From Newfoundland to Guyana

(as Crows and John-Crows Fly)

So boldly I accosted her, 'Good morning, my pretty fair maid;'
So kindly she saluted me, 'Good morning sir,' she said;
'I think you are a sailor just lately come from sea.]
'I do belong to yonder ship lies anchored in the Bay.'
(from 'The Gallant Brigantine')

What is there to learn from comparing Guyana with Newfoundland & Labrador (Canada’s easternmost province, located in the northern Atlantic Ocean, and the last province to join Canadian confederation—in 1949)? What do these places share?

I am an Associate Professor of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland (Grenfell Campus), Canada, and a creative writer. I arrived in Guyana in January 2014 to broach these questions which I hoped would fuel an in-progress manuscript presently entitled As Crows and John-Crows Fly. Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and on sabbatical, I anticipated continuing this project which I had already begun in Jamaica (where I lived for a brief while and have spent significant time). This would be my next book of poetry which would respond to the shared dynamics, as well as differences, between Newfoundland & Labrador, Jamaica and Guyana, and which would creatively examine the relationships between islands, as well as those between islands and their mainland counterparts.

The idea for the comparison stemmed from the shared history between Newfoundland & Labrador and the former British West Indies. For several centuries, Newfoundland saltfish was imported into the former British West Indies (Newfoundland's saltfish trade began as early as the 1600s), including Guyana (either indirectly, by ships going to Newfoundland and picking up saltfish, or, as was the case after the American War of Independence, directly, for over 150 years when Newfoundland ships left the ports themselves to head to the West Indies until about the 1950s when the trade waned). In return, Newfoundland received, amongst other goods, molasses and rum from the West Indies.

Though the trade is no more, its vestiges, even today, are still strong: Newfoundland’s drink of choice is rum, and saltfish remains a staple in many Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica, where the national dish is salt fish and ackee, and, of course, in Guyana, where bake and saltfish constitutes a traditional breakfast. Notably, one of Newfoundland’s traditional dishes is fish and brewis (saltfish with boiled hardtack, or English sea biscuit), and yet another favourite dish is fishcakes (made with either salted or fresh cod, most often the former), sometimes served with tontons (which are comparable to Guyanese bakes and often accompanied by molasses).

What interested me more than the particulars of the saltfish and rum trade, though, is the manner in which memory of the former British West Indies survives in story and song in Newfoundland. Of note here is an old maritime folk song still sung back home, 'The Gallant Brigantine,' which is a song about a sailor falling in love with a girl in Jamaica. People in Newfoundland also remember anecdotes about Guyana which stem from the saltfish-rum trading days. What else was traded in those years, I wondered? What stories and memories were exchanged? How long did sailors stay in ports? Would people in Guyana still be aware of Newfoundland in 2014 (and vice versa) when, once, the seas connected these places like highways?

It was also the relationships between islands and mainlands that intrigued me. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is made up of the island of Newfoundland and the mainland segment of the province, Labrador. While the two places constitute one province, they are at a significant geographical, economic and psychological remove from one another, and it was this reality that grew my interest in Guyana. Just how is Guyana, on the
South American continent, part of the Caribbean and that island network? Are there similarities, perhaps, between Labrador's relationship to Newfoundland and Guyana's relationship to the Caribbean? Moreover, the demographics and physical characteristics of Newfoundland & Labrador are strangely similar to Guyana. Both places have huge land masses and a very low population—according to recent governmental statistics, the population of Newfoundland & Labrador is approximately 526,896 people with a combined area of 405,212 square kilometres (156,453 sq mi); the population of Guyana (according to the 2014 issue of Explore Guyana and 2002 statistics) is 751,223 people and its land mass 214,969 square kilometres (83,000 sq mi). Both places have a 'creole' (called Newfoundland English in Newfoundland) and are bi-dialectal (operating in creole and Standard English). Both places are former British colonies, and the situation of many Newfoundlanders leaving their province today for other provinces, primarily Alberta, in search of work is remissful of the outmigration in Guyana. Furthermore, both places survive on the Atlantic Ocean which, interestingly, seems to draw a certain kind of tourist body unlike that which seeks Caribbean resorts and which seems more interested in rugged beauty; many come to Newfoundland to see icebergs and national parks, and people come to Guyana for its jungles and interior.

There is yet another notable comparison. When I told my Jamaican friends I was going to Guyana, they said (independent of one another) that I was about to meet the most hospitable people in the Caribbean. I have travelled extensively throughout the Caribbean, and I realized almost immediately that what they said is quite true. This is not to say that other Caribbean places are not friendly, but Guyana's hospitality and friendliness do stand out not only in terms of the Caribbean but also in terms of world travel. In this sense, Guyana seems to have a well-founded reputation similar to that of Newfoundland which is well known in Canada and elsewhere for its down-home manners and hospitality. Despite the crime rate in Guyana (and a very low crime rate in Newfoundland), people are very decent to one another, certainly to newcomers, acting with old-time manners and consideration. Strangely enough,
like Newfoundland, which was a have-not Canadian province until the early 21st century (and which suffered a recent massive economic blow with the federal government’s termination of cod fishing in 1992—known as the cod moratorium), Guyana, with its economic challenges, tends to be extremely generous in terms of how people treat one another on a day-to-day basis. One thing that has come to my mind is that people perhaps can’t afford to be rude with one another when, because of size and population and inter-connectedness, word can get back to someone else or to a community within minutes (as in Newfoundland). Or perhaps something can be said about sharing hardships and important values that grow out of hardships. I don’t know. Maybe it’s the specific mix of cultures in both places (though the mix is different in both places, with a notable amount of Newfoundland’s population stemming from Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Southwest England, and with significant Aboriginal populations). Or maybe it’s something one learns about humility in rough and unforgiving landscapes.

