

## *Louise Sheridan: Reconciling the past: Identity, Return and the Newfoundland Woman Migrant.*

In this essay I discuss themes of identity, memory and return in Helen Buss' *Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood* (1999). Buss, an academic currently teaching at the University of Calgary, was born on the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland but went with her family to live in the Canadian prairies at the age of thirteen. Her memoir focuses on a return trip to Newfoundland as an adult with her parents and husband, and the negotiations of memory and identity she undergoes leading up to the trip and arriving in Newfoundland. While undertaking my research M.A. on Irish and Newfoundland women's writing in 2007, I interviewed Helen Buss about her experiences as a Newfoundland emigrant and the extent to which her Newfoundland connections motivated the writing of her memoir. This essay focuses on the results of that interview, the content of Buss' memoir, and contemporary theories relating to migration, identity, and women's self-writing. It highlights the painful and ambivalent feelings of the diaspora towards the home country; in Newfoundland Buss tells of "moments of intense pleasure as the place and the people would make me forget I am a woman from away, followed by moments of loss, being lost, ending often in the terrible claustrophobia of waking late at night in some place that has no meaning for me" (Buss 13).

Buss was seven when Newfoundland became part of the Canadian nation. As a child, she is able to unproblematically adopt a Canadian identity. Her memoir is written at a time in her adult life when she questions her sense of self. In it, she discusses her desire to retrace her Newfoundland past in order to explore the ways in which, if at all, it has shaped her as a woman. Buss' attempts to negotiate her current identity as Canadian professional woman and mother with her Newfoundland girlhood attests to Stuart Hall's claims of cultural identity as "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim" (233). At various stages in her life, Buss has positioned herself in either a Canadian or Newfoundland cultural identity (until the age of seven when she "became" Canadian). Her eventual consideration of herself as a diasporic subject comes at a time of self-

examination of the multiple identity positions she occupies as woman, daughter, wife, and academic. Her memoir is a result of her realisation that her positioning in one cultural identity, without acknowledging her childhood past and subjectivity, is impossible. She has come to a stage in her life when she feels that she is not one or the other of her cultural identities, but must negotiate her past and present selves in order to feel at home in the Self and where she can embrace a multiplicity of identity formations. In this way then:

Life-writing by writers who have emigrated offers an interesting vantage point from which to view the relationship between autobiography and fiction, as the authors have to bridge a gap between two cultures...Their "long geographical perspective" and their displacement from their reference points force them to live with what Eva Hoffman calls 'double vision'. (Gudmundsdottir 141)

It seems that for Buss, as a woman writer, displacement from reference points has provided opportunities to examine her identity free from culture's attempts to label her. She travels frequently with work commitments and contemplates the freedom that travelling allows her: "Before leaving I am someone's teacher, someone's wife, someone's mother, and after arriving I will be someone's guest lecturer, someone's audience...but on the way, especially in the airports that are my usual places of transit, I am myself, unencumbered" (Buss 124). I would argue that her travelling, the writing of her memoir, and the bridging of the gap between her Newfoundland and mainland Canadian culture, allows Buss to create what Bhabha defines as the "Third Space". This space is created when the "process of cultural hybridity gives rise to a something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (211). In her attempts to create this "Third Space" Buss must return to Newfoundland and the past. She discovers that a return to Newfoundland and "the journey *back* may be of equal importance to reconstructing one's identity...Indeed the journey 'home' may be as complex and painful as the journey 'out'" (Hoving 62).

Buss' life is an excellent source in which to expand discussions of nostalgia and displacement experienced by the diasporic subject. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* suggest that "diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces" (217). Buss' formative teenage years, a pivotal period of identity formation in everyone's life, were spent relocating and resituating herself in a new place. Any questions brought about by displacement for Buss revolved around establishing a new life as teenage girl in the prairies. Having adapted to life in the

prairies, she did not return to Newfoundland until adulthood. One visit was a holiday with her husband and children, about which she writes “Months later, when I saw the photograph [Richard] took of me leaning against the Peter Pan statue in Bowring Park, I realized how hard it must have been to be with that woman in Newfoundland, her face full of her loss, her fear, her anger: a woman haunted by unmade stories. How could he have stood it?” (Buss 5). Her next trip was a research visit two decades later in the nineties:

in the guise of researcher—a comfortable otherness—in search of women’s stories. Every place I looked, I found the stories belonged to someone else; they were not mine. Cousins were kind, hospitable, but I did not feel at home. They had lives in this place; I did not. Generous with memory and talk, in the way Newfoundlanders are, my Aunt Jean took time out from dying of cancer to remember my childhood. We spent an hour together and when we said goodbye, I knew I would not see her again. She would be a memory, like my Aunt Helen and Aunt Thelma, the women whose stories had enlivened my childhood years. (Buss 4)

