

[Forum]

Windrows:
Entangled Negotiations with Fish,
Wind, and Time in Coastal Newfoundland/Ktaqmkuk

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Abstract

Windrows is a series of visual artworks in conversation with the winds of coastal Newfoundland/Ktaqmkuk. Drawing on agricultural origins, the term “windrow” can be applied to a row or series of rows of any other materials that have been gathered for drying or collection or that have been clustered, displaced, carried, or otherwise shaped by the wind itself. This forum essay engages *Windrows* by *thinking with* the windblown island and its haunting synchronicity of abundance and loss.

Keywords

Atlantic cod, cultural heritage, entanglement, island studies, Newfoundland, relational thinking, visual art, wind

Author’s Note

It is important to acknowledge that the “Newfoundland” story told here is far from the full story. Colonial history typically displaces and ignores the histories and experiences of Indigenous peoples, as well as the role that settlers have played and continue to play in perpetuating colonialism. For discussions of history, whiteness, and Indigenous erasure in Ktaqmkuk, see, e.g., Crocker 2020 and Manning 2018.

Wind is a geopolitical force that gives form to worlds.
—Etienne Turpin (2018, 17)

Windrows is a series of visual artworks in conversation with the winds of coastal Newfoundland. The term “windrow” has agricultural origins: peat, grass, corn, and hay are laid in windrow to dry by exposure to wind (see fig. 1); branches, leaves, snow, and

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brash (harvest residue) are gathered for collection or disposal; raw materials are stacked in rows for composting (Asam et al. 2014; Cooperband 2002; Moore 2012; Oxford English Dictionary 2021). By analogy, “windrow” can also be applied to a row or series of rows of any other materials which have been gathered for drying or collection, or which have been clustered, displaced, carried, or otherwise shaped by the wind itself (Moore 2012; Ruiz et al. 2020).



FIGURE 1. Hay windrows overlooking Keji-pukwek, Epekwitk (New London Bay, Prince Edward Island) in September 2021; the hay was baled later that day.

Whether natural or intentional, windrows form as the result of a specific set of conditions—a dialogue of extremes (Moore 2012; Whitten Henry 2021). When formed naturally, windrows can offer an ironically static symbol of animation, abundance, and space, and when anthropogenic, can reflect bounty and what is—or is not—valued. Ocean windrows, typically formed naturally by foam or seaweed, are increasingly born of plastic debris, “put[ting] the ocean’s dirty little secret on display” (Moore 2012, 283). These litter windrows are unsettling figures of ongoing becoming, at once a retrospective of the mundane and unremembered and a foreshadowing of the abyss. Linear notions of time disintegrate when contemplating these clustered transients in perpetual motion, their permanence and endurance a chilling reminder of the constancy of the consumption and production that feeds them. In this way, windrows—of all kinds—emerge as remarkably productive figures to think with, as their many components, layers, and functions epitomize the way that “[o]bjects and items can play fundamentally different roles—have very different lives and afterlives—but these cannot be separated from each other” (Pugh and Chandler 2021, 145).

With that in mind, let us turn now to the windrows at hand (fig. 2). At the core of these works are reproductions of photographs originally taken by my mother, Jane Meredith Whitten, in 1973, while visiting friends in Trout River (western Newfoundland) and Brent’s Cove (on the island’s central coast) during university breaks. Scanned negatives of rows of fish, nets, splitting tables, and fencing are haunted with figures of fish and skiffs, a palimpsest achieved by adding foggy layers of my own photographs made in Newfoundland in recent years. I then introduced an iterative wind energy contour map of Newfoundland—reiterated from the original (Khan and Iqbal 2004, discussed later), and

reiterated across the series. While the wind is dependably ever-present, the ways in which it weaves through each environment differs.



FIGURE 2. *Windrows*. Clockwise from top left: *Stage*, *Capelin*, *Splitting tables*, *Fence*.

To begin to take in and think with this body of work, we must sit a while with the richly entangled nexus of history, fish, wind, and time—after all, these cannot be separated from each other.

The island of *Ktaqmkuk*¹—commonly known as Newfoundland² in its colonial context—is a place characterized by its powerful winds, a power recounted in the sciences (e.g., Eamer et al. 2021; Mercer, Sabau, and Klinke 2017), in literature (e.g., Crummey 2014; Morgan 1992; Tomova 2020), in oral traditions (e.g., Memorial University of Newfoundland Digital Archives Initiative n.d.; Mi’gmaq Online n.d.), and in the visual arts (e.g., David Blackwood’s 1996 print *Wesleyville: Cyril’s Kite over Blackwood Hill* [Gough 2001, 18–19]; Pam Hall’s *Re-Seeding the Dream East* [2017]). Here, the wind is

a main character, demanding cooperation, patience, resistance, and, at times, even divination.

