

Secrets of the Tribe: John Steffler's *The Grey Islands**

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The term “outsider” is an unstable category. For one thing, it is immediately apparent that not all outsiders are outsiders. One can be an insider to the urban expression of a culture and an outsider to the rural expression of that same culture. One can be an insider having grown up in a culture and yet an outsider by virtue of temperament, outlook and capacity – by virtue of individuality. One can be an insider by heritage and an outsider through exile – like the expatriate of the diaspora, caught between the past and the present, neither there nor here. All of us are insiders within some culture or sub-culture, and outsiders to all others. At the same time, according to Julia Kristeva, we all carry within ourselves a repressed outsider – the insider/outsider dichotomy being at the very heart of our existence as individual human beings.ⁱ

It is also a troubled category, with a long history of negative associations around tribalism, racism, stereotyping, marginalization, ghettoization, scapegoating, and violations of human rights, which have inspired, in response, utopian ideals of cosmopolitanism that carry their own threats of homogenization, anonymity and sameness. Kristeva asks: “is a society without foreigners possible?” (127) But she also wonders whether this is desirable. (194) The question is: “shall we be, intimately and subjectively, able to live with the others, to live *as others*, without ostracism but also without leveling” (2). How can foreigners come to feel respected, valued and at home? Insiders can become outsiders. Can outsiders become insiders?

Alfred Schuetz, in his classic essay on the stranger, was primarily interested in the stranger’s first attempts attempt to interpret the “cultural pattern of a social group which he approaches and to orient himself within it” (499).ⁱⁱ We all grow up within a culture of one kind or another, learning it from the inside, experiencing it as a set of “trustworthy *recipes*” for managing the social world. Culture thus imbibed is experienced primarily as a field of action rather than as an object of thought, and the knowledge is organized not systematically, as it would be by a sociologist, but according to its relevance for actions that may be undertaken by an individual. Compared to the sociologist’s knowledge, it may be incoherent, unclear, inconsistent, and incomplete, but because it is tested countless times through trial and error in day-to-day living, it becomes intuitive, it has depth, and it works. It is like the grasp one has of one’s native language. The foreigner may have a passive understanding of that language which is more comprehensive and more “correct” than the native speaker, but still lack an active mastery of it “as a means for realizing one’s own acts and

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thoughts” (504). The foreigner may be able to read the *recipes* for action, but he or she has not learned to trust them, does not know them by heart, cannot use them habitually and automatically, without question.

This “thinking as usual” is experienced as natural, permanent and necessary, assumptions the native takes for granted. But the stranger coming into this society shares none of these assumptions, and therefore “has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group” (502). The stranger is shocked to find that one’s “thinking as usual” – “the whole hitherto unquestioned scheme of interpretation current within the home group” – “becomes invalidated” and “cannot be used as a scheme of orientation within the new social surroundings”(503). Everything has to be translated back into the cultural pattern of the stranger’s home group and the translatability of everything is in question. Lacking status in the new social group, the stranger is de-centred and dislocated. Furthermore, the experience has overthrown the comforting belief that one’s own culture is natural, permanent and necessary, and demonstrated forever the contingency of all cultures. Members of the in-group may sometimes feel the stranger is ungrateful for not acknowledging the shelter and protection offered by their cultural pattern. “But,” Shuetz says, “these people do not understand that the stranger . . . does not consider this pattern as a protecting shelter at all but as a labyrinth in which he has lost all sense of his bearings” (507).

“[T]he shattering of repression,” says Julia Kristeva, “is what leads one to cross a border and find oneself in a foreign country.” Often releasing a “sexual frenzy,” which may take the form of risky erotic behaviour or result in fearful withdrawal, exile “always involves a shattering of the former body” (30). Kristeva associates the experience of the stranger with Freud’s notion of the *unheimliche*. (182-183) Translated into French as “l’inquiétante étrangeté” and into English as “uncanny strangeness,” the *unheimliche* is a return of the repressed. “[E]verything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light,” says Kristeva, quoting Friedrich von Schelling. This reappears as an “alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal,” but in reality it is neither new nor alien. On the contrary, it was once familiar and has become alien only through the process of repression.

