encounter. Still, I have believed that through trans archival touches there is a critical lifegiving power that awaits me as I attempt to heal from years of grief and trauma. Seeking a genealogy of hope and desire in the lives of trans women Newfoundlanders helps me find peace when I am breathless and faith when I am lost.

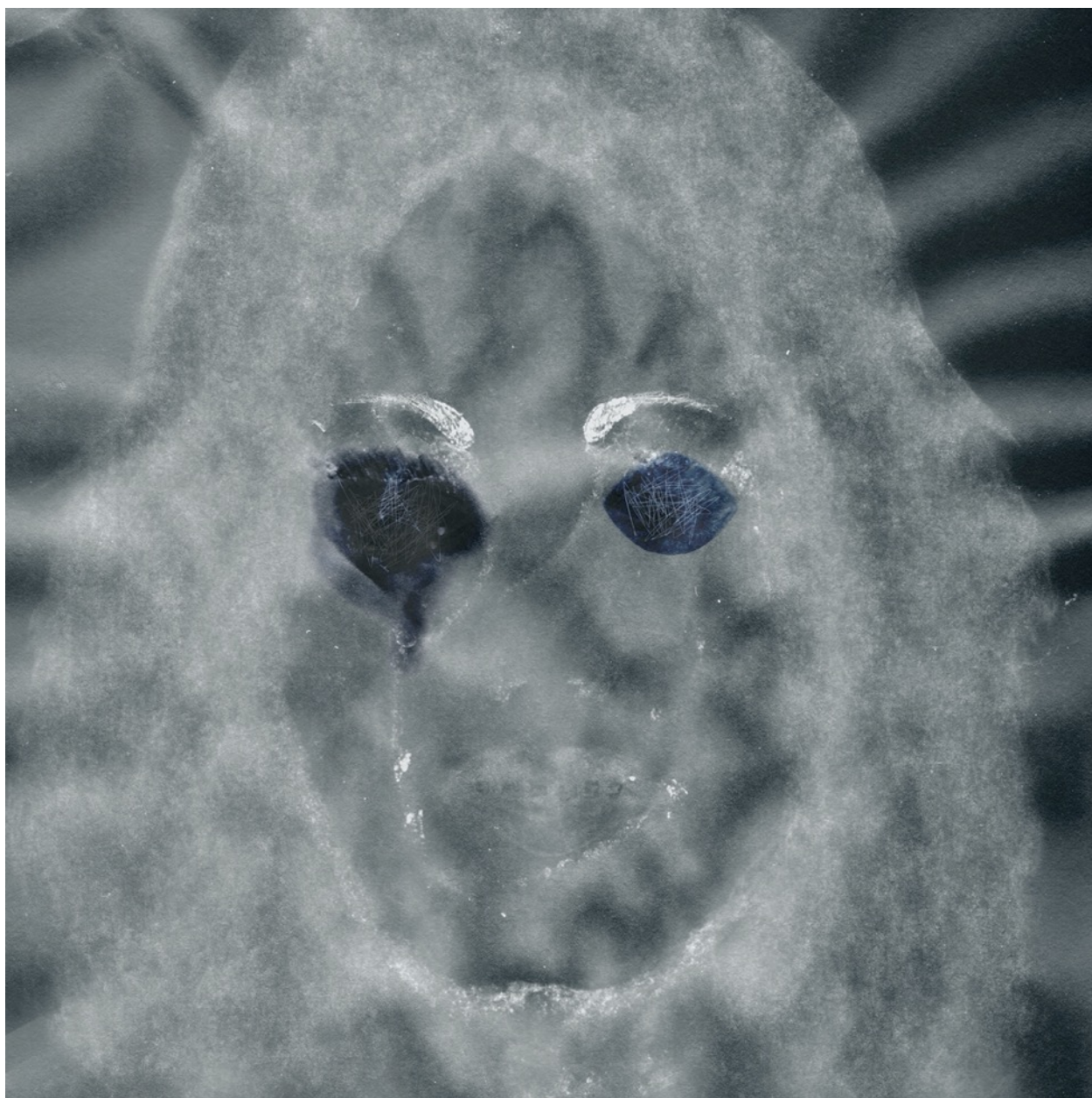
At a conceptual level, the heart of these visuals, poems, sounds, and narrations exists within the spaces between archival absence and presence. Although my thinking and creation turns upon 50 years of trans women's histories, I have tried to shelter my archival kin from the worst parts of visibility in this strange pastpresent. I obscure key dates and recast names, while fishy remains and fetal bodies come to represent what has been born from and abandoned by this oceanic place. Drones of watery beings and my distorted voice offer sonic intensity that has no choice but to break open as I search for release. Capturing Trans-Atlantics might best be confronted as an

unsettling dreamscape and woebegone world. Somewhere within these haunted imaginations and spectral soundings that hold on to hope, the pain I have carried as a trans woman sex worker and grieving grad student is set free.