On both visits Helen was unable to connect to Newfoundland or to feel as though she belonged there. This inability to come “home” fills Helen with a sense of loss and pain. When finally she does next return to Newfoundland with her husband and her parents, Buss admits that, “The idea of walking in my old neighbourhood has, over the years, become mysteriously fearful. The memory of feeling like a ghost when I went there in my twenties...had built a kind of anti-nostalgia in me: the dread that some carefully shaped identity would disintegrate by the very act of touching the ground” (Buss 15). We see that Buss is returning to the homeland not because she is nostalgic for an idealised homeland, but because Newfoundland has become a place that challenges Buss’ idea of her self and how she defines herself. She returns to the past and to Newfoundland in order to redefine her sense of self.

In her essay on “Global Modernities and the Gendered Epic of the ‘Irish Empire’”, Breda Gray examines the two very different theories that underline current discussions of migration. The first is that migrants gladly leave for the world, deliberately discarding all traces of the old (including people who stay at home). The second is that the migrant becomes fixed in a nostalgic time warp of the old world, clinging to its cultural practices. Both these theories work on the premise that the old and new worlds are very distinct and separate places and spaces for the migrant (163). Memoirs written by diasporic subjects such as the one examined

here reject the idea of old and new world as distinct times and spaces. Rather, they show the ways in which the migrant attempts to negotiate the past and the present cultures, in order to create a new dwelling space of opportunity and possibility: "I play with the concreteness of place implied by the word 'Newfoundland' by separating the word's generic parts, to indicate that for me the place is no longer geographical, but a place of selfhood that I had to re-discover to go on with my creative and intellectual life." (Buss Interview June 2007).

As a feminist academic, Helen is aware of the fluidity of the subject; debates on gender, class and ethnicity surely inform her self-positioning in her memoir. In her correspondence with me, Buss acknowledged the difficulties she faced in writing her memoir, both as a woman and as a diasporic subject. Her interest in writing her memoir came at a time of increased interest in ethnic and diasporic writings: "I floated the idea that I too, as a Newfoundlander, felt like an immigrant, having the same sense of a private world of family and memory that was very different from the mainstream" (Interview June 2007). However, Buss found that her feelings of displacement having moved from Newfoundland to mainland Canada were not taken seriously by her friends and colleagues:

My growing sense of myself as displaced was greeted with the attitude that I could not compare moving from one province to another with the situation of second generation Mennonites and Ukrainians even though they were born on the prairie. Some people felt I was attempting some sort of bad "Newfie" joke. (Interview June 2007).

The reaction to Buss' claims of a diasporic identity is interesting because it highlights the fact that a white upper middle-class academic's claim to an ethnic migrant identity could not be taken as seriously as a claim by Eastern European migrants who had experienced poverty, dictatorships and oppressive regimes in their former countries. It also suggests that unless Buss was part of a larger established community of Newfoundland emigrants, she could not belong to a diaspora. This raises questions of belonging and migration that are being explored in contemporary diaspora theory.

In writing her memoir Buss came to realise that the feeling of being two separate selves, of having two identities, was merely the "process that all of us go through in growing up, of learning to suppress the parts of ourselves that are not acceptable to the ideologies inside of which each of us lives" (xii). However, this process is all the more difficult for the migrant who has to learn to negotiate old and new cultures. It is important to note that the part of herself which Buss feels obliged to suppress is that of the writer who wishes to explore her Newfoundland

past and tell her story. She writes about spending the summer researching on Lake Winnipeg in her family's holiday cabin. She feels that working between the old familiar walls of this domestic retreat ties her to her role as woman, reminds her not to "get too high-falootin' girl, with your doctorate and your professorship; remember the woman's life that feeds it" (3). It seems to me that her need to feel that the various roles she plays in her life (daughter, mother, wife, academic) are connected and can exist in one self has been an impetus for Buss to write her memoir:

When I wrote *Memoirs from Away* I was becoming very aware of how distant my adult self-development was from my Newfoundland upbringing...However, I really did feel like two persons through most of my adult life. I was a prairie person, because like most folks between 14 and 30 I believed I was not the past but very enthusiastically the present. Newfoundland was the past and I wasn't even curious about revisiting it until I was a wife, mother of two children, and a teacher. (Interview June 2007)

In her adult years, Buss becomes increasingly preoccupied with the idea of a connection to a Newfoundland past and heritage. In writing her memoir, she becomes part of a growing number of contemporary women writers using various literary forms to recreate and revisit the past and retrieve a previously forgotten and neglected heritage.

While the story of her return to Newfoundland forms a major part of her memoir, Buss is also concerned with the positioning of her memoir in the field of women's self-writing and a contribution to the field of gynocriticism. She acknowledges that writing her memoir was not an easy task and explores the difficulties she faced in making her private life public. She describes memoir as "a betrayal of privacy. For better or worse we have made a separate world of the family, pretending its commerce has no place in the exchanges of power and person that we call the public world" (Buss 7). The fact that many women have lived their lives in the domestic sphere, concerned with the daily politics and interactions of the family, performing roles as mothers and children means that in making this separate world of the family we have excluded the lives of women from discourses of politics and person. In Buss' opinion the writing of women's memoirs is an important method by which to subvert this division between the personal and political, public and private, and to make women's lives known (7). This revealing of the self and of making the private public is not an easy task, however. In order to reveal the self and to construct one's own identity, it is necessary to view oneself in

terms of one's place in the family and relations with others in society. In exploring how we construct or view ourselves in terms of our role in society, it is necessary to explore the ways in which we recall our interactions with others and to construct the people around us in terms of how they affected our views of the self. This, Buss was to discover, inevitably causes conflicts and tensions as the people around her objected to the way in which they were constructed in her story, and the ways in which she revealed their lives to the public. In *Repossessing the World* she writes that one of the first stumbling blocks she encountered in writing her memoir was that the "family stories began to change-to clean themselves up, so to speak, for public consumption" (Buss xii). She is faced with the dilemma of respecting her family's wishes for privacy and nondisclosure of certain events. However, despite her family's opposition, Buss is resolute that she will not change her memoir for her family; there has already been too much false depiction of women's lives in past writing. A trip to her Newfoundland childhood helps her to recover formerly repressed and forgotten memories.

In her memoir Buss explores her childhood, and attempts to understand ways in which her past affects her self-perception. She writes her memoir as a feminist statement, she is angry and this anger is revealed to be a result of her feeling that women's stories have remained unwritten for too long. She notes that she was born on the day that Virginia Woolf committed suicide (March 28<sup>th</sup> 1941) and likes to believe that Woolf's spirit and anger at the position of women in society was somehow transmitted on the day of her death to the generation of women born after her. Buss writes that women her age "are a generation trained to keep quiet about what we really think, but our eyes tell each other that we serve the same lady" (Buss 36). It is difficult for Buss to admit to this anger however and her empathy to Woolf as a woman writer in a patriarchal society, and to work out its place in her life. She writes that this is the "conundrum of feminists who are mothers and the lovers of men: we live with and love our enemies" (49). However, she is aware that she must use her anger in order to write her story and to do something about the absence of women from history; "they have a public record, good and bad, by which to measure their lives. *We* need a history of our own, written by ourselves" (Buss 49). She admits that at times she feels that it "would be so much easier to just be better at all the things men in power do, rather than doing the hard work of becoming a woman who is not a slave. Mimicry is so much easier than making a new kind of person" (136). It is this realisation that women have different experiences from men, and occupy a different sphere in history, that compels her to keep writing her story, rather than becoming another chapter in his.