According to Freud, this uncanny strangeness is accompanied by unease and anxiety and may be provoked by confrontations with death, with female sexuality and raw human drive. (185) It occurs “when the boundaries between *imagination* and *reality* are erased,” it involves “a crumbling of conscious defenses, resulting from the conflicts the self experiences with an other,” and it causes the self to feel depersonalized. (188) We feel separate, incoherent, out of touch with our own feelings. We fear the other, but at the same time we strongly identify with it because we sense that the other is within us. “Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries . . . I lose my composure” (187). Although the experience is assigned to somewhat different causes, the disorientation described here is very close to the account Schuetz

gives of the stranger who is alarmed to discover that the “thinking as usual” that he had come to rely upon and take for granted at home no longer works in the strange country.

Thus far the discussion has been focused on the shock and shattering that the stranger experiences when introduced into a foreign country or society. Georg Simmel, on the other hand, is interested in the outsider who becomes part of a society.ⁱⁱⁱ Distinguishing between the wanderer and the stranger, he describes the wanderer as one who comes today and goes tomorrow, whereas the stranger comes today and stays tomorrow. In contrast with Kristeva’s foreigner, who “can only be defined in a negative fashion” – by *not* belonging to the family, clan, tribe or state – the condition of Simmel’s stranger is “a completely positive relation: it is a specific form of interaction” (Kristeva 95; Simmel 143). “[T]he stranger makes his appearance everywhere as a trader, and the trader makes his as a stranger” (144). The stranger is, therefore, no owner of land, signifying rootlessness. Although close by, the stranger is also remote, and “his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near” (143). The stranger has mobility, objectivity and a certain freedom. “The purely mobile person comes into contact with *every* single element but is not bound up organically, through established ties of kinship, locality, or occupation, with any single one” (145). The objectivity of the stranger does not signify detachment and non-participation, but rather a “distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement” (145). In a sense freer than the native, the stranger “examines conditions with less prejudice; he assesses them against standards that are more general and more objective; and his actions are not confined by custom, piety or precedent” (146). And most intriguing, the stranger “often receives the most surprising revelations and confidences, at times reminiscent of a confessional, about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom one is close” (145).

John Steffler is one of Canada’s most accomplished writers. The author of seven collections of poetry, an acclaimed novel and a book for children, he has recently been described by Canada’s national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, as “one of [the country’s] finest lyric poets.” Between 2006 and 2008, he served as Parliamentary Poet Laureate for Canada.

Steffler’s narrative poem, *The Grey Islands*, has been praised as a classic of Canadian wilderness writing.^{iv} Recently, this view has been tempered by the argument that the poem merges ecocritical concerns with post-colonial theory, as the narrator strives “to locate a stable identity within both a rural culture and a pastoral environment.”^v My paper argues that culture – specifically coastal rather than generically “rural” – is the primary site of conflict and growth in the poem, and that the implacable and forbidding natural environment – more Darwinian than “pastoral” – is construed as a key to unlocking the human.

The unnamed protagonist of *The Grey Islands* has come to Newfoundland from Toronto to take a job as a town planner in a small rural community called Millikin Harbour.^{vi} He has come like a missionary to save the natives, animated by bright dreams of transforming a cluttered, unplanned, weed-like frontier town into “the New Jerusalem, the four-gated golden city with market squares

