

# Fish Trade Futures: Counter-Archives and Sex Worker Worlds at the Margins of St. John's Harbour

**ABSTRACT:** This article imagines the sociohistorical lives of trans women (and) sex workers in Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland) as deeply entangled with ecological relations of so-called Canada's Atlantic coast—particularly the cultural and economic politics of fish trade at St. John's Harbour. Feeling fishy, a trace of transfeminine sex worker expressive culture and vernacular performance, comes to signify an evocative autoethnographic approach to trans sex worker research-creation at the water's edge. Poetic, illustrative, and sculptural play as both counter-archival worldmaking and critical address here emphasize power in creative approaches to trans and sex worker history and folkloristics. Building on art and scholarship immersed in transness and Newfoundland folklore, with mermaids and oceanic beings as guides, I explore trans and sex worker embodiments, desires, and subjectivities in marginal geographic zones. With/holding becomes a way to question the legitimacy of White settler colonial gestures toward extraction, curation, and preservation practices.

a cartography of oiled coins shapes her becoming



■ LEARNS HOW to post a personals ad for the very first time on a worn leather couch at Memorial University's queer and trans student resource center. Two o'clock in the morning, she's nineteen and flat broke. Deeply familiar with the slippery lifeways of sex trade workers

in the North Atlantic, her trans sister Blue says a niche market for t-girls in their small city is on the horizon. Sin Jawns,<sup>1</sup> a contact zone of bodies held fast to the edges of an oceanic world in movement. Together-apart and tethered to her future woman, sea dreaming, everything remains a desire. Needing to pay for transition care and more—to focus on her art, to prioritize her study. With honors in the one and only Folklore Department, these days a wayward little whorefish.<sup>2</sup>



This autoethnographic article imagines the sociohistorical lives of trans women (and) sex workers in Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland) as deeply entangled with ecological relations of so-called Canada's Atlantic coast (see Boon, Butler, and Jefferies 2018)—particularly the cultural and economic politics of fish trade at St. John's Harbour.<sup>3</sup> In this work, *fish trade* has a double meaning: it represents the snarled effects of oceanic resource extraction on islander lives, and it acts as a geopoetic figuration of trans and sex worker performance at the water's edge. Poetic, illustrative, and sculptural play as both counter-archival worldmaking and critical address here emphasize power in creative approaches to trans and sex worker history and folkloristics. My engagements follow a genealogy of feminist and anticolonial critical-creative scholarship (Anzaldúa 1987; Hartman 2019; Simpson 2014), and they emerge specifically within the growing methodological context of research-creation, a framework that turns against paradigmatic logics of critical scholarship and creative practice to imagine the work of knowledge as the work of art (Leggo 1999; Loveless 2015; Manning 2020; Springgay, Truman, and MacLean 2020).

For me, research-creation is an epistemological practice that recognizes the emotional, the embodied, and the evocative as life-giving presence channelled through art, and that offers critical and anticolonial engagements with archives as an alternative for the formation or dissemination of knowledge. In this work, engaging counter-archival and esoteric modes of with/holding becomes a way to question the legitimacy of White settler colonial gestures toward extraction, curation, and preservation practices. *With/holding* is a form of "narrative restraint" (Hartman 2008, 12), a method of qualitative labor that renounces institutional enclosure of marginalized historical subjects (see Boon and Lahey 2019; Tuck and Yang 2014).

As I encounter trans and sex worker lifeways in Newfoundland, staying *with* the weight of the historical record and *holding* the presence of community forebears has changed my life profoundly—in ways both hopeful and hurtful. At the same time, with/holding from this work many of the fragmented and intimate details about their lives on record, which have often already been made spectacle and disposable in legal and media documents, I want to distance myself from the expectations of an extractive structure intended to (re)fail them, to instead imagine ways of thinking intergenerationally that honor their terms of survival and resistance. In the context of ascribed criminality and pathologization which necessitate secrecy, stealth, and suspicion (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010), I seek to form with them a collaborative politics of refusal through which the past becomes speculative, haunting, and fishy.

Tending to the ethics of archival resurfacing, issues of consent and respect shape my decision not to disclose the identities or stories of many twentieth century trans women and sex workers whose lives (dis)appear in historical records or community gossip. Challenging legacies of epistemic violence, with/holding is an attempted practice of care (in an island context, a ghostly context, a close-knit community context, an anti-violence context) where resurfacing a life lived or lost might extend some form of intergenerational harm to community members or loved ones. Simply, it does not feel right to fully recapitulate the violence and criminalization experienced by trans women and sex workers in twentieth century Newfoundland—that alone has been captured by the long historical record (see O'Neill 2003). Rather, I want to carefully acknowledge their choices made to withstand economic collapse, recognizing their spectral presence at the margins of St. John's Harbour, emplacing their labor and kinship networks within a social climate unsettled by the politics and problems of coloniality, cultural loss, and fish trade.