Buss's role as daughter has played a huge role in creating her own sense of identity. She writes that "like the rest of the brave band of women memoirists I am reading in this moment of apocalypse, I shall have to invent my foremothers for myself. I will try to find scraps of truth, a memory or two" (70). The gaps she finds in her foremothers' stories, she will have to fill in herself. When she returns to Newfoundland, her relatives help her to remember her female ancestors. She must negotiate between fact and memory to create lives that somehow will help her to live her own. This includes revisiting childhood memories of her own mother. She mentions two versions of a story about when her mother was pregnant with her and was attacked by a dog. In one version, her mother is a brave defender of her unborn child, a woman warrior. In the other, she has to be helped by the neighbour and is quite frightened by the attack. Buss admits to preferring and wanting to believe in one version more than another "preferring mother the guilty-but-self-empowered risk-taker to mother-the-innocent-victim" (Buss 34). The risk taker would be a matriarchal figure Buss could take inspiration and courage from. Buss herself has not always been an ardent supporter of strong women, however. She states that when it came to writing about her paternal grandmother she described her grandmother in the way a daddy's girl would: "She was a bit of a witch in my description I'm afraid, as all powerful women must be in the patriarchally-defined minds of girls" (68). Interestingly, it is Helen's father who tells her what she had not known about her grandmother and provides her with a matriarchal figure to draw on for inspiration. For Buss it is a "pleasant irony for me to think that I can revise my paternal grandmother to give me the ancestress that all feminists need" in order to resist the "insidious pull into the laws of the father that many of us suffer from as daddies' girls" (68).

Buss uses her memoir to confront memories of the past that she had perhaps never revealed to anyone else, or never fully confronted herself. She talks of sexual abuse she experienced as a child, once when she was six and again at eleven. At eleven she eventually gained the strength to confront her abuser and to make the abuse stop. She learnt that you do "not need to live inside a body so powerless that anyone can use it. You can tend that body, use that body, eventually learn to protect that body, even, if you have a mind to, take pleasure from that body" (144). While Buss learned at eleven that she owned her own body and nobody else had the right to attempt to control it, her patriarchally-formed child's mind still assumed a certain amount of guilt after her abuse. She had been afraid to tell her family about the abuse; perhaps part of her still believed that, as a girl, she deserved the abuse. She was to revisit all of these painful memories when she finally returned to



Newfoundland and allowed herself to remember. This may of course be another reason for Buss' years of disinterest in her Newfoundland past. Living in Canada, she has become a very successful professional woman, a feminist scholar who writes freely of patriarchal subjugation of women. Buss feels that she may not have had the opportunity to create her public voice had she remained in Newfoundland. Gayle Greene suggests possible negative connotations of nostalgia for feminist writing:

Though from one perspective, women might seem to have more incentives than men to be nostalgic—deprived of outlets in the present, they live in the past...from another perspective, women have little to be nostalgic about, for the good old days when the grass was greener and young people knew their place was also the time when women knew their place, and it is not a place to which most women want to return. (296)

Feeling "kept down" by a patriarchal figure as a young Newfoundland girl would undoubtedly have affected Helen greatly and would shape her opinions of the possibilities for women in Newfoundland. While aware that her position as woman undoubtedly limits her on the mainland just as in Newfoundland, Buss still believes that leaving the island created new opportunities for her and offered new possibilities. She discusses ideas of home and nostalgia with me in our interview:

In *Repossessing the World* I argue (using Leslie Rabine's "No Lost Paradise") that "because of women's place in many origin myths, in which they rarely figure as the quester, there is no lost paradise to be regained by such writers, no endings that are a completion of quests for return. We should therefore expect the plots of such women subjects to be different...I never felt nostalgic during the writing of my memoir in the sense that, for example, Wayne Johnson does in his memoir of his Newfoundland father (ironically, published in the same year as my much less noted memoir). Nostalgia looks back to a better time, better values, stronger generations and glosses the defects of the past. Even when there is a "times were tough" veneer, the message always is that the past was better than the present in some important ways. As a feminist I have no illusions about the past in terms of women's place in it, and I hope that the humour with which I treat "returns" in the memoir shows that. After all, I may be the only Newfoundlander who, all efforts at a nostalgic "coming home" experience having failed, must find her moment of recognition in some snails on a road, and then find that even this memory is half lies and writer's invention. (Interview June 2007)



Having re-visited Newfoundland and her past, at the end of her trip Buss comes to the awareness that:

I did not, and cannot return to my homeland. After four decades of living on the Prairies I am from “away” and therefore cannot come home. In Newfoundland “away” is the word they use to explain the crass, the ignorant or the merely mysterious acts inevitable to the condition of being foreign to a place: “Never mind the girl, she’s from away,” they would say with compassion. And I will always be from away. (Buss 10).

