

# I'S THE MERB'Y

## Masculinity, Mermen and Contemporary Newfoundland

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**ABSTRACT:** In late 2017 initial, low-key publicity for a charity calendar featuring a range of bearded Newfoundlanders posing as mermen resulted in international media coverage that discussed and commended the non-stereotypical images produced for the project. This article situates the calendar's imagery within the history of regional folklore concerning mermen and mermaids, the socio-cultural character of the island of Newfoundland and, in particular, the milieu of its port capital, St. John's. Through these perspectives, the article analyses aspects of masculinity present in an island society that has experienced significant transitions in recent decades in relation to the decline of its fishery, the increasing work-related mobility of former fisherpeople, increasing ethnic diversity and immigration, and the breaking down of once strongly held attitudes of Newfoundland as being isolated, homogenous and tradition-based. In terms of Island Studies discourse, this has involved the island's transition from being a relatively autonomous aquapelagic assemblage to an increasingly post-aquapelagic one firmly incorporated within a nation-state. Long viewed as a quintessential "folk setting", Newfoundland is in a state of change that includes the gradual modification of regional stereotypes of masculinity. The revised images and roles presented in the calendar can be seen to represent new, more fluid definitions of masculinity appropriate for an increasingly more cosmopolitan — yet proudly unique — island society.

**KEYWORDS:** Mermen, merb'ys, mermaids, masculinity, Newfoundland, aquapelago

### Introduction

The title of this paper alludes to one of the best-known traditional Newfoundland songs, 'I's the B'y.' The song's title is a Newfoundland English dialect phrase that means "I'm the Boy/Man" (with "B'y" being pronounced as "buy") and the lyrics open by providing a statement of a traditional coastal masculine identity, portraying the vocal protagonist as a busy and resourceful provider supporting a wife at home:

*I's the b'y that builds the boat  
And I's the b'y that sails her  
I's the b'y that catches the fish  
And brings them home to Lizer*

From this starting point, the lyrics go on to refer to various women's names and a range of traditional Newfoundland foods. The song, and its usual performance as a confident,

rollicking, up-tempo ballad, conveys a particular image of rugged, confident, heterosexual masculinity. As discussed in Hiscock (2005: 211–219), the song has immense popularity in Newfoundland and represents the ideals of male self-sufficiency as they developed in a pre-industrial economy. Thorne (2007) notes that the song is part of a canon of material that became popularised throughout Newfoundland around the time of the vote on confederation with Canada in 1949, transforming an archetype of isolated outport<sup>1</sup> masculinity into a more general Newfoundland stereotype that was increasingly satirised from the 1960s on via so-called 'Newfie' jokes.<sup>2</sup> While there was an increasing awareness of the kitsch and self-parodic nature of such songs in the 1980s and 1990s, there was also considerable affection for them in Newfoundland. The latter sensibility resulted in a revival of interest in the canon of folksongs (as identified in Rosenberg, 1994) many of which continue to be performed as widely recognised expressions of Newfoundland belonging. This corpus is exemplified by songs such as 'I's the B'y,' 'Squid Jiggin' Ground' and 'Kelligrews Soiree'. Contemporary Newfoundland song embraces and expands on many of the lyrical themes from this earlier canon, though it likewise reflects increasing cosmopolitanism, with many new songs offering commentaries on the relation between tradition and modernity in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.<sup>3</sup>

Within terms of Island Studies discourse, the transition is symptomatic of a wider shift between the early *raison d'être* and orientation of Newfoundland, as an aquapelagic European settler enterprise, and its more modern condition as a post-aquapelagic province of the Canadian federation. The concept of the aquapelago was formulated in 2012 to describe and characterise integrated marine and terrestrial socio-spatial networks assembled by human livelihood activities in particular island and/or coastal locations. As Hayward has previously asserted, in the mid-17th-20th centuries Newfoundland represented an archetypal aquapelagic assemblage:

*on account of the historical rationale of its modern settlement and the distribution of its population. The principal factor behind the region's population by European settlers was the existence of The Grand Banks, raised areas of sea-bed to the south east of the main island. Located at the confluence of the cold Labrador Current and warm Gulf Stream (a meeting point that gives rise to an upwelling of nutrients), this area of sea had attracted Western European fishing vessels since (at least) the 15th Century on account of the proliferation of cod, hake and other fish in the fertile waters. Initial European habitation of the coast and fringe islands of Newfoundland was transitory, principally to establish fish drying facilities, and/or seasonal, with small groups of workers left over the winter to maintain facilities until the return of fishing boats in the following spring. European settlement occurred as an extension of this practice, as 'wintering' populations extended the duration of their stay on land. The subsequent settlement pattern of the main island and its outliers reflected this, comprising a scatter of coastal 'outports' reliant on the fishery and connected to each other by sea-lanes (with land-based transport systems such as roads and, later, rail being something of an afterthought). (2012: 6)*

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<sup>1</sup> In Newfoundland the term 'outport' refers to a rural fishing community.

<sup>2</sup> Jokes that characterise Newfoundlanders as backward, quaint and/or simple-minded.

<sup>3</sup> Newfoundland forms the most populated area of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Since our discussions are largely confined to the production of the 2018 merb'y calendar around St. John's we principally refer to the island rather than the province. Expanding on the success of the 2018 calendar the creators are planning a province wide orientation (including Labrador) for the 2019 version.

Two decisive factors modified the assemblage. First, Newfoundland's entry into the Canadian federation in 1949, which led to a period when the provincial government actively encouraged and facilitated the depopulation of outport communities and second, the drastic decline of the cod fishery that resulted in the introduction of a moratorium on the activity in 1992.



