

New Spheres

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This is my first semester at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's. It started in early January and after my arrival two days into the semester I had literally no time to adjust to the new situation but plunged right into classes. An immense stream of new ideas, a new kind of thinking and knowing is entering my mind and my life within a very short time, merely 15 weeks (11.5 done, 3.5 to go). The amount of reading and writing definitely caused me to struggle and continues to do so. Being admitted to all these new areas of research, concepts, and lines of argument and thought at the age of almost fifty and across the Atlantic from where I have lived so far is like entering new spheres, like beginning a new life without having to leave the old one behind. It's a net and one hundred percent gain.



Newfoundland had inspired my work as a visual artist for years. Eventually I had started to see beyond and beneath the amazing scenery and my projects became more research-based, drawing on the rich history and culture of the place. When I heard about the Interdisciplinary PhD program at Memorial almost two years ago, it felt like this might be just the thing for me. And after a lengthy application procedure and extensive anticipation, here I am in the thick of it. Generally, a certain distance from the story one is going to recount is considered a prerequisite for good writing. But I want to account the here and now, deliberately and desperately, before any distance that might make it all look more ordered, reasonable or plain will remove it from me. Before the wonder I am feeling now will fade and cannot be recalled.

I have anticipated these times as being challenging, demanding and rewarding; and that is exactly how I would describe them now. But the actual experience is nothing I could have faintly imagined beforehand.

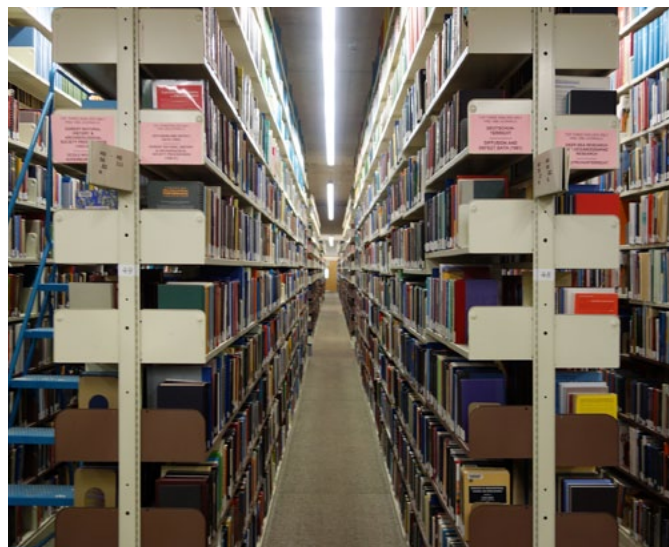
The new spheres have already started to change my thinking and my values: when going to my humanities class, "Utopia," I walk the hallways of the biology department, see the posters of conferences on birds or jellyfish and peek into laboratories where students in white coats do some experiments under the eyes of their instructor. With a background in physics I have an idea of the way of thinking within the natural sciences. I once considered physics the supreme discipline, natural sciences as the only science and humanities as questionable. Now, while I still cherish physics and natural science as important branches of research, I pity these biology students who will likely hear nothing about *Scipio's Dream*, *Adventus vs. Futurum*, *two-ity* or *The Trouble with Wilderness*. With a new guest speaker and a new theme, a new horizon is opened to me in the "Utopia" class every week; the view over the city and to Signal Hill from the Sally Davis Seminar Room being the constant element.

In "Representations of Remoteness in Newfoundland", my sociology class, I have learned so much more in 11 weeks about this island and the ties that connect it to the outside world than I have in the 11 years since I first came here. This place I love acquires multiple new layers of historic, political and sociocultural fabric: its dual role at the centre *and* at the periphery of the *North Atlantic Triangle* is clearly interwoven with the "dissipation of the glowing visions of a new Utopia", the continuing



debate as to “how many, if any, people should live in Newfoundland”, the urge to increase the *time-space convergence* of the outports, and the dawn of the *Newfoundland Renaissance*.

“Creative writing: non-fiction” is the perfect complement in the triple canon of my new school of thought. The class is an exclusive little club: we come together as strangers from 7 till 9:30 pm in the seminar room of the English Department and share some of our deepest thoughts and most personal experiences in essays titled *The Woman in the Nightgown*, *The Deep End*, *Pigeon Morning* and *Our Longest Goodbye*. When our paths diverge again after class and I walk home in the dark, my head is filled with stories and language and my mind feels free. Writing literary essays is not less demanding than writing academic papers. But for the writing class I am browsing my own ideas and experiences to find my themes, arguments