As such, this work is counter-archival: it holds on to the weight of the past while seeking an alternative mode of relationality (see Haritaworn, Moussa, and Ware 2018), gesturing toward the speculative *might-have-been*, a way of “feeling backward” (Love 2007) that remains unclosed. Following Jules Gill-Peterson's approach to encountering the historical worlds of trans women of color street queens and sex workers, eschewing dominant colonial narratives of violence that are shaped by race and class (Simpson Center 2021, 44, 10), my counter-archival ethics hope to make room for legend, ordinary pleasures and

dreams, the slowness and closeness of life in a small port city at edges of the changing North Atlantic. The lay of the land where it meets the sea, where mermaids have come and gone for centuries. With these fishy beings as imagined trans and sex worker ancestors (Jefferies 2022a, 2023), I begin to make creative sense of oceanic bodies and their sexuaction, reaching toward an autoethnographic and embodied mode of research-creation that is intensified by the living ephemeral knowledge of sexual becoming at St. John's Harbour.

For sex workers, autoethnography can be a particularly useful methodological framework to add scholarly resonance to historical, political, and social natures of our labored lives (babylon and Berg 2021; Hunt 2013; Johnson 1999; Mia 2020; Tortorici 2015). Recognizing how trans and sex worker worlds are shaped differently by sociopolitical axes of race and class (Durisin, van der Meulen, and Bruckert 2018; Mia 2020; Stanley 2021), this work seeks to illustrate how the embodied and the ecological are entangled in ways that produce unique terms of survival and resistance for trans sex workers in Newfoundland. My autoethnographic inquiry follows recent sex work scholarship that emphasizes how qualitative research projects are troubled by institutional barriers—including pathological representations of sex workers in epidemiological and sociological literature (van der Meulen, Durisin, and Love 2013). Autoethnographic sex worker research-creation can be understood as a political response to the overexposure and misrepresentation of sex worker lives and worlds in scholarship produced by those without lived experience in the trade. With the worldmaking potential to refuse damage-centered narratives (Tuck 2009), autoethnographic sex worker research-creation can instead draw “*heartful*” (Ellis 1999) attention to anti-oppressive critical relationality as well as imagined praxes for political change and social justice.

My thinking here extends from the historical labors of trans women sex worker artists Mirha-Soleil Ross and Nina Arsenaault, whose creative practices in video and performance explore the spatial and spiritual registers of transsexual womanhood, and whose influences remain deeply felt in my play with trans sex worker embodiments and ecologies. In her autoethnographic article “A Manifesto of Living Self-Portraiture” (2012a), Arsenaault confronts the sociopolitical disposability and desirability of her body-in-transition while moving through the world as a living work of art. Similarly, in the video *Tremblement de Chair* (2001, with Karbusicky), Ross presents a touching account

of her body as always already ecological—one that emerges against the abjection of sex change as an unnatural becoming (see Steinbock 2019, 84). Together, they develop a nondominant politics for rethinking the contact zone between trans bodies and ecologies. I engage with their work as subversive artistic practice—a series of enactments that honor the living ephemeral knowledge of transfeminine bodies, and which offer moments of suspended belief and speculation that register a world still with/held and more livable. Imagining an intergenerational knowledge exchange about the *might-have-been* and *yet-to-come* in an intimate island context, my autoethnographic practice is evocatively tethered to pleasure and sex worker justice.

Encountering trans and sex worker communities at the water's edge with heart and creative response-ability (see Jefferies 2022a, 2023; Springgay and Truman 2017), autoethnography is a way to represent the presence of the past as it moves through my life: a practice of releasing archival relationships and affects, formed and felt with trouble, as a trans woman sex-working graduate student, grieving and loving and becoming anew. Years of community engagement, oral historical inquiry, and archival research live within this work—and I carry these matters with me as I move through the island as a feeling body and a vulnerable observer (see Behar 1996; Boon 2018). Trans and sex worker histories are also shaped by rumor and gossip as the spectral and the speculative bleed into each other (see Otero 2020; Page 2017). Fragmentation of historical knowledge and the weight of archival ephemerality thus shape the urgency of autoethnographic world-making, within which my voice becomes a critical actor alongside the presence of sex worker forebears, chosen family, and mermaids—offering evocative ways of knowing and with/holding minoritarian social worlds (Bochner and Ellis 2016). Following folklorist Kimberly J. Lau, “I seek to place different voices and different narratives near to each other, an open, approaching nearness . . . that resists cohesion and a sense of closure, of containable knowledge” (2002, 246).

