

Rona is a German multidisciplinary artist and interdisciplinary researcher with a background in physics. Leaving familiar grounds intellectually and/or physically allows her to transcend cultural and contextual boundaries and trace correlations and phenomena that have hitherto gone unnoticed. This is why exploring foreign places and life-long learning are key elements of Rona's practice.

She has been awarded numerous international residency grants and project stipends. Besides exhibiting her own work internationally, Rona has co-curated the exhibition program at Künstlerhaus Dortmund for fifteen years. She is a member and international delegate of Deutscher Künstlerbund and joined the Canadian Artist Representation in 2017 and Eastern Edge artist-run centre in 2021.

Rona's doctoral project was inspired by a series of artist residencies in Newfoundland and propelled by the wish to understand and convey her fascination with the place. Realizing it within Memorial's ID PhD Program gives her the chance to be supported by an amazing supervisory committee that helps her enter new spheres.

AMBIVALAND: Cultural Ambivalence in Newfoundland

(Research Statement as of August 2023)

Contexts and subjects bearing tensions that cannot be easily resolved and nurture the imagination have always been of interest to me. Newfoundland offered several such tensions when I first came here for an artist residency in 2007, and the spectrum has widened since. My first observation was the discrepancy between the perceived remoteness of the place and its relevance in Western history.¹ Later, I was puzzled by the concurrent lightheartedness and graveness that many settler Newfoundlanders radiated and how they cherished their European ancestry while simultaneously engaging in a strong regionalism. Eventually, I speculated that I was facing different yet potentially related instances of ambivalence and that this angle might add a valuable facet to the understanding and image of the place.

To further develop the hypothesis that settler Newfoundland is pervaded by ambivalence, I first address the notion itself. Ambivalence's profuse and often little-reflected application across disciplines and contexts has induced significant heterogeneity regarding its understanding. Moreover, ambivalence often carries a pejorative connotation as impeding progress and efficiency. In order to counter both the ambiguity and the dismissiveness, I propose a definition that accommodates etymological roots and prominent viewpoints: ambivalence is what arises if and only if we face the simultaneous relevance of two opposing concepts or values. This makes tension a central element of ambivalence and allows for an expanded understanding of the concept as a condition not only of individuals but of collectives, situations, and structures as well, an expansion that I refer to as "cultural ambivalence." With this concise definition at hand, it is straightforward to distinguish ambivalence from notions such as ambiguity, indecision, or hybridity on the one hand and to reveal its overlap with creativity on the other.

Equipped with a clear idea of the concept of cultural ambivalence and its creative potentiality, I apply it as a research lens to settler Newfoundland as a case study.² Local instances of cultural ambivalence that are

¹ Milestones in Western history directly related to Newfoundland include the completion of the encircling of the globe by humankind, the first sub-oceanic telegraph cable, the first transatlantic radio signal, and the first non-stop transatlantic flight.

² Please note that my focus is on the island part of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, where the large majority of the settler population resides.

established, analyzed, and correlated include: British stakeholders' ambivalence of supporting and opposing European settlement on the island in early modern times; the concurrence of autonomy and dependence in economic and societal sectors of “traditional” outports; the conflicting efforts of “modernization” and cultural preservation in post-confederation Newfoundland; settler Newfoundlanders' ambivalent relation to the land reflected in the side-by-side of deep place attachment and radical resource exploitation; their complex role as settler colonizers and (post)colonial subjects; and the place as both centre and periphery. The project studies the roots of these cases of ambivalence, presents them at work in the local society and culture by means manifestations and effects – some creative (like the unorthodox yet efficient early system of governance or the Newfoundland Cultural Revival), others not, (like a profound social and economic conservatism or self-othering) –, and traces correlations between them.

The project serves two main objectives. First, it revalues the often underrated concept of ambivalence and establishes the cultural version as a distinct concept and research lens capable of opening alternative trajectories of analysis and revealing latent creative potentialities. Second, by applying that lens to settler Newfoundland as a case study, cultural ambivalence is developed as a dynamic and productive characteristic of the place. Dynamic, as it can be viewed as having shaped (and still shaping) numerous aspects of the local culture, and productive because it enhances our understanding of the place as well as our spectrum for addressing or revisiting charged terrain.

Key findings include the conceptual overlap of ambivalence with creativity, the recognition of an enhanced level of creativity on communal as well as administrative levels in Newfoundland, and the undermining of allegedly demarcated realms of agency and power in both colonial and postcolonial settings. Moreover, I am able to debunk local myths like constant neglect and recurrent failure and provide tropes such as conservatism and endurance with actual content. Finally, assembling a variety of contexts not studied in this constellation before under the umbrella of cultural ambivalence allows me to identify correlations between them that have hitherto gone unnoticed. The resulting web provides an alternative explanatory grid and develops a new and potentially creative facet of the place. Notably, the centre-periphery ambivalence of the place and the British ambivalence towards settlement are singled out as being at the roots of cultural ambivalence in Newfoundland. This recommends cultural ambivalence as a potent prism for the study of other (post)colonial locales at the intersection of centrality and marginality.

Genuinely interdisciplinary, the project does not rely on a single theoretical framework. Rather, in the spirit of Foucault, I conceive theory as a cross-disciplinary methodological toolbox from which I choose the appropriate intellectual instruments for my purposes. Methodologically, the research is based on discourse analysis with a focus on problematization, abductive reasoning, transversality, and speculation. These approaches share the capacity to open alternative trajectories of reasoning through the radical questioning or active ignoring of existing explanatory systems, together with a rigorous appreciation of contingencies. This tenor is imperative for a project that attempts to reshuffle both the conceptual and interpretive packs by using a widely neglected concept (ambivalence) to remap a jagged terrain (an array of allegedly isolated tensions in settler Newfoundland). A central device of my approach, the proposed concise definition of cultural ambivalence allows me to identify a common theme in a diverse variety of contexts in Newfoundland across time which would otherwise appear a rather eclectic collection. Thus relating periods and phenomena that have not been studied in this constellation before naturally opens new grounds for analysis and understanding. Visuals of varying documentary and artistic character illustrate selected findings and augment the written content with a sensory element.