and green belts and pedestrian streets and old buildings restored and tourist money pouring in” (23). The disconnect between the narrator’s boundless idealism and the bounded practicality of the townspeople is clear from the outset when he asks the municipal officials for their ideas on what he should tackle first and they tell him their first priority is to do something about the bears hanging around the town dump. Four years later he is deeply disillusioned. He has done some things that have worked – the incinerator he bought for the dump on a government grant – and others that have not worked at all – the shady avenues he tried to create by planting two hundred maples, imported from Ontario, that perished in the unforgiving Newfoundland winter. He has become the town joe-boy, he feels, rather than the town planner. But he recognizes the problem lies partly with him” “I’d find lots to do if the place meant anything to me. Or if the people wanted to change a thing” (23). He scans the trade magazines eager to find a job elsewhere, but there is nothing going in his profession, so he is stuck. With his wife and kids, he heads back to the mainland every chance he gets, but Toronto has changed and they don’t have a home there any more. Classic expatriates, they don’t feel at home anywhere any more. “We . . . drag ourselves over the sidewalks and I hate the place We’re like ghosts looking for something we’ve lost” (24). He tries to put the best face on their entrapment in Newfoundland. He lauds the fresh air and the lack of crime and the friendliness of the people. A great place to bring up kids, he thinks, but then adds: “That’s one lie that’s easy to swallow” (23). And in this comment we can see that the narrator’s understanding that his estrangement is jaundiced by hypocrisy and bitterness. He realizes that he has given up, that he is living a lie, and that his condescension is corrosive, but his self-awareness has not provided a solution to his painful alienation. Steffler’s planner, like Simmel’s stranger, is near and remote, but he has not adapted to that role. Instead, he is locked in a coma of culture shock – paralyzed, depressed, angry. “Four years and I’m still like a tourist here,” he says. “I haven’t even left the motel” (22).

A chance conversation dislodges the narrator, unleashing a force that propels him down the highway of Newfoundland’s Great Northern Peninsula to a remote island, populated only by voices, ghosts and one remaining human settler, thought to be insane. The narrator is seeking a way to corner himself: “Some blunt place I can’t go beyond. Where excuses stop” (9). But although the journey brings him up against the landscape and seascape of Newfoundland, more importantly it plunges him into the culture of the people who hold this natural world in their heads. From the opening lines of the poem, the natural environment is inextricably bound up with the human. True, the island is likened to the moon in these lines, tugging the narrator forward, but he is also pulled by “the voices in those old homes” (9). Images of hurtling dominate the opening sections – the narrator’s car speeding past communities and forests, as he is possessed by fear of what he is doing. Several times he tries to turn around, or at least detour to some place more settled, but instead he tightens his grip on the wheel, and submits himself to the “brutal mechanics of having a wish come true” (21).

He is stopped at last when he reaches Englee, on the east coast of the Great Northern Peninsula. Nels, the fisherman who is to take him to the Grey Islands, has his own priorities and the narrator has to wait a few days to accommodate him. The planner is no longer in control and some of what he witnesses already seems like an affront to his profession. The local pedestrians claim possession of the road, blocking traffic to chat with friends, yielding to automobiles at their leisure. A shaggy herd of wild horses drop turds down the centre line of the highway, “[e]yes full of casual mockery”(19). Claustrophobic and paranoid, trapped in the murderous hospitality of an outport boarding house, forced to interact with the local people, he is out of his depth. Committing one social blunder after another, he makes the children of the house red-faced with merriment at his discomfort, and nearly gets his lights punched out by intervening with misplaced gallantry in a family squabble. Yet he does not withdraw into himself. He asks to accompany the family in the carnivalesque ritual of jigging squid and is caught up in the hysteria. Warned by Nels that if he falls overboard the squid will drag him down, he is stunned by the teeming mass of fish, shooting black ink everywhere, turning wondrous colours as they are pulled into the fatal air, and the imagery is full of life and death and beauty and camaraderie. A few days later, as he and Nels cross to the Grey Islands in a bully boat, climbing “the bright / hills cresting our course, / pitching us up, sledding us sideways, / down, wallowing, walled in water,” he knows that “the harder your hungry eyes bite / into the world . . . // the more you spread your arms to hug it in / the less you mind the thought of diving under / eyes flooded, gulping dark” (51). This image of plunging into the alien element of the sea underscores the narrator’s newfound fearless abandon, his sudden readiness to embrace the unknown, and his dawning realization of the disorientating, dangerous but exhilarating trick of riding the untamed waves.

