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Lisa Moore's *Alligator* and Consumer Capitalism

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Branded Newfoundland: Lisa Moore's *Alligator* and Consumer Capitalism

JONATHAN PARSONS

Lisa Moore is the author of two collections of short stories, *Degrees of Nakedness* (1995) and *Open* (2002), as well as three novels, *Alligator* (2005), *February* (2010), and *Caught* (2013). *February* was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize and recently won Canada Reads 2013, bringing the author some much deserved exposure and acclaim. *Alligator*, Moore's first novel and the focus of this paper, was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and won a Commonwealth Writers' Prize. *Alligator* is set primarily in metropolitan St. John's, offering a vision of a culture and society that has fallen prey to an ideology of consumption. Moore subverts attempts by advertisers to invent a branded Newfoundland cultural identity, highlighting instead the malaise and discontent of a globalized capitalist society. Capitalism has its own icons and brands, and consumer products contribute more to the cultural landscape of *Alligator* than any sense of unified Newfoundland identity. The novel peels away one layer of branded Newfoundland put forward by the province's marketers, only to reveal an already-branded, consumerist culture and the social ills that come with it. The treatment of brands and other markers of capitalism stake out a position in a contested Newfoundland cultural fray, but at the same time bring *Alligator* into conflict with its own nature as a branded consumer product.

This essay examines the way branding functions in *Alligator* as an indicator of a broader cultural critique. What follows is organized in two sections, the first of which explores the novel through a discourse on branding and Newfoundland cultural identity. Use of the term "branded Newfoundland" borrows from James

Overton's term, "the 'Real' Newfoundland," to refer to an idealized image of the island and its people presented in deliberate cultural interventions, such as the provincial government's recent tourism campaigns. Branded Newfoundland is the so-called real Newfoundland, packaged and placed on the market. It is the TV commercials, the billboards, and the feature articles in airline on-board travel magazines. But it is also the myth and underlying narrative of the brand, its appeal to a nostalgic longing for traditional values and quaint people in a place untouched by the depredations and excesses of modern society. This is not the version of Newfoundland in Moore's novel. Whereas branded Newfoundland is presented as culturally specific, rustic communities, *Alligator* is an urban novel set in the heart of cosmopolitan St. John's. Whereas the people of branded Newfoundland are presented as innocent and pluralistic, the characters in *Alligator* are cynical and self-interested. To speak of the novel as subverting the brand is not to suggest Moore's representation of cultural identity is somehow correct, or to suggest there is a "true" Newfoundland identity against which the brand may be compared. The idea of branding a place as a marketable product only makes sense within a globalized capitalist culture; by resisting tropes of branded Newfoundland, *Alligator* brings to the surface the trappings of consumer capitalism that are ignored or covered over by the exercise of place branding.

The second section of the essay explores the novel through a discourse on consumer capitalism, examining specifically how transnational brands and other icons of capitalism function as a textual strategy in *Alligator*. In consumerist culture, a brand is not just a company name or logo on a product, and a brand is not the same as, and seldom fully realized in, a single advertisement. A brand is, rather, a cultural significance attached to a product. Marcel Danesi (2006: 19) suggests that "brands are no longer perceived to be just 'things' for consumption, but mainly as vehicles for securing a better job, . . . attaining popularity and personal prestige, obtaining praise from others, increasing pleasure, and maintaining health." Not just a product is sold, but an entire myth and culture as well; so brand identity is both the selling point and the qualities supposedly bestowed upon the consumer. The characters in *Alligator* are enmeshed in an intensely branded consumer culture. They are categorized and classed by the places they shop and the brands they wear, and as a result of living in a branded society they experience a general sense of disillusionment and alienation. The novel presents brief moments of protest and outrage; however, many of the characters are victimized by a society that perceives people as commodities. The essay examines this reptilian, consumerist element of capitalism as central to the cultural fabric of *Alligator*.