Inhabited, honoured, and stewarded by the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq since time immemorial, the island was colonized around 500 years ago perhaps in spite of its winds. That said, another environmental figure, the Atlantic cod, was central to this endeavour, and we cannot consider one environmental element in isolation from all of its entanglements. The cod flourished in this windy land, and so, in theory, must the settlers; the cod and the wind were synchronous—a package deal.

Long before colonization and the large-scale fishery truly began, those same winds and cod had brought Basque fleets to these same waters. While their presence in the region lives on in many place names,³ the Basques' motivations here were purely commercial and, thus, they had no interest in “planting flags” (Gupta 2009, para. 4; Kurlansky 1999, 56–60). Consequently, when explorer Giovanni Caboto (commonly anglicized as John Cabot) came upon a coast “churning with codfish” (Kurlansky 1998, 49) in 1497, he was quick to claim it—and all of its bounty—for the British crown (Côté and Pottie-Sherman 2020a). Although Caboto had initially been sent westward by Henry VII in search of a northern route to the Asian spice trade, his so-called discovery of a sea “swarming with fish” (di Soncino 1497, quoted in Kurlansky 1998, 48) presented a different economic opportunity—and an equally, if not more, covetable resource to exploit. Cod was in high demand in those days—a demand that the Basque codmen had been meeting for decades by fishing these very waters (although they had never revealed their source) (Kurlansky 1999). This is the difference between fishermen and explorers, you see: when faced with a lucrative “discovery,” while the Basques had gone to great lengths to keep the fishing grounds a secret, Caboto and his delegation were quick to broadcast its existence and location to the world—sparking fierce competition in doing so.⁴ And so began the tale of the island now dubbed “New Found Land”—despite it being neither new nor newly “found” (Crocker 2020; Tuck and Yang 2012). Fishing outposts grew into villages and towns as the colonizers settled into their long relationship with the fish and the winds of this rugged land. Meanwhile, the Indigenous communities and populations of the island grew smaller and smaller as the Europeans “actively sought [the] displacement and death” (Crocker 2020, 104) of those whose ancestral homelands and resources they had stolen for themselves (Côté and Pottie-Sherman 2020a; Kelly 2010; Tuck and Yang 2012)—all in the name of Crown and cod.

The Atlantic cod is an omnivorous creature; it will eat just about anything, swimming with its mouth wide open to achieve just that. It has been said that “[t]he cod's greed makes it easy to catch” (Kurlansky 1998, 33)—fitting, given the greed that the fish, in turn, inspires. This colonial greed was fueled in part by the myriad early accounts painting a utopian image of a cod everlasting: shoals of fish “so thick by the shore that we hardly have been able to row a boat through them” (Mowat [1984] 2012, 208) and so plentiful that they could be caught just by lowering a basket into the sea (Frick Miller and Thornhill Verma 2021; Kurlansky 1998). That such mythoi prevailed for centuries only further

solidified the cod's perceived immortality. In his 1873 *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine*, French author Alexandre Dumas (quoted in Kurlansky 1998) speculated that if all cod eggs were hatched and allowed to reach maturity, "it would take only three years to fill the sea so that you could walk across the Atlantic dryshod [dry-footed] on the backs of cod" (32). We will never know. One hundred years later, when my mother visited Trout River and Brent's Cove, there had long been signs that Newfoundland's cod fishery was in trouble. Those 100 years had been marked by rampant over-fishing, driven by technological advances, economic globalization, and a chimeric trust in the cod stocks—despite nearly 100 years of warnings that stocks were being irreversibly impacted (Kurlansky 1998; Thornhill Verma 2019). By 1973, coastal fishing communities like those that my mother's friends called home had already been facing years of decline and resettlement (Côté and Pottie-Sherman 2020b; Kelly 2010; Loo 2020). Cod were getting smaller both in number and in size, and so, by extension, were the paycheques and the labour force. Not twenty years later, in 1992, it was all over: the Atlantic cod was dangerously close to extinction, and the provincial government declared a moratorium on the cod fishery (Blake 2015; Kurlansky 1998). The coast that had once churned with codfish now heaved with dry boats and empty nets.

So it goes. Now "fish out of water" (Frick Miller and Thornhill Verma 2021, 2:45) themselves, the settlers were left with the vestiges of a once global industry. And yet, it persists: in the flakes and the stages (see fig. 3), the stories and songs, the abandoned communities and homes—many of which had been left as if just for a day or two (Hooper 2018, 80; see also Côté and Pottie-Sherman 2020a; Thornhill Verma 2019). That which remains is at once representative of both loss and abundance: what once was, that brought and kept so many here, and what has been squandered, which sent so many away. They are one and the same—and the island holds all of this. In *thinking with*, modern, linear notions of time and space are disrupted, and we are invited to yield to the entangled experience that is place, knowledge, identity, and history (Burgos Martinez 2021; Haraway 2016; Pugh and Chandler 2021). The figure of the island is an "embodied archive" (Burgos Martinez 2021, 2) that holds and highlights "traces and afterlives of actions and events" (Pugh and Chandler 2021, 21). Here, there is no "past," no "away"; these traces and their entangled afterlives are omnipresent and, hauntingly, very much part of the ongoing here and now.