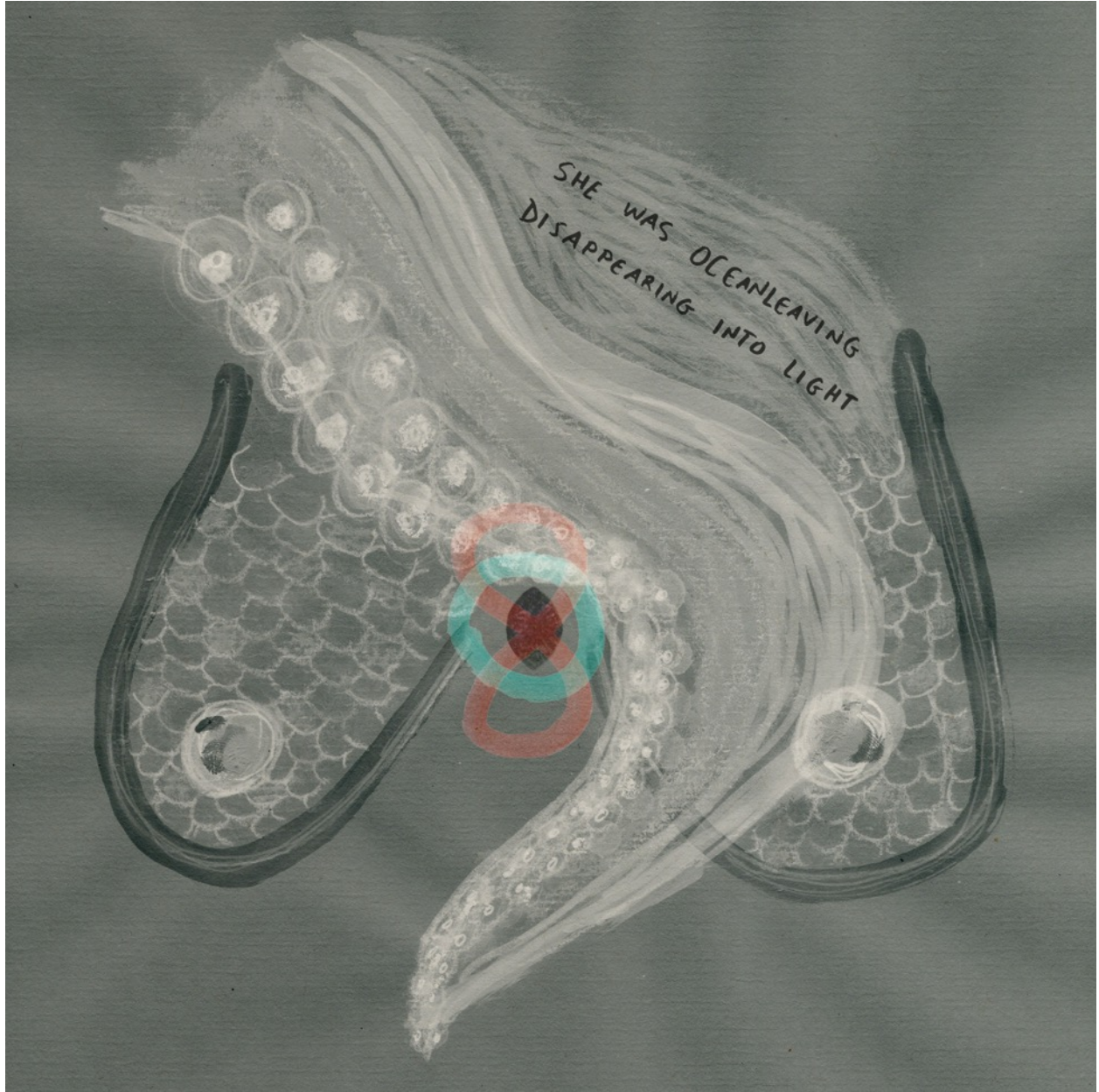
*Fig. 4.1 – Lifeways Lost to a Dying Oceanic
(mixed media illustration / scanography with found objects / digital manipulation)*