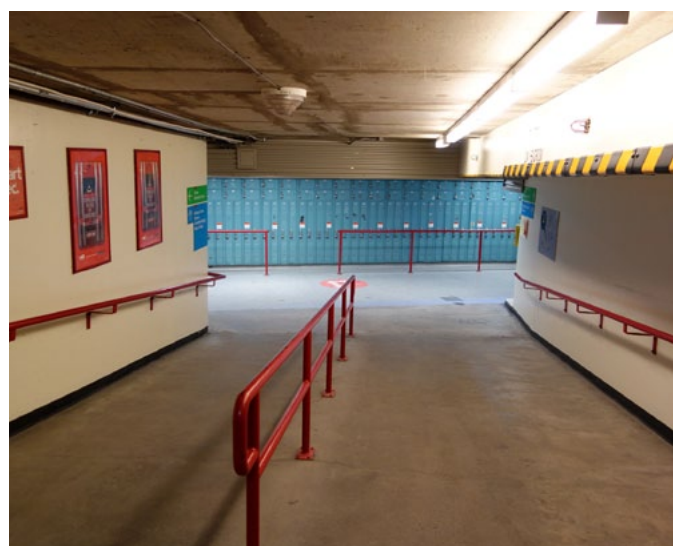


and conclusions instead of browsing the “items” I pick up from the library. The shelves in my room have been filling up with books over the last weeks: from *Fish into Wine* and *Cat Harbour* over *The Anatomy of Utopia* and *White Tie and Decorations* to *Observing the Outports* and *A Public Nuisance*, to name just a few. I am slowly getting used to reading on the computer screen as well, but I still rather hop into bed with a book, pulling over the bedside lamp before I immerse myself into a text. Curiously the reading glasses I had newly acquired and used in the beginning have eventually become obsolete...

It sometimes happens now, that I come across a name, a concept or an idea in one class that had come up in another before: *Francis Bacon*, for instance, and *Charles Sanders Peirce*, two truly universal minds; the former the inventor of both the essay and the scientific method and the author



of the amazing early utopian piece *New Atlantis*; the latter a natural scientist, logician and philosopher, the founder of pragmatism, who came up with the process of *abduction* as “the only logical operation which introduces any new idea”, the ingenious *quincuncial projection* of a sphere, and whom no less a figure than *Bertrand Russell* called the greatest American thinker ever. Or *Frederic Jameson*, literary critic and Marxist political theorist, whose name and statements keep coming up at different ends and proclaim “the failure of imagination” or that “in utopia, politics is supposed to be over, along with history”. An example for conceptual recurrences is the *sublime*, that strange state that manifests itself in a feeling of simultaneous awe and terror and its connection with *ambivalence*, an exciting and often disregarded concept of dynamic indefinitude which appears ubiquitous in any topic that calls on me. The fact that these outstanding personalities and widely applicable concepts reappear repeatedly might not sound surprising, but given that the three classes differ significantly in aim and approach, I find it quite remarkable. Moreover, after entering the realm of





human thought like stepping into the midst of a deep, dense and endless jungle, meeting familiar notions is like finding little signposts or trails within the thicket and gives me the idea that I won't be lost forever. I can feel that there is an amazing network of tracks and connections inherent to the big jumble, parts of which may unexpectedly surface at any time, creating associations and connecting little neurons in my brain.

More often now than not I feel my head is spinning with all the new input and what it does to the "stuff" that is already there. But if I manage to let it run and spin freely – and if I do not hit a cul-de-sac, recurring frustration certainly being a part of the process – I am amazed where my thoughts, augmented by those of others, may carry me. Brainstorming feels like a more literal phenomenon now: it captures me, lifts me up and spins me around and I cannot be sure when it will let go of me again. Of course, brainstorming is also a game that is played with others, and I am surrounded by amazing players and excited to be allowed to join their illustrious team. We all play in different disciplines though which sometimes makes the flow of the game quite erratic. And when everyone's head is spinning with different things, in different orbits and at different beats per hour, the game may not get under way at all. But when orbits cross, sparks are likely to fill the air.

The downtown streets of the city that surrounds me are lined with colourfully painted wooden structures from simple row houses to venerable mansions. The place breathes history: all the things I am learning in the sociology class happened or began their course right here at my doorstep. I live in novelist Margaret Duley's niece's house, and the Colonial Building and the Governor's House are just around the corner. When I walk down

the hill and look over the harbour basin and out through the Narrows to the ocean opening up beyond them, I feel the presence of centuries of seafaring and transatlantic trade. I feel the exposed geography that makes us an outpost looking east towards Europe, the Old World; a large rock subject to the tempers of the sea and the skies. But I rarely get the chance to wander the city or the waterfront at all. My realm is mostly confined to Monkstown Road, Memorial, and the streets connecting the two: *Fleming*, *Bonaventure* and *Whiteway*. Walking back and forth and spending the rest of the days in front of the computer screen or under the bedside lamp in my room upstairs, I am often tired, sometimes exhausted, and occasionally stressed. But I would not want to miss a single second of all this. And I do not ever want to forget about the wonder of being admitted to enter these new spheres of thought.