BRANDED NEWFOUNDLAND IDENTITY

Since the early 1990s, Newfoundland's provincial government has employed professional marketing firms to create a brand for Newfoundland as a tourist destination. One of these companies, Target Marketing and Communications (TMC), was named "Marketer of the Year" by *Progress Magazine* for its 2005 Newfoundland tourism campaign (see Martin, 2007). Some of the company's more innovative advertisements were placed on billboards along the Gardiner Expressway in downtown Toronto, showing an open window looking onto the Newfoundland coast on a bright sunny day. The billboards were draped with white curtains that would blow in the wind. The company also sponsored smog index readings on Toronto radio stations, closing with a reminder that the smog reading in Newfoundland was still zero. Other television ads include images of people playing fiddles; groups of wide-eyed children at the beach; and a young woman in a white dress standing alone beneath a cliff face, staring longingly out to sea.¹

Some of the more romantic aspects of TMC's ad campaign are potentially reductive in representing Newfoundlanders and Newfoundland culture as idyllic and quaint. A number of critics and theorists of Newfoundland culture and society have emphasized this point. Paul Chafe, in his PhD dissertation on "Place and Identity in Contemporary Newfoundland Fiction," suggests that the tourism campaign presents Newfoundlanders as a "sheltered, simple race" and as "authentic, natural fisher-poets" paraded before a consumer audience (Chafe, 2008: 226). Furthermore, James Overton, in *Making a World of Difference*, describes the province's tourism strategy as predicated on an idealized image he ironically calls "the 'Real' Newfoundland":

"The 'Real' Newfoundland" is said to be those parts of the province which are remote from towns and highways of major importance. To find "the 'Real' Newfoundland" visitors are urged to "go down the side roads" and "poke into the bays," to "turn to the ocean and 'test' the breeze; smell the salt, the wave torn kelp, the spray washed air, the saturated, aged sand." (Overton, 1996: 106)

The advertising campaign, in Overton's view, presents Newfoundland as a culturally distinct tourist destination by casting the people and landscape as a series of romanticized images and nostalgic stereotypes. Ronald Rompkey has made similar points, suggesting that romanticized notions of the province as culturally distinct have historically been encouraged by the provincial government:

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Since Confederation, various commentators had associated the peculiarity of Newfoundland life with the notion of an independent and self-reliant people living in small outports, struggling to preserve their milieu against the encroachments of industrialization, welfare, urbanization and the so-called North American values of the late twentieth century — a romantic view based on the reconstitution of the past and perpetuated by folk song collectors and advertisers. . . . Governments had previously embraced such a notion of difference as a doctrine and promoted it as a way of fostering tourism and economic development. (Rompkey, 2006: 63-64)

The provincial government views the culture industry as a viable investment and promotes notions of the province as culturally distinct in order to further political and economic agendas. Tourism has been an integral part of the government's development strategy, and while recently this strategy has evolved into TMC's branding exercise, much of the underlying narrative has remained the same. What has changed is that TMC has used the raw materials of Newfoundland culture, geography, history, and myth to create a brand identity for the province.

In an interview with Jennifer Wells of the *Globe and Mail* (23 Jan. 2009), TMC president Noel O'Dea responds to a question about branding:

When people use the word “brand” they see it as the name of the package or the name of a country or the name of a product, or they think about the logo. . . . Really, brands are bundles of meanings and symbols and associations in people's minds, and those are the meanings and associations and symbols that are created largely by advertising.