THIS ASSEMBLAGE, WITHIN AND WITHOUT, HOLDS MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS / I ASK THAT YOU BECOME VULNERABLE UNTIL YOU HAVE TO TURN AWAY / ALL YOUR CURIOSITIES AND FETISHES – LET THEM FALL APART / THEY HAVE NO PLACE HERE / THEY ARE UNWANTED / AS FISHY BEINGS WHOSE LIVES ARE POSITIONED OUT OF OCEANIC TIME, TRANS WOMEN FROM THIS ATLANTIC WORLD ARE HERE WITH YOU IN FRAGMENTS THAT CAN ONLY BE KNOWN ON OUR TERMS ALONE / IN WHISPERS AND RUPTURES AND TROUBLING REMAINS, WE BEGIN TO PULL OUR LIVES BACK FROM MARGINS THAT HAVE FAILED US AS A WAY TO BE KNOWLEDGE HOLDERS IN THE WAKE OF HISTORICAL DANGER / THERE IS MORE THAN YOU MIGHT THINK, BUT IT CAN'T COME EASY / THIS JOURNEY WILL COST YOU THE TENDERNESS THAT KEEPS YOUR LIGHT SHINING / KNOWING OUR LIVES IS A SPECIAL KIND OF WOUNDING / THE WEIGHT OF OUR STORY, A POISON THAT WEAKENS EVERY INCH OF HOPEFUL FLESH UNTIL SHARDS OF BONE BECOME ALL WE LEAVE BEHIND / THIS IS OUR SOLIDARITY ENCOUNTER – AN UNFINISHED POEM TITLED **HOW TO KILL YOURSELF WITH HONOUR** / THIS IS A PROMISE WE MUST MAKE TOGETHER / LETTING YOU FOLLOW US INTO THE DROWNED KNOWN CAN'T BE UNDONE / WE NEED YOUR CONSENT, YOUR DEVOTION, YOUR PAIN / IT WILL GET EASIER / IT WILL START OVER AND UNOVER AGAIN.



*Fig. 4.2 – Jeanie Oceanleaver
(mixed media illustration / scanography with found objects / digital manipulation)*

CAPTURED BY THE DEPTH OF A TRANS GIRL'S PAIN, I WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT YOUR OCEANLEAVING / AFTER ALL, THAT'S WHERE THIS JOURNEY BEGINS / IT'S WHY I HAVE FOLLOWED YOUR GHOSTS INTO THE WATER / NOW WHEN I DREAM THIS WORLD OF MINE OUT OF EXISTENCE, I FIND MYSELF SINKING INTO THICK LAYERS OF SCUM / SOMEHOW THERE ARE OTHERS LIKE US WAY DOWN HERE WHOSE VOICES BECOME LOST WITHIN THE GENTLE SOUND OF CURRENTS BEING PULLED APART / I CAN'T IMAGINE THEM BREAKING THE SURFACE OR LEAKING INTO PLACES WE NO LONGER CALL HOME / THEIR WHISPERS TELL ME THAT THERE ISN'T MUCH LEFT – ALL THE LOVE IS GONE – AND NOW I NEED TO LET THINGS GO / BUT I CAN'T TRUST MYSELF TO BE ALONE AGAIN / WITHOUT YOU THERE IS ONLY DEATHMAKING / NEEDING MORE THAN FISHY FRAGMENTS TO HELP ME SURVIVE, MAYBE IT'S A FAULT OF MY OWN THAT KEEPS ME AT A DISTANCE FROM THE MOTHERS OF THIS SOCIAL MOVEMENT I HAVE SUNKEN INTO / AS I GO FURTHER UNDER, I LEARN THAT IT'S OKAY TO MAKE AWAY WITH ALL MY LONGINGS AND TURN AGAINST THE PAST / ITS SPECTRALITY KEEPS FLOODING OUR CONTACT ZONE, THE BRIDGE BETWEEN IMPOSSIBLE WORLDS, AND I AM LOSING MY DESIRE TO CROSS OUR GREAT DIVIDE / EACH OF OUR LIFEWAYS LOST TO A DYING OCEANIC SCAR MY BODY-MIND UNTIL I AM UNRECOGNIZABLE / NOW I REMEMBER THE ILLEGIBILITY OF YOUR ARCHIVAL FORMS / IN YOUR ABSENCE, HALF OF OUR KINSHIP IS IMAGINED / I TALK TO YOU IN DREAMS BECAUSE I THINK I'M IN CONTROL / IT'S EASIER TO LOSE YOU THAT WAY / SEARCHING TO BE HELD BY YOUR BROKEN MIGRATIONS, WAITING FOR ANOTHER PAST TO MEET ME WHERE I REST, I SETTLE IN THE SHADOW OF YOUR VIOLENT ENDS.