Figure 1 – Map of Newfoundland showing position of St. John's (Wikimedia Commons<sup>4</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> Map design by Coach.nyta, edited by Qyd: <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>.

Reflecting the factors outlined above, a number of writers and researchers — such as Hartmann (2015) and Power (2005) — have emphasised that characterisations of (supposedly) archetypal Newfoundland masculinity such as those present in 'I's the B'y' have been increasing at odds with the demise of the fishing industry (and the outports associated with it), the increasingly urban nature of Newfoundland's population and the increasing prominence of gay men in the capital St. John's from the late 1960s on (Malone 2009; Moore, 2016). This has led to a rise in more diverse masculine types such as, most recently, hipsters, a self-consciously fashionable and mildly 'alternative' subculture whose men have, amongst other things, repopularised the beard as a facial ornament (Michael, 2015). In 2017, a new element entered this social context in the form of publicity for a 2018 calendar that represented a variety of bearded young men as mermen or, as the calendar and its promotion chose to express it — "merb'ys". The choice of this name (devised by Newfoundland artist Clare Fowler<sup>5</sup>) to describe the male characters had a twofold effect: first, to align the mermen with a recognisable type of masculinity and, second, to invite the characters to be read in an exotic and/or quaint way (with the novelty of the invented word suggesting the novelty of the represented mermen). Publicity for the calendar and its general enterprise spawned a range of local, national and international commentary. This article analyses the nature and antecedence of the calendar's imagery, its significance within contemporary Newfoundland and the range of responses arising from it.

### I. Mermaids, Mermen and Newfoundland

Mermaids have long been present in what might be termed the "vernacular imagination" of Newfoundland culture as a result of their presence in Anglo-Irish maritime folklore and, subsequently, as figures represented in various visual media contexts. The best-known and most often referenced account of a local mermaid sighting occurs in the writings of Richard Whitbourne, a mariner-adventurer from the south-east coast of the English county of Devon who fished around Newfoundland in the late 1500s and early 1600s before turning to promoting colonisation of the island. In the preface to his 1620 publication *A Discourse and Discovery of New-Found-Land*, he related his encounter with a creature in St. John's harbour that had a female human face and upper body, blue hair-like "strakes" and a lower body that "was pointing in pro-portion something like a broad hooked Arrow" (ibid). After mentioning that others had also observed the creature, he speculated that it might have been a "maremaid" (ibid). This characterisation is somewhat tentative given that Whitbourne hailed from Teignmouth in Devon, a county in which mermaid legends and visual imagery were well established,<sup>6</sup> and the account also lacks any reference to the creature having the fish-scaled tail commonly associated with the mermaid. But despite these ambiguities concerning the aquatic humanoid's conformity to stereotypical mermaid form, the identification of the Newfoundland aquapelago as being populated by such a creature is entirely congruent with the folkloric imaginary of aquapelagic societies that produced such figures in European and

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<sup>5</sup> It seems that neither Fowler nor the calendar's initiator, Hasan Hai, were aware that a similarly spelled (if differently pronounced) word — i.e. 'merby' — already existed and had a similar subcultural usage in that it refers to men acting out roles and appearances more commonly associated with women. In Roller Derby player's slang, 'merby' refers to a male competitor, whose typical impact on an opponent is focussed at shoulder rather than hip-level, as is more prevalent with female players. (See Urban Dictionary, nd: online).

<sup>6</sup> Mermaids were, for example, featured in misericord carvings and roof boss designs in Exeter Cathedral and one of Exeter's best-known inns in the period was the "Mairemead." (See Cornforth, 2015).

other contexts.<sup>7</sup> Whitbourne's description was the basis of a visual image produced some eight years later by Dutch artist Theodore de Bry (Figure 2) that represented two mermaids in a more conventional manner, with flowing tresses and scaled tails in a harbour identified as St. John's, serving to 'standardise' the creature described by Whitbourne with regard to dominant 17th Century artistic conventions of her form.



Figure 2 - Engraving by Theodore de Bry inspired by Richard Whitbourne's account of seeing a mermaid-like creature in St. John's Bay (1628).

But despite this early manifestation of figures from European aquapelagic folklore around Newfoundland's shores — and two somewhat slight references to marine humanoids sighted off the Newfoundland coast made by Beck (1973: 273)<sup>8</sup> — these figures did not persist or proliferate as motifs in Newfoundland folklore associated with particular locations.<sup>9</sup> This is all the more surprising since many of the early migrants to the island came from either the English county of Dorset or from the south-east of Ireland, both of which had active mer-

<sup>7</sup> See Hayward (2017: 6-7) for discussion of the nature of the aquapelagic imaginary of European coastal communities.

<sup>8</sup> Beck (1973: 273) gives several examples of marine humanoids reported off the Newfoundland coast. One concerns a female who may have been a mermaid and two others refer to mermen, one of whom was allegedly shot in Great Cat Arm inlet in northern Newfoundland on an unspecified date. Despite Beck's accounts of these incidents, they are not present in any reported regional Newfoundland folklore and their reiteration by subsequent writers appears to be based on secondary sources.

