

From the Back of the Car to the Kitchen Table: Shifting Identities, Pirates, and Tales That Provoke Transition

Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cscKitrina Douglas¹ 

Abstract

In this second installment of *Cowboys & Pirates*, my performance continues to explore how identities are shaped, constrained, or expanded. My starting place is a song called “Stories from the kitchen table”; where and what, I wonder, has shaped the narrative arc of this song? Where are my narrative moorings? Through other stories I have learned about, been told or have created, I revisit the way counter-narratives emerge such that they provide a means to break out (or through) dominant gendered, class, and racial narrative templates that we might otherwise be entombed within.

Keywords

songs, identity, pirates, storytelling, Cornwall

Milk Bottle

Two full bottles of milk stood to attention on the kitchen table.

Speaking like one of the characters from “The Man From Uncle” (UNCLE)¹ her dad described their mission.

“We have to drink these before we go,” he said.

Was it poverty that was behind his request, or responsibility for not wanting to waste good food, or was it something else that provoked the quest? She didn’t know; she didn’t need to know. All she knew was the milk *had* to be consumed.

They were due to drive down to Cornwall, a four hour drive along meandery roads, and then country lanes. In those days, there was no dual carriageway to cut the journey time by half. Her mum and two sisters had gone ahead already, and, once the milk had been consumed, they would set off to join them later on in the day.

Unusually, for your average sporting male, he didn’t make it a competition by handing her one bottle, taking the other and saying “*on your marks, get set.*” No! This was to be no race. They were in this together. After pressing down on the silver bottle top and releasing its seal, he put the bottle to his lips and threw back his head.

Her Uncle David had told her once that “rum rations” in the navy were bought by sailors in measures of sips, gulps, and gasps. Watching her dad’s Adam’s apple race up and down, she decided he was a gulper. But long before the bottle emptied, and at what appeared no specific moment, he brought his head forward, wiped the milk from his lips, and passed the bottle to her.

She took the bottle in two hands and, following her dad, but most probably falling into the sip category, allowed the cold milk to slip, slide, and flow freely until its tide was too much and she too brought her head forward, wiped the milk from her lips, and passed the bottle back.

Was this a baptism of some kind? A passing back and forth initiation into acceptance. After several turns apiece, both bottles stood empty; the mission was accomplished.

Was this play? Fun? A game of milk. Perhaps she would she feel it was an achievement?

It’s a big thing for a dad to put a 6-year-old girl on a level playing field. There has been no negotiation or adjustments for age, size, or drinking power. I wonder what that kind of faith, or belief, in you, does to a child? And what about when that child is a girl in a man’s world? How might that action, that belief make that little girl feel about her worth, her value, and her place in the world? Is it important that they did this *together*? Was this a wonderful collaboration? A beginning?

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Irish families are renowned for telling stories, but she didn’t know that when she was six. All she knew, was that sitting on the bench seat of her dad’s 1964 Ford Zephyr, he would suddenly launch into a story evoking a history long

¹Leeds Beckett University, UK

Corresponding Author:

Kitrina Douglas, Leeds Beckett University, Headingley Campus, Leeds LS6 3QT, UK.

Email: k.douglas@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

before her birth; long before even his birth, and in doing so tying them to a place and space that was not his birthplace—Cornwall.

His birthplace, Belfast, had not begun to encroach upon her landscape when she was six. It wasn't until a few years later that she would be introduced to her family and history in Ireland. At this point in her life, she was also ignorant of Daphne du Maurier's classic novel "Jamaica Inn" and unaware that Alfred Hitchcock had made a film about the very landscape she was breathing in. At six, these cultural classics may have been unknown to her but from the car window, the ochre, cadmium, and purple Bodmin moor was a scene waiting for an anchor. And her dad, as their car made its way through the winding dips in the road, through the wild heather and gorse, needed neither du Maurier nor Hitchcock to bring intrigue, fear, and drama to his storytelling. His imagination was enough.

"It was a dark and stormy night" he began.

A damp mist hung like death along the black cliffs as a shadow approached. Wreckers had lit fires, a lamp swung back-and-forth from an attic window, "*hold steady*" the captain called, inching his vessel forward. The galleon was close now: they could smell her crew, her bell rang clear, just one more yard.

Her eyes were wide, her breath held, waiting for the next installment, en route through a county saturated in myths and legends, Guinevere and Sir Lancelot of pirates and wreckers.

He paused, "Cap'n' Blackbeard's den" he said, pointing toward a sign on a wooden plank swinging in the wind saying *Old Jamaica Inn*, now passing them on the left, "and maybe his spirit is walking the moor." He leaned closer and raised his voice "so you better beware!"