*Fig. 4.3 – Ancient Sunken Cosmos
(mixed media illustration / scanography with found objects / digital manipulation)*

IT SEEMS I AM NOT THE ONE TO TELL THESE STORIES / YEARS OF INTIMACY WITH
THE IMAGINED KIN I WILL NEVER KNOW HAVE SHOWN ME VISIONS I LONG TO
LIVE WITHOUT / ALL THE PAIN I FEEL THROWN RIGHT BACK AT ME / PLEASE – IF
YOU CAN’T MAKE IT STOP, JUST MAKE IT SOFT / TELL ME WHAT YOU HAVE TO,
PULL ME UNDER, LET ME GO / SOMETIMES I WISH THAT I COULD BE HERE ALL
ALONE / FOR SO LONG, THERE IS ONLY DISAPPEARING AND THE RESTORATIVE
PAIN OF CHANGING BRAIN SEX OR BREAST BUDS TEARING THROUGH OUR FLESH
/ THE PRICE OF YOUR SOUL AND THE COST OF YOUR SURVIVAL – LEAKING INTO
THE WATERS WE KNOW LIKE OIL OR RUST THAT SETTLE DEEP WITHIN US / EVERY
PROMISE WE MAKE IS AN OPEN WOUND, ANOTHER ACT OF GUTTING OUR FISHY
NON-BEING / I NEED YOU TO SHOW ME WHERE I’M GOING, TEACH ME LESSONS
THAT ARE ENDLESS, HELP ME BUOY IN THE MADNESS / IN ONE OF THE MANY
DREAMS WE SHARE, I END UP IN A HOLE AT THE BOTTOM OF A PORT AU PORT
COVE / IT’S THREE DECADES AGO, AND I AM DRAGGED INTO THE MOMENT THAT
YOUR HURTING CARRIED YOU AWAY FROM A FUTURE WHERE WE MIGHT TRADE
SECRETS AND LAY OURSELVES TO REST BENEATH THE WOUNDED WAVES / NO
DARK MAGIC CAN UNDO THE TRAUMA YOU ENDURED – IT CAN’T FORGIVE THOSE
VIOLENT MEN, AND YOU TOO / MAYBE THE CRISIS OF OUR VISIBILITY BEGINS
WITH THE WAY YOU KNEW YOUR STORY WAS ENDING / THE PHANTASMATIC
NIGHTMARES CREATED BY YOUR SPLIT / THE BEACH CLIFF BLOODSHED AND
TRIAL FOR YOUR SINS / NOTHING IN THIS WORLD, WHERE THE DISTANCE
BETWEEN US IS A SEA OF POISON, MATTERS IN THE WASH OF YOUR DECAY / I AM
TIRED OF YOUR HAUNTING / I ONLY WANT YOU TO BE SAFE.



*Fig. 4.4 – Corpography of a Body Shutting Down
(mixed media illustration / scanography with found objects / digital manipulation)*