<sup>9</sup> This is curious, given that Anglo-Irish fairy folklore took root in various parts of the island. See Narváez (1991) and Reiti (1991) for discussion of the local fairy phenomena.

themed folklore in the 1700s and 1800s.<sup>10</sup> While only conjecture, the reason for this lack of attachment of such folklore to specific coastal locations might have related to sailors' prolonged absence from their homes, working in distant fishing grounds for prolonged durations. In this manner, the mermaid and/or merman may have continued as elements of an international maritime sensibility more connected with the open sea than specific coastal locations. Reflecting the above, neither mermen nor mermaids have been celebrated in Newfoundland folksong,<sup>11</sup> at least not until local singers adopted Shel Silverstein's composition 'The Mermaid' (1965) into their repertoires in the 2000s. It is also notable that the song is a parodic one that involves a lonely and lustful sailor gaining a mermaid as a partner only to find that she has an inverted figure in that her upper half is a fish and her lower half is human.<sup>12</sup>

In contemporary Newfoundland, the mermaid has principally appeared as a motif in various public artworks located in and around St. John's that have been produced since the early 1990s as part of the conscious foregrounding of maritime folklore and/or local heritage by the city administration in a post-aquapelagic period. The latter enterprise reflects the city's efforts to develop tourism as an economic activity intended to partially offset the decline of the cod fishery and its ancillary commercial enterprises. One of the most significant influences on the development of heritage imagery and associations around the city was a report commissioned from researcher Elizabeth Fowler concerning the education of tour guides in 1990. The report, entitled 'City of Legends' (c1991),<sup>13</sup> was researched in the Memorial University of Newfoundland's Folklore and Language Archive and detailed various aspects of the city's heritage that could provide material for tour guides. The report's focus — and, in particular, its title — were subsequently adopted as an aspect of location branding by the city and were further developed by the commissioning of a series of public artworks that appeared around St. John's in the early-mid 1990s. One work of particular significance for this article was a mural by Helen Gregory painted in Bowring Park that featured a mermaid accompanied by an extract from Whitbourne's previous account of seeing one in the city harbour some 400 years earlier.<sup>14</sup>

A further significant manifestation of mermaid motifs occurred around the city in Summer 2006 when a group of identical mermaid statues decorated by different artists were installed in public places (before being auctioned off at the end of the season to raise money for the

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<sup>10</sup> There are, for instance, various accounts of a 13-foot long, fish-tailed mer-creature of indeterminate gender being washed up on Chesil Beach in Dorset in 1757 (see Hutchins, 1774: 338, for example). Similarly, there are accounts of various aquatic humanoids of varying appearances (including archetypal mermaids and mermen of various kinds) recorded in south-eastern Ireland (see Croker, 1828: 3-84)

<sup>11</sup> The song 'Curse of the Newfoundland Mermaid,' written by British rock band Pioneers of Mediocrity c2010, is an original composition that is only inspired by the island's name and a general association with North Atlantic maritime folklore.

<sup>12</sup> Her form thereby resembles the figure in Magritte's famous surrealist painting 'Collective Invention' (1934), an image that is echoed in the cover artwork of Great Big Sea's album *The Hard and the Easy* (2005), which includes the band's version Silverstein's song.

<sup>13</sup> We have been unable to ascertain the precise date of this report and no copy appears to be available in any public archives. Our discussion of it relates to information provided by its author and by former archivist at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, Philip Hiscock.

<sup>14</sup> The mural was removed after redevelopment of the area. Its mermaid imagery was however incorporated into an audiovisual text entitled 'The St. John's mermaid, call it what you want (phantasmagoria)... a Tall Tale (tail)' (nd) produced by Elizabeth Murphy that combined harbour imagery with poetic verses and music.

Easter Seals disability charity). A promotional preview video for the project<sup>15</sup> featured shots of the coast with a female voiceover (implicitly in role as a mermaid) reiterating the aforementioned city place-branding by linking this to the soon-to-surface mermaids:

*For centuries, beneath the waves, we lived in mystery. Only a lucky few have caught a glimpse but soon all eyes will see. In our city of legends, the downtown streets will soon will set the stage. Watch out for us when summer comes, we'll surface and amaze.*

As per preceding discussions, this brief passage suggests the mermaids as denizens of the open seas, rather than proffering any specific association with St. John's harbour related to Whitbourne's 1620 account or De Bry's subsequent engraving in 1628.

The mermaid statues were rendered in various designs, including a flag motif mermaid (Figure 3 below — artist unknown). The statues were a popular attraction for tourists and locals alike<sup>16</sup> and also provided images that were subsequently re-used by other visual artists, such as Kent Barrett, who produced a series of works that photo-shopped the statue images and re-presented them in various locations around the easterly area of the island (such as his satirical rendition of "mermaid-infested waters" in the strait between Bell Island and St. Phillip's [approximately 15km east of St. John's] — Figure 4).



Figure 3 — Flag design mermaid, St. John's 2006 (photo by Len Waite).

<sup>15</sup> Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-af-KoX8HSY> — accessed 26th November 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Morgan-Cole (2006: online).



Figure 4 — 'Plucky Newfoundland ferry pilots on their evening run brave the mermaid infested waters between St. Phillip's and Bell Island' (Kent Barrett, 2006)

In subsequent years mermaid images have continued to appear in various contexts around St. John's, including in a panel in a large mural reflecting the city's maritime heritage commissioned by the city and painted by Kyle Boston in Scanlan's Lane in 2015.<sup>17 18</sup>

Unlike mermaids, *mermen* have not (to date) been subject to representation in late 20th and/or early 21st Century public art of the type discussed above. Indeed, rather than representing the resurgence of any local folkloric character, the mermen depicted in the 2018 calendar are, instead, local adoptions and elaborations of a popular cultural figure that has resurfaced elsewhere in North America as part of what has been termed contemporary *media-lore* (Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics (2104). The latter comprises the deployment of a variety of figures and narratives from either ancient legendry or more recent folklore in variously updated and/or more novel contexts that reflect facets of contemporary socio-cultural values and mores. In this manner, while the calendar's mermen might be

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<sup>17</sup> See CBC News's 2015 report on (and video footage of) the mural.