O'Dea's description of brands is much the same as the notion of brands elaborated by Marcel Danesi, who suggests that brands are a “semiotic act that transforms products into mental phenomena” (Danesi, 2006: 8). A brand is a cultural, connotative meaning attached to a product, and so brand identity is often amorphous and difficult to define. Theorists of cultural branding, such as Douglas Holt, say that brands serve an important function in society and are something people “rely on to express their identity” (Holt, 2004: 5). From this perspective, the idea of Newfoundland as brand is not so much an attempt to pin down a specific identity as to create a vehicle through which the consumer finds an expression or fulfillment of her/himself. Holt suggests that the most successful

cultural brands (not only in terms of tourism) are those that carve out imaginative spaces in populist worlds. A populist world is perceived by consumers as a “folk culture” in which a collectivist, egalitarian ethos prevails (ibid., 58). The characters that inhabit this world “are not motivated by commercial or political interests,” and very often populist worlds are set in places “far removed from centers of commerce and politics” (ibid., 59). The underlying appeal of the brand, then, is that it provides an escape from many of the coercive or otherwise oppressive structures people experience in their everyday lives. Branded Newfoundland presents itself as an authentic, populist world along these lines, a place where the consumer can live out the ever more urgent desire for authenticity.

In an interview with Herb Wylie for the *Antigonish Review*, Moore discusses the impact of the province’s marketing campaign on Newfoundland culture: “It has been branded. I think the commodification of that culture is an anaesthetizing impulse. As soon as you put fake lamps on George Street, you’re destroying that culture. There is no way to produce a culture self-consciously” (Wylie, 2006: 111). Moore goes on to say the province’s brand is an “easy strawman” because “once the Department of Tourism has pinned culture down it has already morphed into something else” (ibid., 112). In *Alligator*, Moore resists branded Newfoundland identity, showing that the complexity of experience cannot be easily encapsulated in such typecast characterizations. In her novel, Moore presents Newfoundland as part of the broader national community and also as part of a global village, as Marshall McLuhan theorized the term. Modern consciousness is a global consciousness, formed and influenced by factors distant from individuals — through movies, books, the Internet, and other kinds of media. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1964: 21) says of this global consciousness through technology:

The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology. The age of mechanical industry that preceded us found vehement assertion of private outlook the natural mode of expression. Every culture and age has its favourite model of perception and knowledge that it is inclined to prescribe for everybody and everything. The mark of our time is its revulsion against imposed patterns.

Moore uses the imposed patterns of perception in *Alligator* to highlight a general cultural disillusionment. This disillusionment provokes protests, moments of outrage, depression, and even suicide. Characters struggle against their society,

against each other, and against themselves to enact functional identities. These identities falter, however, just as Moore's text undoes any sense of a stable Newfoundland identity by depicting it as a contested cultural space.

Alligator introduces the influence of media in the opening chapter through the eyes of Colleen, a 17-year-old, who has been "downloading the beheadings off the Net" (2), an allusion to the videos circulating online during the Iraq War. The novel begins with Colleen describing another film she is watching, a "training video about safety in nuclear power plants" (1). The video cuts to a scene where a man "puts his head in an alligator's mouth" (2) and "unfortunately, a drop of sweat falls onto the alligator's tongue and triggers an instinctive response" (7). The safety film she is watching "is before the twin towers and web sites that show a mounted rifle aimed at a corral of exotic animals" that can be shot "from your armchair" and then delivered "on ice chips, via PayPal" (4). Other characters in *Alligator* are equally influenced by media, such as when Madeleine, Colleen's aunt, is profoundly impacted by a photograph of a hooded Iraqi detainee (174). Madeleine at one point also recognizes that Colleen's act of rebellion, sabotaging bulldozers, is influenced by mass media: "There was a blast of flame in every news box along Water Street. Was it Iraq or Sudan? Why wouldn't the girl rebel. Who could walk past these boxes and do nothing?" (303). Colleen is not passively imbibing media, and her subjectivity is informed, in this way, by global influences, in contrast to the supposed quaintness or isolation of branded Newfoundland.

