

“To Stand to One Side”: Reflections on Rhetoric and Edgy Identities

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I was born and raised in St. John’s, Newfoundland, a fishing-station-then-permanent-settlement on the Eastern edge of Canada. And I lived on the edge of the city—just up the hill from the official sign that read *Welcome to St. John’s: The Oldest City in North America*. That superlative claim, I remember, was challenged by Roanoke, Virginia. The sign was taken down. So was my house, demolished when I was fourteen to accommodate a new thoroughfare to the airport. My childhood home is now an off ramp, my grandfather’s small gas station and store across the road an abandoned building. When I go back, I try to locate the edges of our former property, recalling a similar plot line in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and humming the chorus of the band Madness’s British pop hit: “Our house, in the middle of our street.”

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Edges, I learned early on, are sites of vulnerability, contestation, and disequilibrium. They are also, however, places of revision and invention. As I reflect on the question of national identity and rhetorical practice for this special issue of *Rhetor*, I note a quality of being-on-the-edge in my disciplinary identifications, pedagogy, and research. My doctoral study, for instance, drew



At one time, Manning's Store. (Photo Credit: Tracy Whalen)

primarily on rhetorical methodologies, but edged on literary studies too. I continue to publish book reviews for literary journals. Edginess in this scholarly context, for me, suggests innovation, humour, suggestiveness, and provocation—but not in an irritable or sharp way. While edginess in everyday parlance can suggest unwelcome tension, I understand it as the generative attitude of holding things in tension. I recall my fascination with American novelist E. Annie's Proulx's *The Shipping News*, a celebrated book about Newfoundland that made me feel ambivalent. I toggled between admiration and dislike. This (for me) provocative book called for an edgy approach—in other words, playfulness. Taking my cue from Kenneth Burke's comic corrective, I examined the book in terms of a camp aesthetic and post-tourist desire, thereby moving away from questions of truth and authenticity asked by so many readers and critics, particularly miffed Newfoundlanders (i.e., Does Proulx's novel offer a real and true representation of outport Newfoundland?).

Upon reflection, I notice that my publications are peppered with analyses of edgy or unconventional Canadian figures: a co-edited book collection about Marshall McLuhan, two articles about singer k.d. lang, a conference paper about (then) Governor General Michaëlle Jean eating raw seal meat in Nunavut. Most recently, I've written what will be considered by some a provocative piece about a celebrated statue of Winnipeg's beloved Winnie

the Bear. This insight is not to suggest, of course, that growing up on the eastern edge of a continent determined my scholarly delectations—or that all Canadian rhetorical scholars identify as I do—but I cannot deny that there are thematic resonances between my situated identities of place and the rhetorical projects I’m attracted to.

My attention to edges extends to lexical and clausal beginnings and endings, too. One of the traditional sociolinguistic markers of Newfoundland English is the use of the word *right* as an adverbial intensifier meaning *very*: for example, right nice, right ugly, or right good. I have a story that, strange as it may sound, links this Newfoundland lexeme with larger insights about the practice of



Edges and Offramps (Photo Credit: Tracy Whalen)

rhetoric as I see it. While doing my undergraduate degree at Memorial University of Newfoundland, I occasionally visited Dairy Queen for a Blizzard®, a frozen dessert of mixed candy and ice cream. The campaign required servers to turn the container upside down to show how thick the ice cream was. In the local vernacular, the server would say, “Upside down. *Right* thick.” I remarked to a friend that it was strange yet gratifying that an international restaurant chain would accommodate Newfoundland usage. A few years later, I again stood in line at DQ, this time in Waterloo, Ontario, where I was doing my doctoral degree in Rhetoric. There, behind the counter, hung a banner that read “Upside*downright*thick.” I experienced an Archimedes moment in the middle of the frozen cakes. Reading the message from two positions allowed for a generative duality in meaning. The lexical synergy was playful and mildly disruptive. “Right thick” I understood. Never in my life had I used the word “downright.” But in that silly slogan the two possibilities were yoked—the familiar and the odd—toggling or oscillating back and forth in a figure/

ground relationship that allowed for alterity and surprise. (For more about toggling and oscillation, see Robert Terrill and Richard Lanham.) This cross-linguistic moment illustrates some of the intellectual preoccupations that inspire my rhetorical research and pedagogy: the generative duality of rhetorical practice, the relevance of rhetorical figures of speech, and the centrality of rhetorical energy or force to writing and speaking.

Standing to the Side: The Double-ness of Interpretation

I often return to Robert Terrill's *RSQ* piece, "Mimesis, Duality, and Rhetorical Education," for his thinking about the "transformative" pedagogical tradition of *imitatio* and its cultivation of "a pervasive self-consciousness about discourse, an ability *to stand to one side* of linguistic performance—whether one's own or someone else's—and assess it along multiple lines of effectiveness rather than at the single point of authenticity" (298, emphasis mine). Over the years, I've acquired the disposition "to stand to one side" of a city, country, argument, performance, or doorway, for that matter, to let someone through first. Terrill argues that the "doubled perspective" acquired through mimesis complicates the idea of a unitary, undivided subject that underlies popular understandings of sincerity. In many of my pedagogical practices, I set out to problematize commonplace understandings of authenticity, sincerity, and the notion of the inwardly directed expressive rhetor:

- In my composition classes, students learn from scholarly models, positioning themselves relative to another writer's words through paraphrase and incorporation into their own argument. In my second-year rhetoric courses, students model their work on exemplary student essays from previous terms. I intend for them to thereby re-conceptualize their writing in terms of attainable, shared scholarly practices rather than (only) unique expression. Additionally, the students who provide models for their peers are provided with a context in which to understand themselves as

pedagogues, and their writing as instructive for others in a practical, useful way—a potentially transformative shift in their identity as writers.