<sup>18</sup> The mermaid's image has also been featured in news items reporting on the activities of various mermaid role-players and/or models in the province. One of the most striking examples of the latter was an image of photographer Kit Sora dressed as Ariel (from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* [1989]) posing on rocks in close proximity to two icebergs at Torbay in May 2015 that was featured on CBC News (2015: online).

perceived to have links to elements of local folklore reported by Beck (1973: 273);<sup>19</sup> they can, more accurately, be understood to be local instantiations of contemporary popular cultural imagery that have occurred at a post-aquapelagic moment. The calendar figures thereby provide a media-loric contribution to Newfoundland heritage, whatever the degree of disconnect between the project's images and previous local folklore.<sup>20</sup>

## II. Contemporary Mermen

While the merman was a common feature in medieval European folklore that lingered on as a motif in 19th Century poetry,<sup>21</sup> his marginal presence in 19th and 20th Century art and popular culture has been in marked contrast to that of the mermaid, who has maintained a prominence that has increased in recent decades.<sup>22</sup> In one of the few explanations of this divergence offered to date, Hayward (2017: 151–166) has interpreted the marginality of the merman in contemporary culture in terms of his awkward position within phallogocentric discourse and within a culture that defines masculinity in essentially phallogocentric terms. As he has contended, the crucial aspect in this regard is the absence of external genitals on the merman's lower anatomy, desexualising him (in terms of his visible organs, at least) in a manner that the mermaid's similar anatomy does not, given that the breasts on her upper body serve as unambiguous signifiers of her femininity (ibid). On the few occasions mermen have been represented in recent popular culture they have either appeared as adolescent (implicitly pre-sexual) figures or else as aged, bearded patriarchs, whose siring of multiple offspring (by opaque means), possession of phallic substitutes (such as multi-pronged tridents) and/or position as authority figures (such as sea kings) renders them masculine despite ambiguities over their anatomy (ibid).<sup>23</sup>

Despite the general tendency noted above, there have been some significant deviations from this pattern over the last three decades. The first, which stands as something of an isolated case, was the appearance of muscular, facially hairless and handsome mermen cavorting in the water in loose interaction with Madonna in Herb Ritts' video for the singer's 1989 hit single 'Cherish'. However, this video — and/or the appearance of dancers in merman costumes in her subsequent *Blonde Ambition* tour (see Hayward, 2017: 156–160) — did not lead to a more general revival of interest in the figure. More recent explorations of mer-masculinity have occurred independently and include the personae and careers of merman performers such as Eric Ducharme, who appears and performs in similar graceful styles to standard mermaids (ibid: 161–164), and the slim, handsome and facially- and bodily-hairless merman played by Brent Corrigan in *Another Gay Sequel: Gays Gone Wild* (Todd Stephens,

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<sup>19</sup> As Hai has recounted (Von Holt, 2017: online), following the publicity for the calendar, local folklorist Dale Jarvis contacted him to inform him about Beck's accounts of local merman sightings, of which he was previously unaware.

<sup>20</sup> Showing a humorous irreverence for the details of folkloric tradition, Hai playfully mischaracterised the information he received from Jarvis as relating that Newfoundland mermen were known for "their incredibly good looks... and their long black beards", in contrast to Scottish and Irish mermen, which Hai characterised as pale-complexioned individuals with "green, moss-like beards" known for their fondness for diving down to shipwrecks in search of rum (Cinderly, 2017: online).

<sup>21</sup> Such as Matthew Arnold's poem 'The Forsaken Mermaid' (1849).

<sup>22</sup> See Hayward (2017) for detailed discussion of the latter.

<sup>23</sup> One of the most notable parodies of mermen in recent years occurred in the film *Zoolander* (Ben Stiller, 2001), where the lead character's performance as an effeminate merman in a commercial for a skin care product disgusts his father and results in general derision from his father's cronies when they see the commercial on a TV screen in a bar, disparaging the character for appearing as a "male mermaid".

2008). As Hayward and Milner (2018: 209–226) have identified, there have also been a variety of alternative/queer mer-masculinities on display at the annual Coney Island Mermaid Parade in recent years, including hirsute and/or larger bodied characters such as 'Beariel' at the 2015 parade (ibid), a character whose masculinity was evident (whatever anatomical features his tail might lack). The most prominent exponent of the bulky, bearded merman type prior to the material discussed in this article was the New York gay 'bear'<sup>24</sup> performer Big Dipper, who appeared as a merman flirting and dancing with sailors in his 2015 music video *Vibin'* (and in the song's subsequent remix video [2015]) (see Hayward, 2017: 164–165). But despite Big Dipper's popularity in New York gay subcultures,<sup>25</sup> his video did not attract mainstream coverage nor come to the attention of Hassan Hai, producer of the Newfoundland calendar that is the main focus of this article, until after the latter had been produced (personal communication, 11th May 2018).

Hai and his collaborators took their inspiration from Joshua Varozza, a large-bodied and hirsute Californian bail agent who has developed a following on Facebook through being photographed in various roles for a 'God Bless America Dudeoir Collection' 2017 Calendar shot by photographer Tami Bears in 2016 in aid of the 'Wheeler's for the Wounded of California' charity organisation (personal communication, 4th June 2018). The term "dudeoir" (also spelled as "dudoir") is a portmanteau word (combining "dude" and "boudoir") that dates back to the late 2000s. It describes the posing and photographing of men in similar styles to those usually associated with erotic representations of women. An early definition identified it as a "version of ladies' boudoir photographic sessions, minus the lace stockings and lingerie (usually)" and added that its images are less concerned to show genital areas (of the type common in pornography) and more concerned with "the seductive nature of the masculine form" (*Urban Dictionary*, 2009: online). The practice of taking such images acquired momentum in the early 2010s, being celebrated in a story in the *New York Post* in August 2013 (Ridley, 2013) and being derided in a response article in the (heterosexual) men's magazine *GQ* shortly after (Sintumuang, 2013). In recent years, at least, many dudeoir images circulated on social media have been variously humorous (particularly in their parodies of traditional female body poses and/or attires) and/or have featured males with larger body types than those usually featured in mainstream male glamour photography.