Until recently, the voices of Newfoundland sex workers have been missing almost entirely from archival, scholarly, and legal documents (see Cole and Mant 2022; Haywood 2002). The work of researchers and activists like Laura Winters (2018, with Gayle Macdonald; 2020) and Heather Jarvis, as well as advocacy and organizing labors of the Safe Harbour Outreach Project,<sup>4</sup> have begun to make meaningful change through sex worker-led political cultures. At present, a community of sex workers and collaborators continue

to advocate for decriminalization, addressing anti-violence and demanding safer working conditions, forming mutual aid networks, providing resources and support—together confronting threats of danger and surveillance as well as the stigma of visibility in a small city. With this cultural shift, a range of symposia, performances, art exhibitions, publications, photovoice, journalism, and research projects are encouraging Newfoundland sex workers to narrate our lives with complex critical and creative terms (Cull 2017; Drake 2019; Smith et al. 2020).<sup>5</sup> Political voices of trans sex workers have been documented for the first time within an emergent culture of visibility and resistance (Cull 2015; Jefferies 2020), calling for justice, demanding social action, and reframing narratives of our disposability in the province's changing economic landscape. The presence of prostitutes has intricately shaped social life in St. John's for centuries (O'Neill 2003), and as gay activist Padraic Brake notes in his paper "Uncovering Our Past: Lesbian and Gay Organizing in the 1970s" (1991), histories of queer sociopolitical formation in the city are entangled with sex worker communities. Can a queer and trans future hold sex worker justice and refuse to abandon the hustlers and whores? How might thinking backward and imagining intergenerationally bring this desire for liberation to bear?

Newfoundland feminist writers and researchers have noted how the economic and political landscape of militarization and commerce in wartime St. John's shaped young women's sexual behaviors and beliefs about survival and transactional sex (Baird and Cullum 1993; Haywood 2002). Helen Fogwill Porter, recalling her life growing up in downtown St. John's, writes: "We knew there were at least two bawdy houses on the South Side. . . . During the War we watched the sailors go in and out of those houses" (1979, 69). From this account, I picture the strolls and bawdy houses around St. John's Harbour as living and restless, with girls performing choreographed gestures that perhaps evoke the complicity of settlers in the transatlantic imperial project. Did sea shanties make those panties drop? Or did young and poor women find ways to temporarily release the conditions of hardship from their lives (see Cole and Mant 2022)? The violence of the colonial historical record misconceives. According to Daniel Bergsma, an American military captain who was sent to St. John's in 1942 to report on venereal disease, "Newfoundland girls were not merely amorous, but were in fact aggressively promiscuous . . . young women of Newfoundland could leave their homes penniless on a trip

to the shop, and prostitute themselves repeatedly on the walk to the store in order to fill their purses for their shopping” (quoted in Tam 2008, 62).

Several of these antagonizing, pathological, misogynistic narratives structure the archival presence of poor and sex-working women in nineteenth and twentieth century St. John’s (Cole and Mant 2022). Their voices are mostly silenced, erased, and misrepresented by the dominant culture, but sometimes appear in short quotations or sympathetic biographical descriptions that produce a lasting narrative of trauma and abjection, of gender-based violence, of trouble and duress (Edwards 1963). How then to consider possibilities of choice or bodily autonomy that foreground survival and resistance through colonial and patriarchal domination? To believe in sex worker forebears imagining practices of freedom (Hartman 2019) or mutual supports that could bolster a desire to carry on together? These questions turn against the historical record to surmise an intergenerational love among trans and sex worker communities in Newfoundland, embodying alternative enactments of the with/held past and livable yet-to-come (see Gilliland and Caswell 2016; Lara 2017; Muñoz 2009). I offer a fishy vernacular of distance, grief, and oceanleaving to envision how ruptures in intergenerational knowledge create moments for counter-archival looking after. What remains of historical sex work at St. John’s Harbour are traces from a time of trade that reinscribe the here-and-now as a net of transcorporeal relations unenclosed at the water’s edge.<sup>6</sup>

In *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag*, feminist folklorists Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye suggest that “imagining and enacting gender contestation . . . has long been part of the heritage of the common and everyday” (2014, 11). From such a vantage point, I question how folklorists might think differently about encountering trans and sex worker worlds in a time of unsettled scholarly production. Beyond a growing body of qualitative research exploring *travesti* and *transformista* worldmaking as lived expressions that cannot be categorized within the colonial archive of gender and sexual diversity (Kulick 1996; Ochoa 2014; Rizki 2019; Vartabedian 2018), much folklore and ethnology scholarship has used performance studies approaches to read and write trans/gender subjects within narrative and literary texts (Greenhill 1995; Ready 2016). At a methodological level, reading cultural texts with what Pauline Greenhill (2014) calls a “transgender imagination” can be an affirmatory approach to