*

Storytelling real characters

Of course, there was a "real" person called Blackbeard, and there were pirates, and these 'facts' aren't lost on Alasdair MacIntyre who reminds us that:

The story of my life is always embedded in those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationship. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide. What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present, to some degree in my present. I find myself part of history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition. (MacIntyre, 1984, pp. 205–206)

Blackbeard (Edward Teach), is part of this history, and was born in my home town, Bristol, in the late 1680s (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

He is known to have served on what were called "privateer ships." These were ships owned by wealthy individuals that were commissioned, often by the government or the crown, to engage with "private" business related to shipping cargoes (often people). Another definition is that their work was to retaliate against "enemies" and in an underhanded way gain compensation or revenge. In other words, "privateer ships" were given liberty to kill, abuse, torture, and pilfer what was not theirs, and in the process, making them appear much like "pirate ships." Historians have pointed out it was difficult to distinguish between the two and almost impossible to police. For Blackbeard, privateering meant he could terrorize foreign ships sailing between the Americas and Europe, and/or the coast of America down to the Caribbean. Blackbeard was known to have worn a sling with three pairs of pistols across his breast, a cutlass at his side, and several knives in his belt. He bred such fear and intimidation that his enemies would often surrender without a fight. In his time Blackbeard captured dozens of ships along with their princely cargoes, including ivory, gold, costly spices, wine, and pieces of eight, *pieces of hate*. If he had wanted, he could have gained a pardon for his transgressions and lived out his time as a respectable citizen.

If Blackbeard was *merciless*, "Black Sam" (Samual Bellamy) was the opposite. He was known to be a gentleman among blackguards and called the "*Prince of Pirates*" while his crew referred to themselves as "Robin Hood's Men." He was born in a small village near where my guitar was made, Hittisleigh in Devon. "Black Sam" was so named because he bucked the fashion of his day—wearing powdered wigs—in favor of fastening his long, black hair with a band of cloth. He died at the age of 28, in a storm off the coast of Massachusetts. Despite his youth, he'd already captured more than 50 ships along with their booty. In the hold of ship that became his grave (found many decades later) was the largest amount of treasure ever captured by a pirate.

Christopher Condent was born in Plymouth, and like many pirates has several names, one of them "Billy One-hand." After capturing the Flying Dragon, a Dutch warship, he raided ships off the Brazilian coast and tortured his prisoners, often cutting off their noses and ears. He then hired more men and headed to the Indian Coast and Red Sea to wreak havoc there while accruing a huge amount of wealth. Unlike Blackbeard, he made use of the politics of his day, recognizing that a hold full of plunder could gain respectability. On the Island of Saint Marie, he shared his large treasure trove with his crew, then sailed to the Island of Bourbon, married the governor's sister-in-law and negotiated a French pardon. He lived out the remainder of his days as a respectable merchant in St Malo, northern France.

But of course it wasn't only the French turning their eyes to how a wealthy man had accumulated his treasure and the means by which they were netted. Francis Drake, yet another sailor (or pirate) from Devon, was a veteran of the

sea before he was 20. His first sorties saw him attack Portuguese towns and ships along the west coast of Africa, before trading his booty of treasure and slaves on Spanish plantations.

Later, he led raids against Spanish ships off the coast of America which earned him the loathing of the Spanish and the name *El Draque*, “the dragon.” He famously circumnavigated the world in “The Golden Hinde” a galleon owned and funded by the Lord Chancellor. At the time of his fame (circa 1500s), England and Spain were fighting over land (and ownership) in the new worlds and it is a matter of record that Queen Elizabeth I gave her unofficial blessing for Drake to wreak havoc on the Spanish, while also benefiting himself, and so he did. In the course of a few years of piracy, England consolidated its position as a major sea power, the stolen Spanish treasure Drake landed in Plymouth paid off the national debt, and Drake was rewarded with a Knighthood.

What a strange and underhanded world, my history and land have.

Far away from these battles, the “Fowey Pirates” attracted notoriety to a small fishing port on the south Cornish coast just 12 miles from Bodmin Moor. Here, the blurry line between pirate and privateer, or merchant and smuggler/wrecker, was also tenuous at best. Many local traders, county squires and government officials carried out their “honest trades” with one hand, while on the other, they worked foul of the law, financing raids, wrecking ships, and accepting whole cargoes of “stolen” goods, “fencing” them on the black market under the eyes of Customs officials and port bailiffs. Secret caves under the cliffs held huge stashes of contraband, while the smugglers and their dark arts and sinister practices have become the “stuff” of legends. What keeps these stories alive, if you go to Cornwall, is experiencing the terrain, the geography, and the ocean. When you visit Cornwall all the “stories” make more sense, and seem to take on an expression of their own. Likewise, if you walk on the beaches or look down from the cliffs at the wrecks and cliffs you won’t need help to imagine those times. The stories seem to live in the winds and gales that batter the coast; you can almost taste them when the spray catches your face and lips. As you wander through the century old cobbled streets I’m not alone in asking what stories are hidden within these little cottages with their tiny windows, their history written in the weathering of stones that hold them together.