While the calendar featured Varozza in various roles (and various states of minimal attire),<sup>26</sup> the image of Varozza as a merman (Figure 5) attracted most attention in the US and overseas.<sup>27</sup> Varozza has explained his interest in such photo modelling work as a personal statement to the effect that "at the end of the day... we've only been given one body to rock, I chose to rock what I got;" as a result of which he "inadvertently became a spokesman for body positivity" (personal communication, 4th June 2018). With regard to his appearance as a merman he has identified that:

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<sup>24</sup> In North American gay slang, "bear" is a term for a hirsute and large-bodied gay male. (Also see *Bear* magazine, which popularised the term and body type during its initial publication phase in 1987–2002).

<sup>25</sup> Big Dipper's first *Vibin'* video has attracted 95,332 views on YouTube and the remix 26,697 (27th November 2017 YouTube data), by no means insignificant figures but not ones that indicate any 'viral' dissemination of the videos.

<sup>26</sup> The calendar images are reproduced online at: <https://www.godblessamericadudeoir.com/product-page/the-god-bless-america-dudeoir-calendar> — accessed June 4th 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Varozza appeared via satellite on Channel Seven TV Australia's *The Morning Show* on September 10th 2016, for instance, being interviewed with Tami Bears (accompanied by a gender flexible caption "The Tattooed Merman: 34 year-old had always dreamed of being a mermaid").

*The idea of a merman shoot had been on my mind for some time. I kept seeing women as mermaids, like beautiful women... so I really thought it'd be funny to put a hairy, husky spin on the norm. (ibid)*



Figure 5 — Joshua Varozza posing as a merman in photo-shoot for the 'God Bless America Dudeoir Collection' calendar (photo by Tami Bears, 2016).

### III. The Merb'ys

Inspired by Varozza's merman image, members of the Newfoundland & Labrador Beard and Moustache Club (NLBMC) modelled as mermen for a 2017 calendar produced as a fundraiser for the local Spirit Horse charity.<sup>28</sup> St. John's resident Hasan Hai established the NLBMC in early 2017, a few months after moving to the city, inspired by a similar group in Regina, Saskatchewan where he lived prior to relocating to Newfoundland. Hai emphasises, however, that these groups were primarily a way to start meeting people and building community, that facial hair was just a fun way to start building a group:

*it could have been the 'kind eyes' club, or 'cool sweater' club... the main thing is that you embrace diversity and community and you appreciate people, respect them in spite of their differences and that you're committed in some way to giving back. (interview with authors, March 2018)*

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<sup>28</sup> The charity's website describes the organisation as aiming to enhance "the mental health and life skills of youth, adults, families, and groups through therapeutic interactions with horses" (2016: online). As of January 14th 2018, the calendar had raised Canadian \$300,466 (Eaton, 2018: online).

Hence the Club's official description:

*a social club open to people of all genders and facial hair growing ability. Bearded, moustached, two hairs on your left cheek or none at all. As long as you appreciate facial hair and believe in doing good things for others, you're welcome!* (NLMBC, 2017: online)

This description is notably inclusive, being “open to people of all genders” and does not even require members to *have* facial hair but merely to “appreciate it.” Hai also notes that while forming a group on the theme of facial hair implies masculinity, the NLBMC embraces a very diverse view of masculinities. While it has members who are big, burly, bearded, and covered in tattoos; the Club does not embrace toxic masculinity nor is membership limited to cisgender males.<sup>29</sup>

Beard and moustache clubs appear to have originated in Europe in the late 1980s and to have initially developed around competition events, with the first North American beard and moustache championship taking place in 2003 and the first World Beard and Moustache Championship (WBMC) taking place in 2005, in Berlin (WBMC, 2015: online).<sup>30</sup> Despite their proliferation, the clubs and championships have attracted little (if any) in-depth analysis.<sup>31</sup> A variety of factors may be behind this. Firstly, whatever degree of mainstream fashionability and/or acceptance beards and moustaches — and, particularly elaborately sculpted types of these — may have had in the 19th Century, their fashionability in Western culture since the mid-20th Century has been highly variable and often limited to particular subcultures (being embraced in the counter culture in the 1960s and 1970s, by bikers and various working class constituencies on a continuing basis, in minimal form as “designer stubble” in the 1980s and 1990s and, in fully flowing form, adopted as a symbol of hipsterism in the 2000s and 2010s). Beards have likewise become part of sports folklore, particularly in relation to hockey where players grow their beards during play-off season for good luck (Podnieks, 2010).

Moustaches have, if anything, been even more marginal and minimally fashionable than beards in recent decades, predominantly seen as relics of a pre-counter-cultural past and/or as self-conscious references to earlier images of masculinity embraced by confident popular cultural performers such as Prince or Freddie Mercury. The ‘Movember’ charity movement is notable in this regard. Established in Australia in 1999, and subsequently promulgated internationally by the Movember Foundation, which raises funds to promote the awareness and prevention of prostate and testicular cancer, the movement involves men growing moustaches during the month of November as a sponsored fundraising activity. Implicit within the exercise is that men can grow moustaches without social approbation (at least for

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<sup>29</sup> Toxic masculinity refers to the ways in which some men create and/or embody a version of masculinity that results in higher levels of personal physical injury (be it road crashes, sport injuries or physical health and mortality arising from poor diet, drug abuse and avoidance of health care), that directly or indirectly contribute to a culture of rape, domestic violence, homophobia and racism, and that simultaneously have a negative impact on mental health. See Connell (2001), and Kimmel (1995) for extended discussion on this concept as it relates to the development of masculinity studies.