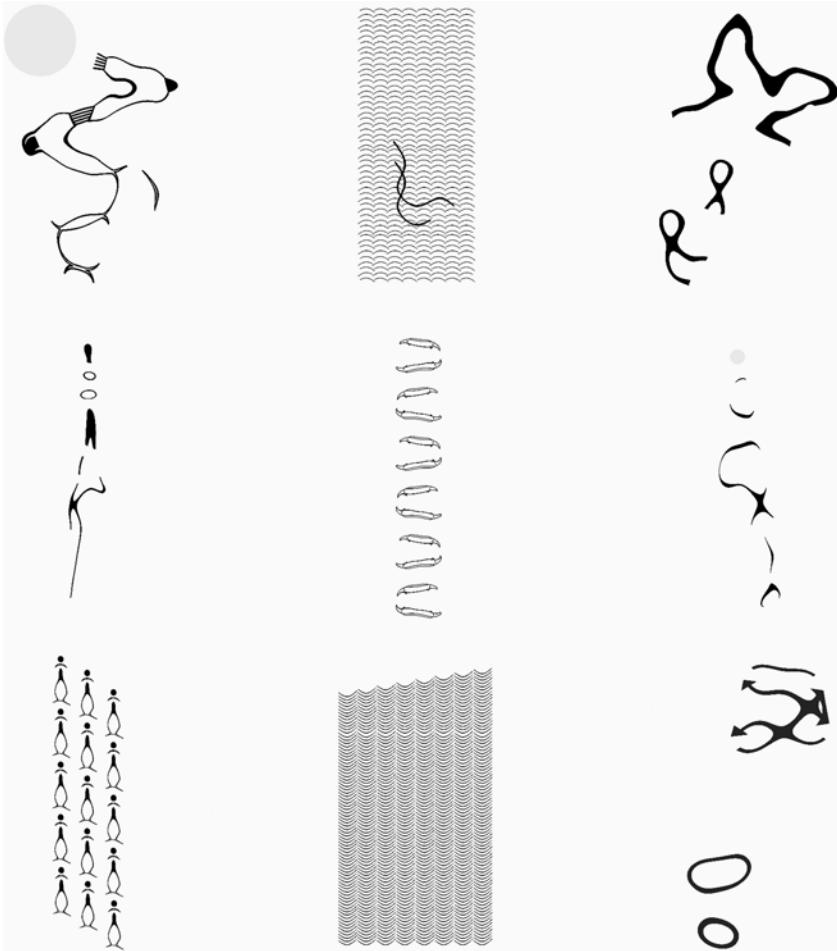


FIGURE 1.

Daze Jefferies, *past-present of a showgirl's soul and back again*, 2021–2022. Digital illustration.

understanding more about the ecological, sociohistorical, and temporal relations that shape trans life. While these kinds of scholarly readings help to illuminate locally defined issues of trans desire, an often-enfolded gaze of White queer theory's textual engagements with trans and gender variant knowledges has uncertain ends (see Benavente and Gill-Peterson 2019; Heaney 2017).

Following trans scholar Viviane Namaste's recognition of structural challenges for archiving trans lives (2015) and drawing insight from her oral historical and community-based research (2005, 2009),



I want to practice a trans folkloristics that embraces critical-creative methods of inquiry grounded in living ephemeral knowledge. The notion of ephemerality speaks to many ways in which trans lives are made marginal, precarious, and brief—toward the realm of nonexistence—by structures of social and institutional failure (see Hayward 2017a; Muñoz 1996, 2009; Raha 2017). Alongside decades of medicolegal erasure, employment discrimination, and sociospatial displacement that epitomize the nation-state's deathmaking project (Namaste 2000; Spade 2006), centuries of life-altering White settler colonial violence have facilitated the ongoing subjugation of trans and gender variant knowledges in and beyond folklore studies (Benoit 2019; Maracle 2000; Miranda 2010). My positionality as a White settler, trans woman sex worker, and folklorist in Newfoundland encourages me to engage with ephemerality as a “fishy” matter. As I have articulated in recent creative and scholarly works (Jefferies 2020, 2022a), a fishy methodological and theoretical approach to folklore scholarship holds on to the entanglement of embodiment, ephemerality, and ecology that is necessary to understand more about the social, historical, and political lives of Newfoundland trans women and sex workers. North Atlantic waters and the histories they hold entangle these fishy practices, contexts, and aesthetics.

My work here is informed by an evocative kind of fishy vernacular—feeling fishy—that has been resonant among communities of trans femmes and queens for many decades (see Rechy 1988, 106; Rodgers 1972, 81). These fishy sociolinguistics are possibly connected to much longer histories of comparison made between the biopolitical commerce of fish trade and prostitution (Shaaber 1971; Wentersdorf 1983, 354). While the origins of fishy vernacular are slippery (Jefferies 2018), Urban Dictionary user fish trap suggests that feeling fishy—as an embodied prospect and form of language play—emerged in the mid-twentieth century among Black and Latina femme queens and trans sex workers in American metropolitan geographies.<sup>7</sup> A playfully politicized mode of categorization that signifies niche markets of cis and trans women's sex-working bodies by way of selling vaginal or anal sex, feeling fishy has offered a way for femme queens and trans sex workers to map relations of sensuous desire and biopolitical commerce—the encounter between bodies, geographies, and livable futures—that materialize within the dynamic landscapes of sex work strolls (see Baker 2015; Hamilton 2016; Ridley 2019; Ross 2012). A spirited body language spoken by the dolls, signifying momentary



FIGURE 2.