Will Smith has noted the global consciousness in *Alligator*. Smith says that the novel is a reflection of regional identity as informed by mass media and that "the attempt at constructing an authentic place-voice must acknowledge characters' access to global influences" (Smith, 2007: 40). Lawrence Mathews, in his "Report from the Country of No Country," notes this same characteristic of Moore's work, suggesting that while Moore's stories are set in Newfoundland their subject matter concerns more than specifically local issues; the characters in her stories "[do not] look to the collective past for the cause of or solutions to their current predicaments" (Mathews, 2004: 14). In *Alligator* the characters are connected to the world through media and St. John's is not depicted as an isolated place. The narrative boasts a long list of specific place names from most every part of the globe, which quantifies the globalized consciousness in Moore's Newfoundland. Moore's characters travel outside of the region for work and holidays, reflecting an identity that is permeated and informed by global interaction.

Further examples of an influx of culture and media are the direct references to music and songs. There are allusions to such songs as "Bridge over

Troubled Water” (45), “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” (136), and “Paradise by the Dashboard Lights” (136), all of which are heard in pubs in St. John’s. The closest thing in the narrative to a traditional Newfoundland song is the hotdog salesman, Frank, humming a few bars of “My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean” (212), which is a traditional Scottish song. Even though most of the narrative is set in downtown St. John’s, there is no mention of any traditional Newfoundland music. Frank hears that the Russians who moved into the unit upstairs have brought violins. He says that their music was “the same as Newfoundland music or it had turned into Newfoundland music or all music was the same, always, and this was just another example of that” (161). Some books and works of literature that *Alligator* names are indicative of an influx of global culture into the narrative space: *The Futurist Manifesto* by F.T. Marinetti,² the foundational text of the Futurist avant-garde art movement, and *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann.³ No specifically Newfoundland texts are mentioned other than the local newspapers. Most of the print material comes from outside the province, and even in the local papers there is a dominance of outside influence, imagery, and stories. Moore’s characters in *Alligator* do not conform to any notion of a distinct regional identity, and the cultural factors that influence and shape their subjectivity are not only local, but are formed through interconnectedness with a globalized world.

While rejecting cultural specificity, the novel engages branded Newfoundland by subverting cultural icons associated with the tourism industry. One Newfoundland cultural symbol referenced numerous times in the novel is George Street.⁴ George Street is a car-free road “with bars on both sides and is famous now for the festival, which is just drinking all night long” (133). The street in *Alligator* has been renovated to look quaint and historic: “George Street was full of crowds, there was a band outdoors, people had plastic cups of beer The city had done up George Street to look like drinking was a Newfoundland tradition. But the old-fashioned street lights were brand new” (138–39). *Alligator* shows a version of this famous little street different from the one the province’s tourism board promotes, one that is “covered in garbage, drunks lurching,” and where taxi drivers are “dragging vomiting drunks in and out of cars” (133–34). This is not the nostalgic or quaint tourist destination that has been marketed. Frank, who works selling hotdogs, “has a permit for the corner of George Street, which is the best spot in the city” (133). And though Frank “didn’t like to drink” (137) and isn’t one to frequent the bars on the street, he holds a constant vigil over this cultural nexus at his hotdog stand. The version of George Street Frank witnesses is filthy, vile, and repulsive. And while

the tourists flock to the destination to take in the richness and vitality of a distinct culture, he sees the shallowness and vanity, the garbage and the dirty side of the culture industry. The romanticized vision of branded Newfoundland as a tourist destination is anything but the reality to be found on George Street in the novel, and this cultural icon is, thus, deconstructed.