While realising that she will never feel at home in Newfoundland, revisiting her past means that Buss can deal with memories raised and move on with her life. She may not have found “home” in Newfoundland, but her trip means that she now feels at home in the present and is not tortured by ambivalent feelings on the issue of home. Embracing the past and considering its impact on the future becomes for Buss a cultural syncretism. Cultural Syncretism can be defined as:

...an instance of cross-cultural creativity; what Wilson Harris calls the miracle of a dialogue with eclipsed selves: a reterritorialisation of otherwise deterritorialised and diasporic identities in a globalised world. Diasporic cultural fictions produce an endless series of flexible cultural translations, arcs or bridges of new possibility, brought about by a creative fracturing of surface cultural representations. Identities are articulated across this fracturing, this hyphenation (Bromley 97).

Returning to Newfoundland, Buss engages in such a dialogue with an eclipsed self; namely, her Newfoundland girlhood. A result of this dialogue is the writing of her memoir. In this way we can see how cultural syncretism allows for “creativity arising out of possible adversarial or antagonistic contexts—certainly sites of difference” (Bromley 97).

McLennon and Moffat suggest that:

The insularity and physical separateness of life on a small island have traditionally produced a cultural identity marked—not surprisingly—by its emphasis on singularity and difference. Island communities that exist on the margins of larger cultural identities are particularly prone, like any marginalised cultural group, to this embracing of separateness as a form of resistance to cultural influences that may threaten to overwhelm them. (271)

Newfoundland is one such smaller cultural entity situated alongside their larger neighbours of America and Canada. As a smaller, formerly colonised

country, Newfoundland has struggled to retain a sense of national heritage, often through the establishment of close knit communities and the oral transmission of community stories through story and song:

Island communities are traditionally united through bonds of social interaction, oral tradition, musical celebration, and a strong sense of family. In a nation where diversity and distance challenge traditional notions of kinship, reclaiming a sense of community so typical of the island experience is one way to embrace a sense of communal identity rooted in place. (McLennon and Moffat 274)

Buss' memoir of a Newfoundland emigrant provides us with insight to the issues of identity and belonging raised with the migrant's departure from their island home and what it means for their sense of a communal identity. Throughout her life she is faced with the challenge of negotiating a family life that retained many of the old island customs and traditions, with her new life and social customs in mainland Canada. She feels that this process has been made all the more difficult by her position as woman and by society's reluctance to recognise her as a diasporic subject. According to Buss, memoir "is a form in which history must come into concourse with literature in order to make a self, a life, and to locate that living self in a history, an era, a relational and communal identity" (2004 xiv). Visiting Newfoundland helps her to re-establish a sense of community, if only in that her "awayness" positions her in a long history of migration to and from Newfoundland. Visiting the graveyard in Julie's Cove and reading the headstones, she finds that "These bleached-white testaments tell the history of so much of Newfoundland, the brave, tenuous communities of interconnected families, the generations of lives spent in these small worlds of the coves, their ultimate diaspora" (Buss 14). She may never truly feel at home in Newfoundland, but she now feels as though she belongs in its diaspora.

In this essay I have attempted to show the importance of memoir as a literary mode in which a Newfoundland diasporic writer has explored her history, her place in society and her identity in order to question women's absence from history and to share her experiences with other women. Buss' memoir attests to the prevalence of issues of memory and identity in contemporary women's writing, while raising important questions on women as diasporic subjects. Wolfgang Iser notes that: "The flight from the ethnic community to return to it as well as the ambivalent relation to it that it implies have become a central tradition in contemporary multiethnic writing. To go home again is the spatial equivalent of recall; the community signifies the memories and their storing place" (135). Buss'

writing highlights the need for a diasporic Newfoundland woman to create a “Third Space” in which to negotiate past and present, to revisit different times and places, in order to create a more complete future subject to dwell in. It is only by returning to the past and confronting its importance to her present identity that Buss can fully embrace the multiplicities of her identities as a woman diasporic subject. She rejects nostalgic ideas of home and embraces her position of belonging neither to the past of Newfoundland nor the present of Canada, but a mixture of both where she can look forward to the future. This is an example of how “The ethnic community one remembers or returns to is not only a different space. It is also a different social time, with a different pace and pattern. And for many post-modern writers, recall includes the “conscious decision to embrace deterritorialisation and to resist the temptations of nostalgia” (Kawer 130).

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