Daze Jefferies, *past-present of a showgirl's soul and back again*, 2021–2022. Mixed media illustration.

pleasure and performance, tethered to sex, sway, and survival, feeling fishy gains increased emotional resonance on a port city's historical sex work strolls that have been shaped by enclosing and extractive nature-cultures of the North Atlantic fishery.

Thinking intergenerationally with trans women, mermaids, and sex worker forebears, feeling fishy is a practice of kinship. In her memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014), writer and activist Janet Mock recounts everyday life, survival, and sisterhood as a young Black Hawaiian trans girl, and she recalls meeting a community of trans women for the first time: “To be called fish by these women meant that I was embodying the kind of femininity that could allow me access, safety, opportunity, and maybe happiness” (2014, 115). I turn to Nina Arsenault who

shares: “Fishy. That’s what American trannies say when they mean you look like a biological female. That’s something we say amongst ourselves. We mean it as a compliment. It means she looks real” (2012b, 212). These quotations inform a larger narrative about accessibility, privilege, violence, and disposability that are linked to historical and contemporary networks of resistance and survival, safety and stealth, employed by Black, Indigenous, migrant, and White settler trans women sex workers. Fishiness can thus be imagined as a form of solidarity-in-difference, a social act of endearment and embrace, of aliveness and pleasure. Fishiness also symbolizes the slippery nature of transfeminine and sex worker survival on so-called Canada’s Atlantic coast. A transcorporeal (Alaimo 2012; Strongman 2020) practice for theorizing how trans and sex worker embodiments, desires, and subjectivities have been shaped by settler conquest, oceanic resource extraction, feminized labor, mermaid imaginaries, and sexuation in the North Atlantic, feeling fishy through this work is fluidness consonant with a poetics of relation (Glissant 1997) that emplaces trans and sex worker vernacular performance inside a changing ecology of fish trade in Newfoundland.



FIGURE 3.

Daze Jefferies, *recurrent bawdy*, 2021. Cotton, yarn, and polyester.

○

■ will know skin-yarns and sea-touched flesh.  
 the smell of home, the reek of fish.  
 t/here and gone my dear she haunts.

○

As sensuous geographical locations (Rodaway 1994), the hidden strolls and long-demolished bawdy houses along St. John's Harbour hold many secrets of trans and sex worker history in Newfoundland. Girls have worked the Harbour for centuries, first with sailors and now with strangers desiring car dates or other play in the fishy downtown core. Newfoundland historian Paul O'Neill (2003) notes that the presence of sex work in old St. John's can be traced back several hundred years. A fragmented chronological account of sex at the waterfront reveals a series of violent encounters shaped by policing, surveillance, and disposability. In 1610, colonist Richard Whitbourne was greeted by mermaids t/here, nude fish women with outstretched arms, and subsequently ordered his men to assault them as he worked through his own troubled fetishizations (Whitbourne 1620). What might the mermaids have been trying to communicate? Did they survive the brutal force of colonial contact? The coexistent desirability and disposability of feminized bodies at St. John's Harbour echoes and haunts.

Just under a century and a half later, Elenor Moody, a young sex worker or "Nuisance to the Publick" (O'Neill 2003, 387) was tortured and banished from the island colony after stealing from an intoxicated seaman (see also Baird and Cullum 1993; Pedley 1863, 97–8). The rest of her life eludes archival capture in Newfoundland. What might justice for young and poor sex workers from the eighteenth century look like today? In a counter-archival poem dedicated to her, referencing the disastrous Great Fire of 1892 in St. John's, I grieved with anger that "one way and no other, this city deserved / to burn for what it put you through" (Jefferies 2022b, 11). During World War II, increased policing and surveillance began to shape the everyday lives of sex workers and poor women in St. John's, who were seen as not only a public nuisance but as vectors of venereal disease (Haywood 2002). In the 1970s and 1980s, surrounded by Portuguese ships, prurient sailors, and the slow deep breath of a dying cod fishery, women in the sex trade continued to weather economic collapse while

simultaneously encountering institutional trouble and violence at the waterfront (*The Evening Telegram* 1983). In the past-present moment, sex workers come and go here—entangled with generations of forebears in the trade, desiring safer working environments, resisting policing, building community, and discovering lifeways of resistance and survival.

Within a blue history of fluid desires, trans women and sex workers become fetishized fishy beings. Together with the work of artists Mirha-Soleil Ross and Nina Arsenaault, and quoting trans scholar Eva Hayward, I understand the sociohistorical lives of trans women and sex workers in St. John's as "partly an 'artful' response between emotion and environment, politics and ideological power" (2017b, 274). This is to say that the embodied and the ecological are entangled in ways that produce slippage and risk through political, economic, and medicolegal oversights which make transactional sex necessary to survive for many positioned at social margins. Above all, ephemera and remains of sex work at St. John's Harbour reveal centuries of class disparities between the rich and the poor, symbolized here as merchants and maidens. As such, vernacular knowledges of contemporary sexual labor must be read alongside centuries of extractive fish trade that have carried some White settlers into safer harbors while exploiting the work and bodies of others who are left to fend for themselves and their communities.