So what have I learned, then, and what have I done? At the end of six months I have many more questions than answers, many new directions, and a rough body of prose, not poetry, which, at this point anyway, has created contemporary fictional spaces largely distinguished from one another as Northern and Southern, with the specific locales of Newfoundland, Guyana and Jamaica effaced.

This is not what I set out to do. So why is this? I was reminded by a Jamaican friend recently, who had set a new creative work in a fictional Caribbean island, that many Caribbean writers dare not set their works in actual places. Everyone knows everyone, after all, and in small or isolated places, investments in the line on certain narratives are strong. This is certainly true in Newfoundland, where I could still be considered a CFA—the province’s abbreviation for a ‘come-from-away’ (a commonly used term for an outsider)—born and raised as I was in British Columbia and though I have lived now in Newfoundland for over fifteen years. The problems which can attend attempts to ‘represent’ a place were strongly planted in my mind again when I recently attended a wonderful reading and question and answer period at Moray House here in Guyana which profiled two impressive talents, Gayatri Bahadur and Rahul Bhattacharya (authors of the recent works Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture and The Sly Company of People Who Care, respectively). Certainly, though their works have both been praised, both have also been questioned or attacked as these authors have different relationships with Guyana than those authors who were born here and have stayed their whole lives. However, it is not like I am simply allowing a theoretical stance to determine the places I name and write about. It is more the case that any attempt to account for the intricacies of the many ‘Caribbeans’ that exist or the subtleties of lives, say, in two places which, together, constitute over 200,000 square miles has left me with very broad brush strokes for the moment. As well, what I have come to learn (at least at this moment), and as I recently wrote in a creative piece which stems from my travel heretofore, that, at the end of the day, all you can observe is the self, because it’s impossible, really, to make sense of other people and their worlds. You can only make sense of yourself in different places.

What I do know is that Guyana and my travels elsewhere in this ‘Southern’ region have enriched my life and pointed to some very rich considerations. In terms of saltfish history, I find it most interesting that Guyana appears (and I say ‘appears’, as I could be wrong) to be the only place in the former British West Indies with a significant history of salting its own fish (I say significant, because I am aware of some Caribbean islands making saltfish in minor quantities). Jamaicans must have cod, for example (since the Newfoundland moratorium, it now comes
from places like Portugal, as must many other islands, despite the prohibitive and rising price of cod and the inconvenience of importing a whitefish to places, which, ironically, teem with whitefish. I learned that Linden Forbes Burnham had restricted salt cod, along with other food items, during his time but also that, perhaps, Guyana might have had an extensive history of salting its own fish before Burnham. Since I have been here, I have been delighted to taste salted banga, salted shark, salted snapper and Guyanese salted trout (equal to Newfoundland's salted cod!).

If these comments seem to be all over the map, it's because the research and considerations are literally all over the map and because living in and experiencing a place always leads people to modify plans they showed up with. However, I do not think the parallels I'm talking about which brought me to Guyana for half a year are false or not worth considering. Newfoundland & Labrador and Guyana have a significant shared history—about which not much has been written and which can, perhaps, tell us new things. Or perhaps it can help reinforce important lessons. For example, this shared history is not a romantic history, for the saltfish which was imported initially was used to feed slave populations. It is, therefore, part of a brutal history. Perhaps the best that could come out of such a foray, then, is to learn more so that the errors of the past can be addressed in a different way in order that they might never be repeated.

In a contemporary sense, and perhaps ironically, Newfoundland & Labrador and Guyana, though they now know little of one another (with most Guyanese, when they immigrate, moving to other places in Canada, most notably the Toronto area) perhaps have significant and present shared realities, too. Newfoundlanders, like the Guyanese, are Atlantic people. Other than sharing cricket, dancehall, law, and the English language (and Caricom), I'm really not so sure how Guyana is Caribbean. In fact, I've told my friends that I feel I haven't left Newfoundland at all in a sense, for this appears to be an Atlantic world. Despite glaring differences, Guyana is strangely familiar (perhaps in Atlantic ways and others)—the way people survive here in a rugged landscape, the way they switch (depending who's present) into creole or English, the way they don't seem to benefit from their own natural resources as they perceive they should, the way people move and take time and are decent, and so much more.

So at the end of the day, what I can say, in bold relief, is that six months could never be enough time to understand the riches of Guyana and its people. However, I can't help but note that Guyana, like Newfoundland, is a land of many rivers and that it is shaped by both the Atlantic Ocean and a notable kindness. Moreover, in both Newfoundland and Guyana, there seem to be a wealth of different stories that remain to be told, and there seem to be important stories which grow out of the historical relationship between the two places, as well as out of their contemporary similarities.