<sup>30</sup> See the categories of facial hair prizes competed for at the championships on the WBMC website: <https://www.worldbeardchampionships.com/categories/> — accessed 27th November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Unlike analyses of historical fashions for facial hair, such as that in Victorian England (see Oldstone-Moore, 2005) or ethnographic studies on the social and cultural functions of barber shops and hair salons that tend to focus on social inactions in barbershops (Oldenburg, 1999) and masculinities (Barber, 2008), with particular emphasis on African and African-American spaces.

one month a year), exhibiting currently unfashionable (and/or 'macho') facial adornments under the protective umbrella of participating in charity work.<sup>32</sup> To date, the Canadian branch of the Movember Foundation has been one of the most active international branches and the most successful at fundraising.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to creating a space to meet people, the NLBMC was an expansion of Hai's previous fundraising and volunteering activities. It was about building communities through acts of kindness. While residing in Regina Hai started to do work for the homeless community and then did fundraising for Syrian refugees and, later, victims of the 2016 Fort McMurray (Alberta) forest fires. Shortly after arriving in St. John's (in June 2016), he began posting Facebook ads with his children, offering their family time to anyone who needed it, be it visiting strangers, walking dogs, helping out wherever needed. This evolved into *Project Kindness*, which he has used to organise free haircuts, to collect and distribute Valentine's Day cards to local agencies, and to put together a video for the city promoting multiculturalism (using clips of people saying "This is my St. John's" in various languages).

Hai was born in Pakistan and moved to Canada when he was an infant. He is Canadian, and after less than two years living in St. John's he has already started to break the barrier of island identity. Some of his friends insist that he start calling himself a Newfoundlander, despite the local tradition of labelling most immigrants, and especially visible minorities, as "CFAs" ('Come From Aways') — a term that few immigrants can escape, as "belonging" is often defined not only by residence, but likewise by the residence of parents and ancestors as well. As a brown-skinned man from a Muslim country, Hai created "Dark Elf on a Shelf", which involved him dressing as the popular Christmas figure for photo ops and donations as a way of taking part in Christmas festivities while promoting diversity and charity. He also started doing "meet an immigrant" sessions at a local café, to give people the opportunity to ask him questions in a non-judgemental space.

Building from such activities, and while seeking ideas for NLBMC, Hai became inspired to produce a merman-themed calendar after seeing Varozza's representation as a hirsute merman on Varozza's Facebook page. Hai posted a message on social media asking for volunteers to appear as mermen with him in a calendar, with little planning or knowledge of how this would come together. Around 40 men volunteered and a selection were chosen to appear in twelve photo-shoots staged around St. John's, with nine contributing photographers aided by various volunteers and with costume tails designed by Clare Fowler and others. While not targeted at the tourism market, this strategy of representing mermaids in various locations in and around St. John's echoed the (previously discussed) 2006 mermaid statue installations in the city and the original blueprint for the Council's 'City of Legends' strategy discussed above.

Initial publicity about the calendar went viral, both locally and globally. The story was carried widely by local news outlets, including mainstream and alternative/entertainment newspapers and radio. It was likewise carried across Canada by *CBC*, *Global News*, *Huffington Post* — *Canada*, *CTV* and *Daily Hive*, and was picked up by local publications in different

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<sup>32</sup> There have been interesting nuances of this in different locations. In Australia, for instance, where the national cricket team regularly plays international matches in November, the team's fast bowlers have grown moustaches as both a charity exercise and, in recent years, in order to imitate (and/or 'channel') aggressive and highly successful fast bowlers with moustaches from the more macho era of 1980s' cricket, such as Dennis Lillee and Merv Hughes (see Meyn, 2017 for discussion).

<sup>33</sup> See Movember Foundation Canada website (2017).

provinces in both English (Nova Scotia's *The News*) and in French (Quebec's *Ilesdelamadeleine.com*). More telling is the story's rapid spread beyond Canada. It was carried by major (and aspiring) online news and media sites such as *Buzzfeed*, *Mashable*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Daily Kos*, *Daily Break*, *Demilked*, *Twenty Two Words*, *My Modern Met*, *Good News Network*, *Viral Dazed* and *Yahoo Lifestyle* (the latter in Spanish); in American regional papers and media outlets such as *The Sacramento Bee* (California) and *Wate* (an ABC News affiliate in Tennessee); and in popular blogs (*Scarymommy.com* and *RebelCircus.com*). It crossed the Atlantic to appear in the UK's *BBC News*, London's *The Metro* and France's *BFMTV*. In Ireland and in Germany, it was featured in female oriented sites such as *Her.ie* and *Women.at* and, in the UK it was referenced by *Gay Star News* in a brief article on mermaids and gender-fluidity. In Australia, it was featured in the popular culture site *Junkee*. Perhaps most unique, however, was a thirty-minute video podcast with Laura Von Holt (2017: online), the self-described "Certified Fairyologist" and "Fairy Boss Mother" of Cinderly, a website dedicated to mermaids, unicorns and fairies. Von Holt conducted the interview in New York City with a shirtless Hasan Hai, both sporting mer-tails while lounging on a sofa.