The narrator’s high spirits continue during his first days on the Grey Islands. As he looks out upon the “sunlit bay,” he sees “spits, shoals and islands, white / birds lifting out of the blue. no // centre. no shadows here. no lines / leading anywhere. waves / capes scrub-tufts shift, shuffle // under the open sky” (55). As he breaks into a cabin, he notices something else that subverts the logic of his former life. The padlock has been ripped out and hammered back many times. “Out here,” he observes, “the law is the other way. The right to shelter takes first place” (56). The only discordant note is barely remarkable. Across the cove, on a flat spit of land, he sees the “black-skeleton houses” of an abandoned community under a “rumbling sky” (59). The endless space and isolation sharpen his senses and he experiences “flashes of happiness” and even transcendence as he walks up the narrow caribou trails to fish for trout or harvest the trembling fruit of the blueberry bushes on the plateau (63, 69).

But soon he begins to feel uneasy, especially at night. Far from being quiet, the isle, like Prospero’s, “is full of noises,” and the narrator often cannot identify them. He recalls stories Nels told him of Mother Burke, a ghost supposed to haunt the islands, and of Aaron Shale, who had his son salted when he died so that his burial would not interrupt the fishing season. The tide

constantly changes the contours of the low salt meadow near his cabin. Paths appear and disappear, landmarks turn into little islands. Sometimes he will look up and find “the shore has wandered inland like a herd of deer” or notice “the tall peak of an iceberg jutting over a hill” (75, 105). Then it begins to rain and he realizes that in the midst of his romantic reveries, he has fallen into a classic mistake of the city-dweller in failing to use the good weather to cut wood. In a panic, he has to burn wood to dry wood to burn, and he feels foolish, frightened, and completely out of his element. When the rain turns out to be the harbinger of a fierce four-day storm, water leaks in everywhere, mountain runoff flows under the back wall, gushing out under the front steps, walls jump forward, sleet rattles the windows “black as obsidian,” and the cabin feels as though it is cartwheeling into the night (85-86). “[A]lone up here like a rat in a hole, three / sleeping bags over my head, the hail, / the wind lifting the roof,” the narrator nostalgically recalls sweet summer in his home province, Ontario. He bitterly rebukes himself for “trying to lift the blank mask / of this smothered island” and prays that someone will get him off this rock. Since Newfoundland is an island that is known in popular speech as “the Rock,” it is hard to avoid interpreting this statement as synecdoche, by which the narrator’s self-recrimination expands to include the whole of his fruitless attempt to penetrate the culture of his adopted home.

But the narrator survives the four-day storm and the experience opens him up. He reflects on the *hubris* that led him to plant the avenues of maples, “a leafy screen” to hide the garish building fronts that secretly horrified him, “the pink and turquoise plywood faces, bits of fake brick siding here and there and tiny windows high and far apart . . . I was in my power then, carrying the gospel to the hinterland” (90). It seems to him now like poetic justice that these “pampered sticks raised in the chocolate loam of southern Ontario” should perish in the stony ground of Newfoundland. Looking at the skeleton houses across the cove, he is suddenly moved to explore the abandoned community: “my only company here: absent people, gaps / where they would have walked, worked, / stood in their doors. // questions, vanished things, are / solid facts / as large as the hills, the fitful bay” (94).

Picking his way through the ruins of “the tangled gardens, the wind-hollow houses,” the narrator wonders who these people were “who tried to balance their homes / between water and air” (99, 97). Cyril and Ambrose Wellon, two fishermen who come ashore to get drinking water from a natural spring, provide unexpected answers to some of his questions. When Cyril points to the house where he was born, “[t]hird from the church,” the narrator notes that neither building is standing any longer (104). “[T]hese people don’t measure by what you see,” he concludes. “They carry the world around in their heads. All this rock and water is only a backdrop. Like a felt board to which they attach the cut-out figures in their minds.”

Cyril Wellon tells the narrator that when they used to live on the island all year they would be iced in seven months of the year. They would survive off provisions laid up in advance – salt fish made in the summer, barrels of salt meat, root crops stored in a cellar below ground – and game

they would hunt on the island, like rabbits, partridge, but especially ducks. They would go out at twilight and lie on the ice with their muzzle-loaders near the open shoal water. The ducks would come in over the ice in their thousands to settle on the shoal water, descending in waves and calling to one another in such a way that when Cyril first heard it as a youngster it made him cry. He didn't know why, perhaps because it was the sound of food, but there was more to it than that. They often didn't have regular shot for their guns and would use nuts, bolts, nails – anything that came to hand. On one occasion, Cyril recalls using the inner-workings of his grandfather's gold watch. Salt had got into it, and it didn't work any more, so his grandfather took it apart and fed all the little wheels and springs down into the muzzle of his gun. They lay on the ice, thirty degrees below zero, covered in snow until the ducks came in over them and it was time to shoot. Cyril's cousin Eustace, who had tuberculosis, was with them and died on the ice after firing his gun.