Piracy, skullduggery, and suspicion seem to be woven into the fabric of the county of my birth; the country where my identity and sense of place have shaped me; this seafaring nation, whose wealth, identity, and accomplishments have been molded by stories about “the sea” the ocean and the vessels that navigate it. The group of islands of my birth is known as the British Isles, but on my passport it says “Great” Britain. Most times recently, I haven’t felt so

“great” about it. In fact, in recent years “shame” seems to be more appropriate. But, as I look back through history, there have been times when my spirit does resonate with the actions of my people; if not in the piracy, then perhaps the actions of other seafellows from these islands.

After the D-day landing, when thousands of wounded soldiers lay dying on the beaches in France, hundreds of little boats, in fact almost anything that could carry people and was seaworthy, set off to save the fallen heroes. In total, 860 vessels (of which only 49 were war ships) took part in the daring mission which was led by the “little ships” as they later became known. These were not, to reiterate, war ships or military crafts, nor were they manned/or womaned by military personnel. They were fishing trawlers, pleasure boats, speed-boats, ferries, yachts, and life boats—manned by fishermen, men and women who worked in the towns near the coast, normal people doing extraordinary things—240 never returned. Some of the boats were sunk by German surface vessels, others were holed by mines or submarines, while others suffered at the hands of the Luftwaffe, who from the skies strafed bullets at these civilians from the skies. It seems impossible to think that 338,226 soldiers were rescued by “everyday” men and women. This act of heroism and solidarity evokes a different understanding of my people and the way our lives can be connected to the sea. There is more to us than skullduggery.

Again, Alistair MacIntyre (1984, p. 205) reminds us that we

inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its moral particularity. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 205)

I recognize this on one level. Cognitively, I know there is moral particularity to my life, but I also recognize that the lens I use to explore “my tribe” is a lens fashioned in “the now” of history, and the limitations of this are impossible to escape. How we now refer to someone, and whether we bestow a heroic or villain identity on them (such as “a pirate,” “privateer,” “president,” “hero,” or “soldier”) depends on where the line is drawn, and the actions we sanction are often a matter of politics.

Re-internalizing aspects of our cultural narrative can lead to narrative foreclosure—once a dog always a dog? Not necessarily so, if we can understand how our histories shape (limit or cement our identities) and sap their coercive power, we can open possibilities. We might achieve some type of distance through writing and exploring our stories; poetry too can be another route to help think through our past and identity. As Mark Freeman (2010) suggests when he said poetry has the power to illuminate the personal histories that usually are hidden.

Poets strive for neither memetic representation of the world nor for a fictive imposition upon it. Rather they seek to rewrite the world through the imagination, such that we readers can see or feel something that might otherwise have gone unnoticed or undisclosed. (p. 43)

For me, it has been useful to consider my historical moorings and their influence on me through exploring some of the songs I write. Those that have not been written for a specific cause, but which have emerged from the secrets held in my body. The same body that drank the milk and shared an emotion of collaboration with my father 54 years ago—it was good. The same body that was moved by a story and shaped by the sea. In what follows, I close with the lyrics from one such song, rooted in the sea and my pirating histories.

Stories from the kitchen table²
(Douglas, 2014©)

A dark horse some might stay and she seldom stayed long
But her words would entice if she sang a song
Her love slipped away on the back of a wave
Hidden secrets they stir from the depths of the grave

Oh, where do stories go?
What truth might they show?
So you think you know?

As a boy he would wander and think by the shore
To escape the oppression an oath that he swore
A violent storm and a break, the sea came to his aid
Released into colour the dark of his life it now fades

Oh, where do lovers go?
So you think you know?
What have you to show?

On the table of life you be served up your fare
Come lovers, come lonely, all you who care
Choose a seat at my table, I'll help you belong
Hidden secrets uncorked for those with a song

Come drink your fill of me
Hold me tenderly
We'll set a story free

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ORCID iD

Kitrina Douglas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1481-9642>

Notes

1. An American spy-fiction tv show first premiered in 1964 and then made into a film in 2015 by Guy Richie. The gist of the plot is that four secret agents are charged with a “mission” in each week’s episode.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjSRKxDbr2w&t=5s>

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Author Biography

Kitrina Douglas, I am a video/ethnographer, storyteller, song-writer, performer and narrative scholar whose research spans the arts, humanities and social sciences. With David Carless I produce and edit the online qualitative programme “Qualitative Conversations” available on youtube https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkWCty8bNOY6JlvX_yg-Uig