#### IV. Masculinities and Diversities

Writing in *The Huffington Post*, Wong reported that the calendar was "absolute perfection" as an example of "dudeoir" imagery (2017: online). It is significant that despite Montgomery's characterisation of the models as "big and bearded and sexy" (2017: online), this aspect is not one that has been particularly emphasised by Hai or by the other participants. Indeed, Hai's main statement of this to date occurred in previously referenced video interview with Von Holt:

Hai: *It was not intended to be like a sexy merman calendar; it just so happens that we are all so extremely good-looking!*

Von Holt: *You are. [Looking to the camera] Everyone by the way is extremely attractive and I have like never been so attracted to so many burly men in merman tails. I didn't know it was a thing that could happen.*

Hai: *We didn't know we would be so attracted to so many burly men in merman tails.* (2017: online)

Rather than sexual attractiveness, Hai has stressed that he wanted to promote "body positivity", through the calendar, stating "I like refer to myself as 'Size Volumptuous'... everyone one of us is beautiful in their own way" (ibid). Hai and other participants have also stressed the male camaraderie of participation, pushing the boundaries of conventional male bodily display, sensibility, interaction and role-play.<sup>34</sup> As Hai has characterised:

*We wanted to send a message that masculinity and the definition of what a man is... is not contingent on what a person looks like. And it can be fun, it can be*

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<sup>34</sup> In the growing fields of fat studies and masculinity studies, the muscular slim body is seen as a singular preference/goal of most forms of toxic and/or hegemonic masculinity. By embracing the term *fat* and rejecting cultural narratives that increasingly stigmatise fat male bodies, they push for a diversification of both the body and of masculinities. Hai's approach for this calendar is an embodiment of these counter-hegemonic ideals. See Farr's (2013) 'Fat Masculinities' theme issue of *Men and Masculinities*.

*whimsical. So, if you want to be wearing a flower crown, if you want to be blowing kisses, if you want to be holding hands, if you want to be affectionate, and showing like I can, with a guy friend, I can hug him, I can hold his hand, in a platonic way, or a non-platonic way, it's all cool... Someone can kiss another man and they are no less or more of a man than I am here. (ibid)*

Hai is concerned with the difference between “claiming to be open” and “demonstrating openness”, noting that the calendar models’ playful approach to masculinity is not meant to mock homosexuality or gender diversity but is rather intended to show how masculinity can be all of these things.<sup>35</sup> Hai wanted the calendar to demonstrate diversity, in terms of masculinities and body image. It is notable that he doesn’t discuss — or even *mention* — homo- or hetero-sexuality in any of his media interviews and/or his own sexual inclinations (the only information relating to this comprising occasional references to his having children, which is, in itself, no necessary indication of any proclivity). This is, depending on what position you approach it from, either evasive and/or non-sexuality deterministic. The male calendar figures are, in this way, open to multiple interpretation.

One of the images that was frequently reproduced in coverage of the calendar story exemplified the aspects identified above, framing a central bearded merb’y, wearing a beanie and a somewhat goofily happy expression, with two shaven-headed, bearded merb’ys with their arms locked into his and shaping smooches at him (Figure 6). This image is one of the calendar’s most ambiguous ones with regard to sexual orientation and has a strong similarity to images that feature in Big Dipper’s aforementioned *Vibin’* video. There is not so much a gay *subtext* to this image as a conscious imitation of such a sensibility (however archly). *If* the image can be considered as an example of dudeoir photography, it is one that is far more self-deprecatory than the classic types of male ‘cheesecake’ shots that have typified much of the field and is one that plays with sexual orientation in more ambiguous ways. According to Hai, showing how men can be sensitive with each other is less about sexuality than about showing how men can and should be more open in terms of their feelings, and less concerned with fitting into social ‘boxes’. In this regard his position mirrors critiques of toxic and hegemonic masculinities.<sup>36</sup>

Illustrating the non-traditional nature of the garb and poses the models were required to adopt, Hai replied to a reporter’s question as to whether any of the participants were “pushing up against the edge of their comfort zones” in the affirmative and described how one participant felt so awkward having his face close to Hai’s in one shot that Hai had to advise him to shut his eyes in order to be more comfortable (Bradbury, 2017: online). The calendar models’ perceptions of wearing tails are also significant. As one participant, Will Whelan, identified:

*I don't mind taking off my shirt, it doesn't bother me, but when you put on the tail, there's something vulnerable about it. I'm not self-conscious but this is right at the edge of my comfort zone. (ibid)*

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<sup>35</sup> Whitsel’s (2014) ethnography of the “Gerth & Mirthers” subcommunity takes up this discussion in specific reference to the stigma attached to fat gay male bodies, and the ways that these men have rejected the dominant images and attitudes of Global-North popular culture, arguing that gay men can be fat and attractive, and that men should not be limited to a singular definition of masculinity.

<sup>36</sup> Such as those in Farr (ed), 2013.



Figure 6 – Merb'y calendar promotional image (2017).

The repetition of the term “comfort zone” in the two quotations above illustrates how the act of donning a lower body costume more usually associated with mermaids that hobbles the movement of the wearer can be one that undermines stereotypical male body images and behavioural modes and thereby makes the wearer feel vulnerable. But, in this regard, Whelan’s characterisation contrasts markedly with Hai’s own comment on wearing a tail (Figure 7), namely that “it feels like I was meant to be in this” (Montgomery, 2017: online) and that:

*There’s literally joy in the world around you when you dress as a merman... When you have three or four big, burly guys putting on tails, it’s joyful. People would stop and watch us and they’d be laughing without even knowing what we were doing. They loved it. (Bradbury 2017: online).*

The essential Newfoundland masculinity of the merb’ys — at least as defined with regard to stereotypes of Newfoundland men being burly, beer-drinking, *bon vivants* — was typified by another prominent promotional image for the campaign, showing eight merb’ys at the bar of the renowned Erin’s Pub in St. John’s (Figure 8). In this shot their tails are all made from shiny fabrics and are variously coloured. Any diminution of the men’s masculinity related to their wearing tails is offset by the models’ presence in the bar looking at the camera in a relaxed and comfortable manner.