The image of the ducks landing in formation against the desolate beauty of the dark sky and the frozen ice combines with the poverty and desperation of the men, creating a powerful picture of the lives they led. And the unsentimental dismantling of the watch for shot is charged with significance. It conveys the deprivation of the people to be sure, but also their capacity for improvisation. The timepiece is such a symbol of measurement and manipulation. Industrial society could not exist without watches and clocks. As well, in a bourgeois society it would be traditional for a grandfather to bequeath his watch to a grandson as a keepsake. Cyril shooting his grandfather's watch at the ducks explodes everything the narrator had known about watches and clocks, coming as he does from progressive Ontario, Canada's industrial and economic heartland. "[N]ot man's time here," he observes: "sun's time. / rock's time. / I begin to feel it" (144).

The intimate and mysterious interconnection between the physical environment and human culture is driven home to the narrator again and again as he listens to the Wellons' stories about their families and about Carm Denny, the supposed madman who was forcefully removed from the island the year before. The categories that the narrator had previously taken for granted no longer seem stable. He marvels at the strength of family relationships among these people, extended to include distant cousins and even neighbours – "blood lines making a human net to hold these capes and islands in" – and he feels that to the Wellons he must "lack substance, dignity, to care so little for my kind, wandering here alone, family history effaced, lost in anonymous routines" (127). A startling image of the way in which the human is wrapped around the physical occurs when the narrator goes digging for worms to go fishing and cannot find them anywhere except outside Carm Denny's shack where the land had been recently fertilized by the organic refuse of his life. As he picks the worms out of the soil, the narrator feels "a bond of brotherhood with Carm, as though I am touching some extended parts of him, veins that had spread from his body, taking root in the land from which he had never divided himself. I move swiftly, borrowing his life, his island's life, feeling it coiling, pulsing under my hands" (135-136).

The narrator's identification with Carm, the last member of the community to live year-round on the island, is consolidated when he moves into Carm's shack. He says he feels completely at home there: "It's like standing inside the head of someone who knows the place" (142). By now, he has come to empathize with these people whose lives have been erased except in the minds of those who still tell their stories. Having made himself their guest, he decides that he has a "kind of duty to them" (131) to also speak on their behalf, even though there is so little left to go on: "white stones in the boggy burying ground, a few / small houses fallen in. rich plots of weeds. / a path leading nowhere under the gulls" (100).

As the narrator continues to explore the ruined settlement, his fascination with the physical environment shifts to the people who lived in this environment and their descendants. The respect he suddenly feels for their struggle is evident when he approaches one of the abandoned houses, and sensing what the ghosts of the place are thinking, he feels "foreign, standing there with my knapsack and fishing rod and camera" (141). In a deliberate gesture of courtesy, he leaves his things outside before stepping through the doorway. By now, he has begun to feel empowered by the place as they must have done:

*day by day a power
coming out of the rock*

*my past a theory
my job, my dithering
belong to someone else*

*I am this island now
strong. solid. (148)*

He reflects on anxieties that have emerged about his relationship with his wife – his realization that he has "been dead" and giving her nothing for years, his fear about how close they have been to breaking up (129). But now he feels more than a match for any rival suitors: "I'm not just a man any more," he thinks. "I'm an island" (145).