A further cultural icon associated with the branding exercise is the massive cruise ship looming in the harbour.⁵ The cruise liner is visiting the city for a few days and has offloaded thousands of tourists. The ship indicates, once again, a broader discourse on cultural tourism, and more specifically the success of the branding exercise. It is referenced numerous times in the text, but one instance highlights the oppressive effects of the branding exercise when a society must conform to its brand. The character Mr. John Harvey is a “downtown vagrant” who “wore an army surplus parka done up to the chin,” even on a hot summer day (81). He is having a coffee in the food court of Atlantic Place, a commercial office building overlooking the harbour, where Colleen and her mother are waiting for a court appointment, when “a cruise ship crept into the window frame. There were thousands of black portals . . . a monstrous vessel casting a cool shadow over the families walking along the harbourfront” (82). Harvey approaches the table where Colleen and Madeleine are seated, and a few police officers, who are also in the food court having coffee, respond to his approaching the mother and daughter. One officer says as they shuffle him away, “he’s had his coffee and now he has to have a nice stroll in the sunshine. Let me walk you to the door. . . . There’s a cruise ship in the harbour” (86). In “Re-Placing Regionalisms,” Smith says this segment of the narrative is an example of Moore giving voice to a liminal character (Smith, 2007: 39); however, this part of the text seems more a liminal character being silenced than given voice. Harvey, in this part of the narrative, is out of place, and is quickly ushered out of the scene by the police, and also out of the story. Harvey is a symbol of the unequal realities of the city, in contrast to the supposed pluralism of branded Newfoundland. This is a point in the novel, as Chafe (2008: 9) puts it, that “readers become aware of another Newfoundland place, the St. John’s underworld — a place not considered by the tourism industry.” This segment of the narrative can be likened to notions of the anaesthetizing impulse of cultural tourism, advertising the city as quaint and historic by hiding away what is unpleasant to see. No tourism department would want to advertise the inequalities and social problems of the destination as a selling point, and the enforcement of brand identity is shown in Moore’s novel when Harvey is quickly taken away by the police. Ominously, he disappears henceforth from the text.

Theorists of place branding have identified a number of ethical issues that arise as a result of commodifying a people and a specific geographic space. Andrea Insch, in her introduction to a special issue of the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, says that the “undesirable consequences of place branding are often overlooked. Detrimental outcomes of place making, such as wasteful investment, uneven development, social inequality and environmental damage, are likely to cause concern among stakeholders, but typically do not receive the attention that they deserve” (Insch, 2011: 151). Efe Sevin’s article in the same special issue suggests the potential for the branding exercise to change the cultural landscape of a place, since “the brand of a place is directly related with its actual performance. This argument supports the idea that in order to alter the perception of a place, the place itself is required to change” (Sevin, 2011: 161). In practical terms, this can amount to a covering over or displacement of those things not conforming to the brand identity. Overton (1996: 118) discusses this with regard to Newfoundland culture when he notes, “Once ‘the “Real” Newfoundland’ exists as an idea, it is fed back onto the landscape and the pattern of people’s lives. A whole set of government actions is undertaken to make reality conform to this image.” Overton elaborates on this point:

Why bother writing about such an insignificant phenomenon as “the ‘Real’ Newfoundland”? In capitalism, a dominant way of life and thought is widely diffused throughout society in all spheres. Seemingly “innocent” ideas, especially those presented in the form of cultural traditions and myths, function on a wide scale to mask the realities of the system and so help perpetuate the existing order. We partially accept such ideas because they speak powerfully to our experiences, dissatisfactions and hope. (Ibid., 122)

Moore does not mask these realities in *Alligator*, but intensifies them. By subverting the brand, *Alligator* brings to light coercive aspects of consumer capitalism that ensure conformity to social, economic, and cultural norms. By rejecting the simplistic ideas wrapped up in branded Newfoundland the novel engages forcefully with capitalist consumer culture. Indeed, because it is dissonant with even those connotations of the brand that speak fundamentally to Newfoundland experience, as Overton puts it, the cultural landscape of the novel is deeply unsatisfying.