Figure 7 — Hasan Hai in calendar publicity shot (on a hill above St. John's) (2017).



Figure 8 — Promotional image for the Merb'ys Calendar (2017).

While most media coverage concentrated on the beardedness and burliness of the males modelling for the calendar, the nature of the tails also merits discussion. Unlike the highly naturalistic, strong, flexible and organic-looking ones worn (and designed by) professional mermen such as Ducharme — which produce gender ambiguity by their smooth effacement of genitalia in their tight sheath-like forms — the tails represented in the calendar are markedly different, being looser-fitting costume elements that do not approximate the verisimilitudinous aspects of Ducharme's garb. In this sense, while performers such as Ducharme are attempting to role-play mermen (imagined as a credible folkloric entities), the Newfoundland calendar models are, more precisely, role-playing by being men dressed in fabric tails that give them a merman-like appearance. Costume maker Clare Fowler has identified the type of tail used as resulting from the zero-budget available, her use of old, donated fabrics and the overarching ethos of the project:

*This project was meant to be silly and whimsical and light so it worked out to use all manner of fabric in various colour and pattern combinations. One of the other crafty volunteers is really into Cosplay so she took the lead on all the accessories and between the two of us we coordinated the "looks" for the themes we were given... Maybe I was going for naturalistic...but not really! How naturalistic is a big, burly, hairy tattooed MerMan? Especially with the materials for his tail coming out of a space like Nan's closet... The By's were amazing! The more wacky, colourful and sparkly the tails got the more they loved them. (personal communication 2nd December 2017)*

With regard to the homely, found-material bricolage of the merb'ys' costumery and the model-performers' participation in a playfully provocative cultural practice, the calendar project invites comparison to the costumed identity games and gender ambiguities manifest in Christmas mummering practices in the province. In the latter, individuals traditionally don a variety of garments, including those usually worn by the opposite sex, in incongruous combinations. The original purpose of this was to appear incognito in the streets and/or on neighbours' doorsteps in order to be invited in for refreshments and/or entertainment during the 12 days of Christmas. In recent years the original functionality of the such dress-ups has been complemented by the costumed practice occurring in novel contexts. This is particularly apparent in an event conceived and inaugurated by The Heritage Foundation of St. John's that represents one of the most successful manifestations of St. John's' conscious orientation as a 'City of Legends' since 1991. The annual mummies' street parade, first held in 2009, has become both a major event in the local calendar and a substantial draw for tourists gathering to see a range of bizarrely dressed participants. Similar to this event, there is an intentional humour and playfulness to all aspects of the calendar project that underlies the model-performers' confidence in defying established gender stereotypes. Indeed, reflecting on the 2018 calendar project, Clare Fowler has characterised that:

*This whole experience has been such a breath of fresh air. I have laughed and giggled my way through it. Everyone has offered their best self to make this project happen. I have seen people overcome their own self doubt to show the world and themselves that it's okay to be okay with who you are in all that you are. The world has responded with a great big "HELL YEAH! Yer deadly B'y!" (ibid)*

## Conclusion

The production and reception of the Merb'y calendar discussed in this article represents a highly local response to broader popular cultural phenomena that has been articulated through prisms of regional identity and/or official policies around the promotion of St. John's in terms of traditional folkloric themes and motifs. The production of the calendar and public discussion of it has allowed traditional stereotypes of masculine identity in Newfoundland to be reconfigured in a manner that has been acknowledged and affirmed beyond the island. In the latter regard the calendar can also be seen as an effective tool for promoting St. John's and Newfoundland to tourists as an active organic culture rather than as a museumified one. While it is too soon to gauge what the longer-term impact of the calendar and its imagery might be in Newfoundland, it is significant that it originates from a location often disparaged for its backwardness within Canada (via the Newfie joke and related perceptions). Countering that perception, the NLBMC's Merb'y calendar shows that the resilience, sense of humour and iconoclasm traditionally associated with Newfoundland culture is both alive and capable of new articulations. It is fitting, in the latter regard that 'Merb'y' was voted 2017's "word of the year" by listeners to CBC Radio's *St. John's Morning Show* in January 2018, showing that local language and culture is continuing to produce fresh fusions of tradition and modernity. The success of the 2018 Merb'y calendar stems from its accuracy and timeliness in identifying and promoting new and more diverse images of Newfoundland and Labradorian masculinities and identity more broadly.

In terms of this article's characterisation of Newfoundland's initial constitution as an archetypal aquapelago, it is possible to characterise the merb'y calendar images and their popularity in the province as a post-aquapelagic phenomenon. We coin the latter term in a partial evocation of postmodernity, which was famously characterised by Jameson (1984) as a period in which cultural products imitated the styles and effects of classic Modernism as attractive and finely wrought but essentially "blank" pastiches of and sensibilities that were no longer operative during (what he then characterised as) "Late Capitalism" (ibid). But, by contrast, the post-aquapelagic impulse we perceive as manifest in the merb'y phenomenon has a distinctly more local aspect. In place of the glittering, free-sliding signifiers of postmodernity that Jameson describes, Newfoundland culture has offered up cheerful bricolage of found materials, signs and textures to mark its contemporary difference that, amongst other things, evokes the well-established tradition of mummering costumery in the province. Understood against both folkloric and media-loric traditions, the merb'y calendar's images demonstrate the fluidity of identity and the ability of Newfoundland's vernacular culture to embrace globalisation and diversity while maintaining a strong sense of place — of island identity. The calendar and associated discussion also represent a significant re-emphasis and re-articulation of the figure of the merman in contemporary popular culture, pulling it in from the margins and contesting the hegemony of the fish-tailed female in modern media-lore.

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