THESE EXPERIMENTS ARE FRACTURES FROM A LANGUAGE PROJECT THAT HEALS ME WHILE IT HURTS: FROM THE VIOLENT OUTMIGRATION OF A YOUNG GAMBO GIRL, TO THE SOFT DECAY OF A SHOWGIRL'S CORPSE, TO ASTROLOGICAL WARNINGS ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD – STRAIGHT INTO THE HARBOUR WITH THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US / PAST AND FUTURE, GHOST AND DREAM, CAPTURE AND RELEASE / EVERYTHING I COME TO KNOW AS EPHEMERAL OTHER REACHES INTO MY HEAVENLY BODY AS A PERFORMANCE OF TOUCHING ACROSS TIME / THEY HAVE TO VANISH BEFORE I AM READY TO EMBRACE ALL THE ACHES AND PAINS THAT WILL BE LEFT IN THEIR WAKE / LET ME DREAM A LITTLE LONGER, LET ME CLOSE MYSELF OFF FROM YOUR LOVE / WHEN THE ICE BEGINS TO BREAK, I WILL REMEMBER YOUR PROMISE TO NEVER ABANDON ME LIKE BEFORE / KNOWING THAT YOU CANNOT KEEP IT, I WILL SING TO YOU UNTIL MY THROAT CLOSES OFF AND ALL MY BREATH GIVES WAY TO THE POWER OF OUR SHARED FATE / SNUFFED OUT AND LEFT TO SUFFER, I SINK FEET FIRST INTO A GENEALOGY OF LOST HOPES AND MUTILATED DREAMS / AS WE PULL OURSELVES APART IN THESE MOMENTS OF UNENDING GRIEF, AS WE GIVE IN TO THE NUMBNESS OF OUR FLOUNDERING SURVIVAL, WE FIND JUSTICE FIERCELY WAITING IN AN ANCIENT SUNKEN COSMOS THAT PERSISTS BY FORCE OF WILL / OUR CROSSINGS ARE ETERNAL AND THEY MUST BE MADE / THESE FISHY BONES, THE LAST KNOWN TRACES OF OUR KIND, WILL BE FOUND IN ANOTHER LIFE / THEY WON'T TELL ALL OUR SECRETS, BUT THEY WILL HELP US CARRY ON.



Fig. 4.5. Fishy Failures
(mixed media illustration / scanography with found objects / digital manipulation)

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Chapter Five – Conclusions for Our Known Unknowns



What is born in an ending? What comes back in another life? As I sink comfortably into the known unknowns of a trans+oceanic world I cling to with hope, I learn to accept that no easy journey awaits me here in the future-present-past. Crafting a creative and scholarly practice that touches trans histories across time and tide has filled my heart with many queer teachings. Who I am as an artist-poet-researcher at the end of this journey is fundamentally different from the confused and curious student who entered a Master of Gender Studies program looking for historical kinship. Over these four years in graduate school – structured by trauma and overwork, violence and acclaim – all that I have wanted is to feel less alone. Now it is coming in liberating waves. I carry the weight of this thesis as a reminder to live better with knowledges that hurt and heal me.

The precarity of this project's search for trans histories continues to guide my creative and scholarly work, and the impossibility of this particular artistic and academic endeavour makes it all the more necessary to keep close in my body-mind. After many different drafts, outlines, and methodological frameworks that have changed me over two slow years remade by grief, completing this thesis is a lifegiving release from each pain that has complicated my intellectual journey. In part, this is why my thinking has centered the significance of dreams – as longings and visions, as fragments of the unconscious and the impossible. Dreams are exits to imagined worlds, dreams are never and always enough.

I have often felt that it is necessary for graduate students to know the difference between research practices that we understand as jobs, and research projects that are inseparable from who we are as material-semiotic beings. My practice of research-creation is not a job for me; it is not an interest or stint of mine. Informing my movements through Atlantic Canada as a fishy trans body in a time of capture, this work shows me reasons to keep going while the world around me breaks open. It helps me hold on just as much as it scars. Most significantly, it honours my kin whose lives and worlds have been stolen by and lost to transmisogynist violence. With these fundamental worldmaking tenets, this thesis has tried to creatively map slippery movements and temporal ruptures in the historical lives of Newfoundland trans women. Taking account of difference across lines of gender, sex, race, species, and time has been a way to encounter ecologies of loss and desire within this trans+oceanic place. Following the work of Viviane Namaste (2000), alongside recent interventions in queer and trans archival studies (Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016; Cifor 2015; Pyle 2018), I hope that there is something greater to be understood within this work of research-creation about the weight of missing archives and the impact of historical absence on marginalized communities.

Taken together, the four body chapters of this thesis have explored trans histories, ecologies, and temporalities in ways that begin and end with water. From my positionality as a trans woman sex worker, an artist, an intense feeler, a dreamer, and a little fish (Plett 2018), I believe that scholarly interrogations into the lives of trans Newfoundlanders deserve deep and emotional engagements with environment, time, labour, and loss. Each of these chapters has been brought into being through a heartfelt methodological interplay of archival research, poetic figuration, and embodied experience. Each chapter contains knowns and unknowns that open

discussions about histories of trans women Newfoundlanders while keeping necessary secrets as forms of institutional refusal (Hartman and Wilderson III 2003).