At the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, I hold a poetry chapbook from the rare stacks, *Sea Legend* (2010) by Mark Callanan. This copy is number 44/100. Its outer sleeve, printed on Mohawk Eggshell paper that feels generations old and delicate to touch, bears an illustration of a mermaid taken from Bertuch's (1806) *Bilderbuch für Kinder*. Her body is pulled between-two by the book's spine. On the front cover, she has a half-breast, part of an arm, a few strands of hair, and most of her tail fin. On the back, I see the rest of her torso. Her arm is outstretched and she's holding plant life. On both sides, the edges of the cover leave her without a face. As I read, I discover: "The women of Church Hill know for certain / that in port towns there are always sailors, / and if not the kind that roam the ocean, / then at least those mariners who are at sea, / adrift, cut loose and dragged / by trade winds and by foreign tides, lashed" (Callanan 2010, 9).

The breath I take, the knowing swallow.

I respond the same way to Kent Barrett's (2004) digitally manipulated photograph, *Merhooker*, which details a busty mermaid sculpture with black hair, brown skin and scales, an outstretched arm and erect tail, positioned below a red streetlight on the corner of a downtown haunt. Both Callanan and Barrett provocatively illustrate the historical connections between mermaids and sex-working women in St. John's using poetry and photography, but I long for the voices of whores to speak back. To seek what can/not be spoken, overflowing, with and against,

a history of sex work through the eyes of men  
 the eyes of social scientists  
 the eyes of cheap clients  
 the eyes of politicians  
 the eyes of poets  
 the eyes of those unseen?

Imagining transhistorically, mermaids become spectral trans and sex worker ancestors adrift in Newfoundland waters. Feeling fishy, this engagement joins the work of folklorists and anthropologists who have used merfolk figurations to theorize gender and sexual relationalities (Campbell-Galman 2018; Hayward and Thorne 2018). For centuries, violence against mermaids has coexisted alongside slippery sexualizations in much of Newfoundland's folk and popular cultures. As folklorist Dale Jarvis (2021) notes, half-women mermaids have been objects of both suspicion and sexualization throughout White settler colonial Newfoundland history. This is demonstrated most grievously in colonist Richard Whitbourne's text *A Discourse and Discovery of Newfoundland* (1620). The fishy reality of simultaneous disposability and desirability also mirrors the life histories of trans women and sex workers in St. John's (Jefferies 2018, 2020, 2022a). Witnessing mermaids as trans and sex worker ancestors in a province that has been structured by ecologies of fish trade, my soft sculptural works (Figures 3 and 4) play with precarious survival in an oceanic world.

Critical relationality and analogous materiality with mermaids act as an emotional link between the contemporaneity of trans and sex worker survival and much longer histories of fishy beings that help illustrate the formation of racialized and sexualized narratives of displacement and belonging in Newfoundland. As I have

previously noted: “Forming linkages between the labor of Atlantic women islanders, Black queer vernacular in diaspora, Indigenous human-animal relations, and trans phenomenology is . . . one way to highlight and trouble posthuman fishy futures for trans women’s lives in Newfoundland” (Jefferies 2018, 18). This is to say that my research-creation is informed and troubled by a slippery assemblage of White settler storytelling traditions (Greenhill 1995; Wakeham 1967), hauntings and refusals from the Black Atlantic (Alexander 2005; McDougall 2016; Sharpe 2016; Turner 2022), and Mi’kmaq oral histories and stories of water people (Taylor 2009; Wallis and Wallis 1955, 349), alongside more-than-human eco-mythologies that produce fishy lifeways at the North Atlantic margins. The thingness of a mermaid, the thingness of a trans femme, the thingness of a sea whore, the thingness of a ghost—each a threat to the structure of Whiteness, held and also hidden within the colonial historical record—resurfacing, refusing, remembering another world.



Can seawater be understood as a counter-archive that holds detritus of an island-bound libidinal economy? In May 2019, overlooking ocean, at the 13th Annual Conference of *philoSOPHIA: Society for Continental Feminism* Newfoundland writer and scholar Kate Lahey, who grew up in St. John’s and carries memories of the water, shared with me a story of condoms waywardly adrift and washing ashore where the Waterford River flows into the Harbour—where mermaids and sex workers find their place and position in a history of transatlantic trade. Whether or not they were flushed into the Harbour or were deposited there by sex workers or their clients remains uncertain. I read this abjection poetically: the sea whore’s survival is a more-than-human problem (see Haraway 2016; Keir 2010; Kanngieser and Todd 2020; Todd 2017), and the Harbour remains as a precarious zone for human and fishy beings alike. Kate’s theoretical explorations of drift as a methodology of archival refusal (Boon and Lahey 2019)—one that turns against logics of colonial enclosure toward counter-histories of intimacy and resistance—encourage me to question the presence and absence of corporeal exchanges and transactional ephemera. Condoms are an intimate trace of skin-close contact, and like hosiery washed ashore (Figure 5), they offer an evocative and speculative reconsideration of drift, sensuality, and touch as



FIGURE 4.  
Daze Jefferies, *skin-close*, 2021. Cotton, polyester, and latex condom.

vernacular performance in the past-present lives of Newfoundland sex workers at the water's edge.