The narrator's identification with the local people leads at first to a Rabelaisian fantasy of acceptance. When he had stopped over in Englee, he had been given a bed belonging to a young woman who was away at the time. Her name is Jeweleen, perhaps the daughter of Mrs. Brake, the woman of the house. Now he dreams that Jeweleen comes back in the middle of the night and he has to share the bed with her. Here the close unceremonious hospitality of the outport home is taken to comic extremes when the encounter inevitably becomes sexual. Who seduces whom is anybody's guess, and we may even suspect that Mrs. Brake plays the role of procurer, because soon the narrator is telling Jeweleen that they are going to get married, to which Jeweleen does not

object. This distinctly unromantic proposal is followed by a drunken engagement celebration with family members stumbling and floundering and speaking gibberish. The wedding that follows is more of the same with wiry old men slapping the narrator on the back and all the old women laughing and flirting with him. The episode, outrageous and hilarious, nevertheless mimics some of the matter-of-fact old-style courtship rituals in outport Newfoundland. It is a caricature, but a sympathetic one. And in it the narrator feels accepted: “They see I don’t stand on ceremony, that I’ve got no delicate plans for myself, that I’ve given my whole body not only to Jeweleen but to all of them, to the whole place, the way they have done” (166).

But a concrete symbol of acceptance comes when Cyril Wellon invites the narrator to help him and his crew haul a cod trap. The episode is described in great detail: the narrator amazed at the violence of the movement of the little skiff being tossed by the sea; the sea birds skimming the waves; the wind, the cold and the wet; the capstan breaking because the load is too heavy and the tide too strong; the landing of five tons of cod “slippery as pumpkin seeds on the longliner’s deck”; the ritual of gutting and splitting the fish, the men knee deep in blood and guts (162). For the narrator, it is an adventure; for the fishermen, it is like taking the bus. But the narrator loses his sense of the most fundamental boundaries in this orgiastic rite:

*all this life being
hacked apart, us letting
blood out of its envelopes,
the world suddenly seems to be all
alive, blood running inside
of us and outside of us, inside
our hands and over them, with little
between the two, a cover of skin
keeping me in or out I’m not
sure which, but some sharp
bones have gone into my hands
and some of the running blood is mine.*

This ecstatic shattering of boundaries is the culmination of the imagery of plunging that marked the start of the narrator’s journey, and it seems to permit a merging with the people from whom he had previously been estranged.

In her discussion of Aeschylus’ play, *The Suppliants*, Julia Kristeva notes that according to the text one way in which foreigners could become accepted is by becoming supplicants (47ff). Danaüs’ advice to his daughters is that they adopt an attitude of respect towards their hosts, honouring their gods. The narrator of John Steffler’s *The Grey Islands* at first exhibits an overbearing, albeit self-consciously disguised, attitude of superiority towards his hosts, a reflection

of the metropole / periphery power imbalance within the country of Canada, but his journey turns him from saviour to suppliant, a change that can be seen most clearly when he leaves the symbols of his tourist status outside before passing the threshold of the broken house.

Georg Simmel, emphasizing the objectivity of the stranger, suggests that the stranger sometimes receives confidences that are kept hidden from the native members of a culture. Alfred Schuetz also notes the stranger's clear-sightedness about some things, having learned through bitter experience the limits of his own "thinking as usual." Does Steffler's narrator achieve a similarly superior knowledge of his adopted home because of his outsider status? The people he encounters, when he decides, as it were, to leave the motel, do not tell him anything they would normally keep hidden from one another. Indeed, when he shows he is properly respectful, they *let him in* to their lives. Yet, in seeing things with fresh eyes, perhaps the narrator understands how extraordinary their lives are better than they do themselves. He has not yet been blinded by their way of life becoming customary. However that may be, the narrator's decision to go to the Grey Islands is a decision to come to terms with his new home. It is not a retreat into the wilderness but, on the contrary, a reaching out for communion.

Endnotes

ⁱ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1 & *passim*.

ⁱⁱ Alfred Schuetz, "The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 49.6 (May 1944): 499-507.

ⁱⁱⁱ Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" (1908), in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings of Georg Simmel*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 143-149. In her wide-ranging study, Kristeva also discusses the stranger who stays. See, for example, her account of barbarians and Metics during the classical age in *Strangers to Ourselves*, 50-56.

^{iv} John Steffler, *The Grey Islands* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985).

^v Adam Beardsworth, "Natural's Not in It: Postcolonial Wilderness in Steffler's *The Grey Islands*," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 25.1 (Spring 2010): 92.