- In my theories of delivery courses, students are introduced to exercises from the progymnasmata, a series of fourteen lessons central to classical and early modern rhetorical pedagogy. Students, for instance, amplify and animate a short fable (employing strategies of copia or embellishment), emulate a model speaker, or “bring before the eyes” a descriptive scene. These exercises are often defamiliarizing (or downright scary) for beginning rhetors new to such demands. These lessons, I’ve noticed, introduce a generative challenge that brings into relief for students their compositional selections and inventive strategies, especially since they perform these revised and translated pieces for classmates.
- In my oral communications course, students are asked to examine pervasive ideas about acting naturally or speaking “from the heart.” They trace Rhetoric’s fraught relationship with theatricality and truth, They have discussed, to give but one example, the history, practice, and aesthetic of sprezzatura, the quality of apparent effortless or nonchalance prized by Baldassarre Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier* and Renaissance writers.

My pedagogical and research interest in authenticity, rhetorically understood, emerges in part from my experience as a Newfoundlander and, later, transplanted Newfoundlander on the Canadian mainland. To be sure, Newfoundlanders aren’t unique in their anxieties around authenticity—some real, true, or genuine cultural way of being. Charles Taylor points to “the contemporary culture of authenticity” (31), a romanticized, individualized concept of self that emerged in the eighteenth century. While the scholarly debate is too complicated to rehearse at length here, many Atlantic Canadian scholars point to the fact that Newfoundland

and Labrador seems to be “turned inward” (Conrad 168) and is defined by a powerful “culture industry” that “peddles an ‘authenticity’ based on unfounded romanticism,” which is “perpetuated through ‘historical’ reenactments” (Chafe 171). According to Paul Chafe, Newfoundland literature “will undoubtedly contain suffering tempered by irrepressible humour; loss balanced by a mystical oneness with the land; icy waves crashing on harsh shores; a salty yet melodious language; and the lingering mystique of a unique, unspoiled people” (171). I grew up listening to the traditional folksong “The Ryans and the Pittmans,” and sang along with its chorus: “We’ll rant and we’ll roar like *true* Newfoundlanders.” It was only later that I learned these lyrics were, in fact, a variation of the words “We’ll rant and we’ll roar like *true British sailors*” from the British ballad “Spanish Ladies.” Evidently, ranting and roaring are not unique to the true Newfoundlander alone. I’m reminded of Terrill’s thoughts on imitatio and how borrowing from models encourages a duality: that Newfoundlanders should mimic (and self-consciously modify) a British text complicates the idea of a true, unified Newfoundland identity even as the song asserts it. Against this cultural backdrop—and from the remove of mainland Canada—I’ve analyzed Newfoundland novels (all of which draw on the canon of elocutio or style) in order to complicate notions of authenticity: the aforementioned paper about *The Shipping News*, a stylistic analysis of Bernice Morgan’s *Random Passage*, and a study of intensity in the prose style of my favorite Newfoundland writer, Lisa Moore. It is a theme that, to me, feels like home.

Standing to the Side: Syllepsis and Rhetorical Force

For as long as I remember, I’ve been interested in rhetorical figures of speech like those at play in the phrase *upsidedownrightthick*. This playful combination illustrates syllepsis, a trope that occurs when “a single word that governs or modifies two or more others must be understood differently with respect to each of those words” (“Syllepsis,” *Silva Rhetoricae*). One

oft-cited example is Charles Dickens' line in *The Pickwick Papers*, "Miss Bolo . . . went straight home, in a flood of tears and a sedan chair." The preposition *in* means differently relative to the figurative "flood of tears" and literal "sedan chair." In a similar fashion, the word *right* in the chain *upsidedownrightthick* can be understood differently relative to the word *down* (i.e., as part of the word *downright*) and the word *thick* (i.e., as an intensifier for the word *thick*). Garrett Stewart, who writes beautifully about this figure, calls it "syntax redux, a return of grammar upon itself" and observes that "timing is everything . . . in the cross-coupling of syntactic ligature this trope performs" (93). Kent Puckett notes that "syllepsis trips us up, forces us to second guess"; it "relies on the rough, shave-and-a-haircut timing of slapstick comedy" (179). Rhythm, energy, delivery, impulse, connection, revisionist force—are these not central to rhetoric as lively art and practice?

What might one take, then, from these ponderings about doubleness, edginess, rhetorical practice, and place? As one who has moved from the "The Eastern Edge" of St. John's to "The Heart of the Continent" that is Winnipeg, I have learned to "[attend] to [my] own discourse and the discourse of another, simultaneously, and thus . . . divide [my] attention in a way that is similar to that required by two-sided argument" (Terrill 300). Growing up in one place and now living in another, I am attuned to and relish spaces of playful duality (in fact, multiplicity) and celebrate it in my everyday textual encounters. As I tell my students, exemplars of structural duality—syllepsis, paranomasia, or dissoi logoi, to name a few—can jolt us out of our comfort zones and habits of thinking, an important capability for democratic citizenship. Syllepsis, I tell them, has rhetorical force. It gives us pause, can be funny and visceral, and relies on timing and delivery. It necessitates a second reading, a re-evaluation—and an awareness of duality. Some might call it edgy.

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