A t-girl floating in seawater beckons. Who on the land will laugh or listen? In her playful performance poem “Gone to the Dogs” (2018), Newfoundland writer and artist Violet Drake explores the tedium of stigma that shapes her life as a trans woman sex worker in St. John’s. She writes:

low down / dirty hounds / on the / down low . . . lookin’ to trade /  
with a merchant maid, / paid in nothin’ but / miserable minutes /  
wasted on waiting / for tricks that try / to make a mockery /  
of this economy

I am particularly moved by the naming of herself as a “merchant maid”—what I read as an attempt to grapple with the role of feminized labor within histories of fish trade and White settler worldmaking at the North Atlantic margins. Her use of this term has resonated deeply, shaping my play over the past handful of years. So much so that we chose to expand on this phrasing in a collaborative poem (Jefferies and Drake 2020) which explores the imagined afterlife of trans women’s sex work in downtown St. John’s:



ANYHOW, GIRLS HAVE BEEN HOING AT THE HARBOUR  
 FOR AS LONG AS LITTLE LIVYERS STARTED EATING UP THE  
 FISH / SO MAYBE WE CAN NEVER ESCAPE THIS ARCHIVE /  
 NEEDING TO BECOME SUBLIME LIKE MERCHANT  
 MAIDENS, OUR TRANS+ATLANTIC BODIES IN CRISIS AND  
 REDEMPTION / GIRLS WITH SECRET SKIN STUMPS WHO  
 SINK BELOW THE WAVES STRAIGHT INTO ANOTHER BRINY  
 EVERLASTING / COVER ME IN PURPLE AND WRITE SOME  
 OTHER FUTURE—ERRATUM FOR A WASTED REVOLUTION  
 BY THE BAY

Our poetry envisions that future temporalities and ecologies of trans women's sex work in downtown St. John's will continue to become-with the Harbour's sensuous life force. As Eva Hayward argues in her own autoethnographic research endeavours: "transsexuality . . . reveals how bodily feeling and desire are constituted socially and spatially" (2017b, 256). The thick and salty air of the ancient port with scummy germinations all along the wharves—we imagine these ecological relations as engendering fishy kinds of survival and performance at St. John's Harbour. Thinking with Rebecca Schneider's recent scholarship on the intersections of island and performance studies (2020), as well as her important theorization of performance as an ephemeral address positioned to remain rather than disappear (2001), feeling fishy becomes a mode of hopeful and uncertain drifting toward livable futures for Newfoundland trans women and sex workers. Wavering through pleasure, sensual ephemera, and spectral encounters, water you lonely?



FIGURE 5.

Daze Jefferies, *resurfacing you torn-together*, 2023. Nylon hosiery washed ashore in the Bay of Exploits.

Research-creation fosters emotional engagements with creative and expressive cultural forms, acknowledging conditions that shape my life in the twenty-first century are tethered to the labor of sex-working women who endured and found escape from a different patriarchal and colonial world. Research-based drawing becomes a link to the past recalled through legend and cultural fetish. Illustrating trans and sex worker knowledges with mermaids, fishing nets, and an untranslatable asemic language allows me to address through visual means a haunting narrative of biopolitical commerce and watery mythologies as I follow a desire to find expressions of pleasure and hope within difficult histories. Poetic inquiry as vernacular relation gestures toward a sea change in time. Hosiery washed ashore are given new life as a found textile form which signifies intergenerational touches and spectral saltwater preservation. What lives in me from archival relationships is figured into the work through touch, the gendered labor of my hands a “felt matter” (Vaccaro 2010) that is playfully and politically provocative in sculpture. Condoms come to represent a border between then and now, the feel of changing risk negotiation, ocean plastics and polluted waters, sex trade as a trans-species exchange. Counter-archival research-creation is therefore an act of



FIGURE 6.  
Daze Jefferies, *slowblew*, 2021. Found wooden box, seawater, and latex condoms.

reflexive encounter that documents imagined historical release.<sup>8</sup> It brings me closer to an intergenerational knowledge exchange with trans and sex worker forebears.