Windrows

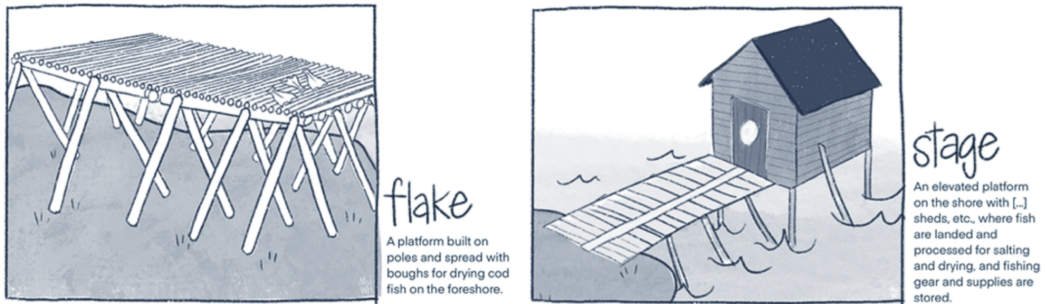


FIGURE 3. Author's illustrations of a flake (left) and a stage (right) with definitions from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirkwin, and Widdowson 1982, 187, 525).

Windrows emerged as an exploration in thinking with the wind, in conversation with the island. The wind is ever-present, a constant in all equations—especially here. Given its inevitability, how might the wind interact with its environment, and how might a contemplation of this honour or reflect such interactions across time? Here, the wind is invoked—and evoked—by an artistic adaptation of a surface-level wind map of the island of Newfoundland originally created by M. Jahangir Khan and M. Tariq Iqbal (2004, 1216). Based on reanalysis data from the National Centers for Environmental Prediction, the contours of the map indicate that the wind speed gradually increases from the west to the east coast of the island (Khan and Iqbal 2004, 1215; see fig. 4).⁵ *Windrows* reiterates this pattern in a different context, shedding its labels until it is just its contours; a whole island's worth of wind in an intimate, localized interaction. The wind is everywhere at once—a timelessness (or rejection of linear notions of time) further reiterated by the black and white composition.



FIGURE 4 (left). Author's iterations of a surface-level wind map of Newfoundland. Top: Artistic rendering of original map by Khan and Iqbal (2004, 1216); Bottom: Exposed wind contours.

FIGURE 5 (right). The author leaning into (and being held up by) strong winds at the top of Brimstone Head, Fogo Island. Photograph by Brendan A. Henry 2013.

Admittedly, the winds of Ktaqmkuk and I are probably best described as “close-ish” acquaintances. We have held each other from time to time (see fig. 5), and they have certainly impacted me in many ways over the years but, having lived away from the island for most of my life, I still do not know them as well as I would like to. I certainly do not know them as intimately as those who have worked with, against, and alongside them as they fished and navigated these rocky shores for the last 600 years and since time immemorial. The map recalled in *Windrows* was an early product of the island’s growing renewable energy sector. Nothing goes to waste on an island (except when it does), and the wind is no exception. While wind energy may offer a welcome transition from the extractive fossil fuel sector on which the province heavily depends (Sodero and Stoddart 2015; Stoddart and Quinn 2020), the act of harnessing the wind as a commodity is, arguably, just another iteration of colonialism (Dunlap 2018; Tuck and Yang 2012). Nevertheless, at the time of writing, there are three established wind farms in Newfoundland and, with over two decades of region-specific research and recommendations, not to mention the urgency of the global climate crisis, more are likely on the way—the eventual result, in a fitting symbol of recursion, being (wind)rows of wind turbines.

And so, the settlers of Newfoundland—in windrow themselves, having been clustered, displaced, carried, and/or otherwise shaped by the wind—embark on the next stage

of their age-old parley with the wind, a negotiation that is, in some ways, more intimate and cooperative than before—but, in others, as impersonal and transactional as ever.

So it goes.
—Tralfamadorian proverb
(Vonnegut 1969)



Notes

1. ook-DA-HUM-gook; <https://www.mikmaweydebert.ca/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ktaqmuk.mp3>.
2. newf-un-LAND; <https://youtu.be/7RVHeXaoF0g>.
3. For example, Ingornachoix Bay comes from the Basque *Aungura Charra* (Bad Anchorage) and Port-au-Choix comes from *Portuchoa* (Small Port) (Kurlansky 1999, 57); see also: Port-aux-Basques, Biscay Bay.
4. For more on the “Cod Wars,” see Kurlansky 1998, 92–110; Kurlansky 1999, 119–120.
5. While this is the map that I chose to think with for this series, it is not the most accurate representation of wind energy potential in the region. Its modeling assumes that all land is airport-like terrain with minimal obstacles, which is far from the case on the island of Newfoundland. Khan and Iqbal’s study ultimately sought to develop a more accurate and standardized model for the region (see Khan and Iqbal 2004, 1219).

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