As I reflect on the past two and a half years of my research-creation, across which the entirety of this thesis has been written, I better understand how my decision to embrace the uncertain has allowed me a necessary creative and scholarly growth. One that I will need to ask further questions about the worlds of trans women Newfoundlanders using other methods like oral history, or to follow historical leads in ways that will not be prohibited by the shortened scope of a Master's thesis. I do not have all the answers and I never will. While I look forward to more trans historical explorations in my future work, I recognize that I am undeserving of much historical knowledge. I will not capture, enclose, or index missing histories in pursuit of false academic promises. The things that matter most in my work are a deep love and emotional resonance that allow me to cherish fragments of Newfoundland trans women's historical lives as teachings and embodiments of resistance.

The fetishization of alien mermaids, 200 dollars for an hour of trans sex. Suckling nipples and shucking the flesh. The price of skin is high, young skipper. Scales, bones, tails, girl dicks. Bodies are broken into fishy remains. Trans histories – figurations of non-being otherwise – are present and absent in ephemeral objects. Sex-working ads, slippery skin stumps, condoms awash in St. John's Harbour. Silicone implants, ancient engravings, torn little timelines, and splashes of sea. Trans historical lives push and pull across the boundaries of legibility. They do not come easy and do not last long. At the same time, they linger now/here forever and wish to find release. Haunted by the fragment, this thesis has done the work of honour by letting elder ghosts live on with their own power. Exhuming nothing, I have shared only what the waters have allowed me to leak. This coming and going is a rite of passage. The liminal spaces do not vex me anymore. At

this point in time, I meet the uncertain futures of my own loss, sex work, and oceanleaving with an open heart and watered mind (Jefferies 2020a). I can only ask my archival kin to anchor me from deep below.

Becoming vulnerable with fishy fragments in this text has been a challenging but affirming mode of scholarly production – one that encourages me to rethink both my changing positionality, as well as how these fishy intellectual questions might be taken up by a different kind of scholar. I wonder how a non-trans woman without sex-working knowledge might approach this endeavour. Or a researcher who doesn't live and work within crip time. Or any other lifeform pulled from the mess of an academic industrial complex in ruins. My investment in and closeness to the dark matters of this project have clearly shaped a tender work of research-creation that is just as unsettling as it is unforgiving. Reflecting on the powers of grief and loss that have held my life in crisis as a graduate student, I ask: How could I write any other way?

Out of my hands and beyond the emotional fishy fragments of this text, how might Newfoundland trans scholarship be storied differently? My creative thinking has tried to articulate how the historical lives of trans women Newfoundlanders cannot be separated from the oceanic borderlands of this place like no other that we call home. Questioning when and where our fishy lives might end up in a world that isn't structured by loss, sex work, and oceanleaving, I acknowledge that these conclusions remain complex and troubled. Not now, not here – not then, not there. Holding on to palimpsestic archives of our kin as we dream of release from epistemic ruination (Alexander 2006; Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018; Pyle 2018), the process of our survival and resilience can only grow fishier this future to come.

I am left to believe in drowning worlds, beginning and ending together-apart. Evading the gaze of probable science as we sink into the mighty and sublime deep blue, what will become of

the archives and fictions that give meaning to our precarious lives? While sea levels rise, I imagine a future where paper records soak and tear into fragments, motherboards and clouds holding digital histories flood and frizzle in a matter of seconds, and reels of aging microfilm become ocean plastics that resist apprehension by humanly desire. In the words of trans poet Quinn Eades: “The body is salt. The body is water. The body is ocean, waiting to escape” (2015: 131). Maybe, then, all attempts at archiving mean everything and nothing. Maybe there’s no other way to make it through the madness. Trusting in the power of water to hold counter-archives of our past-present-future historical matters is therefore a melancholic and hopeful method of letting our fishy worlds live on as we return to the sea. To end with a dream:

*there used to be someone else like you
out around the bay, she whispers
with a tongue I can only just fathom.*

beyond the far-flung distance of her words
we break against this woe of being
forty years apart and still wayward
in the dark blue of a Kitpu cove.

my body,
no longer the lonely excess held by tidal drift,

but other fish bones and false lashes
and your barely human heart

that save the soft slow ache from bellowing over.

to know your myth is a wounding gift,
an heirloom of tears and sunken flesh –

whole parts of a counter-historical past
we lost to the depths of the Cabot Strait.

could it be that she was right?

taking you away from here
with beautiful detritus
of a love we knew before.

leaving me westbound and wondering
how I might survive an open ocean
at the edge of her canoe,

keeping this vision of a trans+atlantic
door that you hold ajar as I move
across the vastness and look

at what's left of our beginnings

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