In the basement of the QEII Library, I sway through decades of personals ads in *The Telegram*, seeking the presence of older working girls, defiant, through arduous life on the island. With broken rubber bands and years of microfilm behind me, I encounter a TS escort's listing from the early aughts. There's a URL listed in her ad and the Wayback Machine takes me to an archived website where I see her face and body bare. I wonder how she might communicate with me about clients, pleasure, movement, or now being captured and embedded in a low-res photo that meets me as a digital ghost. She's stunning and she's smiling and she's visiting from across the country. More than likely staying at a downtown hotel. Overlooking the Harbour, where her labor will wash into a history of fish trade that buoys the prospects of our shared yet disparate terms of survival at the North Atlantic margins.

I hold the heart of this counter-archival research-creation by refusing logics of institutional enclosure, imagining instead more sustainable modes of sharing knowledge with community and drifting through precariousness. Creative educators Stephanie Springgay, Anise Truman, and Sara MacLean suggest: "research-creation becomes a practice of responding to and countering the logic of the archive, while attending to its ephemeral and affective qualities" (2020, 898). As such, art and poetry have the potential to make these historical worlds anew. Traversing living ephemeral knowledge of Newfoundland trans and sex worker worlds, feeling fishy as an unruly embodiment helps me to take account of what political theorist Wendy Brown describes as "the late modern rupture of history as a narrative, history as ended because it has lost its end, a rupture that paradoxically produces an immeasurable heaviness to history" (1993, 403). Any fish trade future that I might foresee in this place will be tied to the marginal lives of those who came and labored before me on the sex work strolls of St. John's Harbour.<sup>9</sup> Here and now in this oceanic contact zone—where centuries of ancestral labors live on through the minoritarian worldmaking of sex workers—transcorporeal and ephemeral beings withstand fishy margins at the water's edge: "even though blackwater leaving / our bawdy house is filled with / enough fake estrogen now / to forcibly sex change / what's left of the cod, / as if this place wasn't / home to sirens and halfway / creatures already swallowed" (Jefferies 2023, 16).

Thinking intergenerationally with a politics of refusal, I am left to consider the ethics of engaging and with/holding vernacular knowledges in the wake of coexisting social animosity and desires for trans and sex-working women. Against colonial motivations to enclose and possess aliveness in archives, I want to imagine how creative and expressive cultures can live on with the psycho-corporeal power of their own will (see Gumbs 2018; Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017). This refusal troubles the historical practice of folkloristics which aims to preserve vernacular knowledges that might otherwise disappear. Still, I choose to believe in a fishy trans folkloristics that reconceptualizes ephemerality as a critical-creative mapping of worlds adrift and yet-to-come, worlds where decriminalization and solidarity-in-difference reshape terms of survival and resistance, worlds where trans women and sex workers in Newfoundland are safer, beloved, and held.

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## Notes

1. A vernacular term for the capital city of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

2. My use of "little fish" is motivated by the 2018 novel of the same title by trans writer Casey Plett, which follows a trans woman sex worker in Manitoba as she navigates through a cold winter of grief, longing, precarity, and resilience.

3. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador, unceded and unsurrendered ancestral homelands of the Mi'kmaq, Beothuk, Inuit, and Innu, is situated on the far east coast of what is colonially known as Canada. Because this article is concerned with sex worker histories at St. John's Harbour, I refer exclusively to Newfoundland, the island portion of the province, known as Ktaqmkuk in

Mi'kmaq language, which roughly translates to “across the waters.” Although this decision reflects larger cultural and political divisions between the island of Newfoundland and the mainland geographic region of Labrador, lifeways and ecologies in Labrador exist beyond the scope of my encounters here.

4. Established in 2013, the Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP) is a sex worker advocacy program located in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

5. In particular, *Queer Uncensored*, a series of four performances organized by two-spirit Mi'kmaq activist and artist Jude Benoit between 2014 and 2016, with support from students at Memorial University's Student Union (MUNSU) and Sexual and Gender Advocacy Resource Centre (MUNSAGA), offered revolutionary political narratives from queer, trans, and sex worker communities in St. John's.

6. My understanding of transcorporeality, a theory of becoming within feminist new materialisms (Alaimo 2012) and Black Atlantic religions (Strongman 2020), recognizes the nondomination of human bodies in entanglement with and transformation by ecological and spiritual beings.

7. A quick Google search of the words “trans,” “woman,” “drag,” and “fish” together will generate a range of interesting resources. One definition that sticks with me is from Urban Dictionary user fish trap, who has contributed a range of queer- and trans-of-color vernacular to the digital linguistic archive. For more info, see fish trap (2018).

8. The illustrations titled “past-present of a showgirl's soul and back again” (Figures 1 and 2) appeared in the exhibition *Let's Connect Tomorrow*, curated by Jason Penney and Cyril Butler, at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador from February to May 2023. The hosiery as sculptural body titled “resurfacing you torn-together” (Figure 5) appeared in the exhibition *falling through our fingers*, curated by Emily Critch, at the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick from June to September 2023. Thank you, Jason, Cyril, and Emily, for believing in this work.

9. To learn more about critical fishy futures that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty and kinship, see the work of Red River Métis artist-researcher Zoe Todd (2022).

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