Although this discussion of *Alligator* and branded Newfoundland reveals a dichotomy, the novel does not represent an authentic Newfoundland cultural

identity that exists in opposition to the brand. Furthermore, if a novel or cultural production presents a pluralistic, quaint, or otherwise romantic image of Newfoundland, that portrayal is not necessarily inauthentic. Part of Moore's project in *Alligator* is to trouble this dichotomy and to show that any such limiting ideas about cultural identity are problematic. One way this is accomplished is by avoiding monolithic or totalizing notions of Newfoundland cultural identity. The closest *Alligator* comes to constructing a specifically Newfoundland cultural identity is through the character of Madeleine, who is a film producer involved in a project to "capture the history of Newfoundland" (199). She has set out to "transfigure human experience," and in her film she wants to show a "Gothic, vicious landscape, a curse, a new kind of beauty." She says that the film should have "turnip soup and fish flakes and scurvy . . . pouting orphans with sunken eyes and scabby knees" (177). But even though the film is an image of "Newfoundland before Confederation," Madeleine insists that the horses for a particular scene be imported from Austria (198). She is obsessed with authenticity and representing historical accuracy, yet the difficulty of realizing her vision pushes her to make "artistic" concessions, and also takes a heavy psychological and physical toll. She is quite literally haunted throughout the narrative by the spectre of Bishop Fleming,⁶ a nineteenth-century Newfoundland cultural icon who features in her movie; and the novel closes with Madeleine's untimely death. One of the main stressors leading to her heart attack is the horses for the movie, which were delayed on a freighter that was "stuck in the ice" (198). Madeleine arranges a meeting with the premier of the province and asks him for help with this dilemma, to which the premier responds, "I think we can do something. . . . I can get those horses over here" (200). He intends to have the horses helicoptered in from the stranded freighter. Yet Madeleine later learns "it was impossible . . . they would not helicopter the horses in, was she crazy? The animals would die of panic" (226). This segment of the text is an unsubtle comment on the ineptness of the provincial government's attempts to encourage cultural productions in Newfoundland. Since the film remains unfinished at the close of the story, the realization of Madeleine's vision of Newfoundland cultural identity remains speculative and abstract.

Madeleine's part in the narrative does not suggest what authentic Newfoundland cultural identity is or ought to be, but rather disrupts the idea that cultural identity is something one can or should try to produce deliberately. Moore, in *Alligator*, is concerned with the way economic interests have co-opted culture, and many of the issues the novel probes relate to the effects of consumer capitalism on individual subjectivity. Culture, in the imaginative world of the

text, is determined in no small part by the movement of capital, by the dynamics of capitalist systems of production, consumption, and control. The local, that is to say the city and its physical geography in Moore's text, has an influence on the characters' lives; however, the cultural landscape is dominated by transnational brands and other icons of consumer capitalism, which contribute to the way characters categorize one another and understand themselves. The following section examines, from a different perspective, branded Newfoundland, not one that has merely been branded by a tourism campaign, but branded by the cultural hegemony of globalized consumer capitalism.

CONSUMER CAPITALISM IN *ALLIGATOR*

Consumer capitalism is a theory of political economy that focuses on consumption and consumer behaviour as a driver of capitalism. This theory does not take as primary the relation of the worker with the means of production, but rather the role of the worker (and everyone else in society) as consumer. In *Consumer Capitalism*, Anastasios Korkotsides (2007: 33) argues that consumer capitalism implies a new understanding of the alienation inherent in capitalist society: "The product of alienated labour cannot be an object of non-alienated discretion by workers as consumers, since alienated workers cannot be transformed, as they move from the factory floor to the shopping centre, into emancipated consumers. . . . It is alienated consumption that drives capitalism." This is to say that capitalism not only relies on the exploitation of the worker's labour, but also, and necessarily, requires the worker's participation in the consumer economy. Consumer capitalism, ideally viewed, creates the conditions for a self-propelling consumerist culture; but Korkotsides notes that it is also a culture that has "evolved into a global culture of acquisitive rationalism that masses made into their own cause and way of life" (ibid., 77).

Various theories of consumer capitalism take up different positions on the degree to which branding and advertising are a force of cultural coercion and domination. Dissident perspectives, such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, see consumer capitalism as an attack on cultural diversity, because despite the promises of self-realization and self-expression central to the branding myth, "market-driven globalization doesn't want diversity; quite the opposite. Its enemies are national habits, local brands and distinctive regional tastes" (Klein, 2009: 130). Somewhat more conservative perspectives, such as that of Conrad Lodziak in *The Myth of Consumerism*, suggest that theories of consumer

capitalism go too far and risk oversimplifying if they take advertising and branding as an entirely coercive exercise. Nonetheless, Lodziak qualifies his arguments by noting, “advertisers do *attempt to manipulate and deceive* and these attempts *may be effective* on the most vulnerable. Among the most vulnerable I include pre-teens, youth . . . and those with a fragile self-identity” (Lodziak, 2002: 64; emphasis in original). An analysis of branding and consumer capitalism in *Alligator* does not necessitate a dogmatic view on this issue, but it is worth noting, nonetheless, because this question of branding and subjectivity is raised by the treatment of branding in the novel.

Brands and other signs of consumer capitalism dominate the cultural landscape in *Alligator*. Moore’s particular use of language, her textual strategy, depicts an intensely branded society, one in which the very identity of the characters is a function of consumer products. In terms of narrative construction, this is achieved through the sheer number of brands named. Textual allusions to branding, to products and large companies in *Alligator*, include Cosmo (3), Aqua Velva (23), Tim Hortons (27), Wal-Mart (32), Comet (34), Dumpster (172), Pledge (172), and Jaguar (228), to name only a few. Of these many references to brands, Wal-Mart (more recently rebranded as “Walmart” by this US-based retail giant) is perhaps most often mentioned, and *Alligator* presents two specific instances of this brand. One instance is when Colleen remembers a time she and her mother had gone to Wal-Mart on Christmas Eve to buy a gift for her stepfather. She decided on a bottle of Aqua Velva, which ultimately ends up “in the cupboard under the sink in the guest bathroom” (34). It was the first gift “Colleen had ever picked out by herself” (23), but it was a poor choice in some respects, since as far as Colleen knew “he had never used cologne of any sort in his life” (31). When Colleen and Beverly first entered Wal-Mart, they were “greeted by a woman in a white plastic apron” (23). This greeter could have been another character in the novel, Frank’s mother. In a later segment of the novel, Frank recollects a tap-dance recital at Christmas and how his mother, in order to see him perform, swapped shifts at the Wal-Mart where she worked. The narrator says that Wal-Mart workers “were mostly single mothers or teenagers or older men who had suffered some version of emotional collapse that made them incompetent at their previous jobs. They were working at Wal-Mart because other options hadn’t panned out” (130). Frank remembers that his mother came home after her shift and soaked her feet in a tub of hot water and Epsom salts because “she was on her feet all the time and she had varicose veins, zigzagging veins . . . lumpy and blue as ink.” These presentations of Wal-Mart destabilize and make ambivalent the happy-face

logo. The consumerist vortex Colleen encounters, with “giant Christmas bulbs hanging from the rafters, carols bubbling wordlessly through the overhead speakers, shoppers in bright coats rushing forward and away” (23), is placed alongside the physical damage etched on Frank’s mother’s body. *Alligator* recasts this iconic brand as vacant, since Colleen buys a frivolous gift (that no one will ever use) while workers like Frank’s mother are struggling to make ends meet and paying a physical toll.

Wal-Mart is linked not only with convenience and cheap prices for customers, not only with consumerism and consumption, but also with notions of a class divide. Class is signified in the novel through brands and through the places characters shop, accentuating the inequality in the city. There are the many references to shopping malls, department stores, and other businesses, and the narrative shows the implications of what wearing a certain brand means in social terms. When Colleen shows up for the first day of her court-ordered youth diversion program, she finds that the other young people there “slouched, stank of body odour, and cigarettes, and they all wore velour pants from Zellers . . . they had the look of low intelligence, which was the nicest way she could think to put it” (219). Zellers, in *Alligator*, is where the working class buys clothes, and Colleen recognizes that there are “class differences and flares of temper and social injustice that had created the divide between her and them” (219). This segment of the narrative shows how Colleen identifies and classifies those around her through brands and products, but also indicates a class conflict, one that is exacerbated by consumer capitalism.

Class distinctions are perhaps best expressed in *Alligator* through the character Frank, who seems destined to become an independent hotdog salesman until his illusion of class mobility is shattered and his dream falls apart. He has worked towards becoming a member of the petite bourgeoisie (a small business owner), but by the close of the novel he has rejoined the proletariat (working class). Frank is classified, like other characters in the novel, by products and by shopping at particular businesses. One example is when Frank remembers looking for dishes at the Salvation Army, trying to find a lid for his sugar bowl and not willing to accept one that was only close to matching: “He never wanted close again. He had been living with close his whole life” (207). His mother had brought him to this Salvation Army store “since he was born,” and so Frank has always been of working-class background. Selling hotdogs is not what he envisions as the ideal job, but since he has a juvenile record and no formal education, he has few options in his quest for upward mobility in a free-market economy; he must try to better himself by his own guile and effort. However,

Colleen, at one point in the narrative, steals money from Frank, and the narrative provides Frank's resentful internal monologue:

She has never been in a welfare office. She had never had to get a brown paper bag from the breakfast program at school. She'd never been evicted from an apartment because her mother was three months behind on the rent. She had never eaten Kraft Dinner for supper unless she wanted to. She had never worn a windbreaker, one of three hundred, donated by a sports store to a shelter for battered women and distributed throughout the city to needy families, a windbreaker that became an immediately identifiable mark of poverty. (228)

Frank and Colleen may inhabit the same city, but their experiences are strikingly different. Colleen is from a relatively wealthy family, while Frank has grown up in poverty. His one indulgence among his meagre possessions, his waterbed purchased at Sears, "the most expensive bed you could buy" (17), is turned into a weakness when Valentin destroys it as a threat to extort money from Frank: "He pulled the covers off the waterbed and saw it had been slashed from the headboard to the footboard. One long gash" (216). Valentin, to add to the devastation, overturned the urn holding Frank's mother's ashes, the most important of his few "luxury" items in the room, so that "the ashes were soaking wet" (217). Frank remembers that "the urn had cost \$700. He doubted his mother had spent that much money on a luxury item ever in her life." Having all of his few things in his one small room, anything of value would make an easy target, and Frank is "aware of the bald simplicity of the act." Because he has invested so much of his sense of self in these consumer products, this destruction of property is a devastating blow and compels Frank to submit to Valentin, who exploits Frank's vulnerability, poverty, and working-class background.

The desecration of the urn and the destruction of the waterbed — the luxury items Frank thinks will make him part of the status quo — demonstrate to him that his social position has not improved, and that he is not the same as those he aspires to be. For Frank, the waterbed is a sign of status, though "the waterbed he saw, now that it had been slashed, was nothing more than a vanity" (217). The urn is, in a way, a final symbol of status for his mother and a way of validating her life and work. Frank keeps his mother's remains not only as a memorial, but also because "for whatever reason he felt the urn was company." The urn and the waterbed, as consumer products, are significant to Frank, and in this way the luxury items and products he owns come to form his subjectivity.

This theme is reprised when Frank contemplates the purchase of a “wet bar” at Sears (141). Though he realizes he has no use for a wet bar, “he had to admit it was an impressive piece of furniture” (142). Ultimately, he decides it is an impractical luxury item for him to own and tells the Sears employee simply, “I don’t want a wet bar.” The salesperson’s reply, one that is telling of the influence of consumerism on subjectivity, is that Frank has “potential,” indicating that his potential will be realized by purchasing this item. The salesperson says that she and her fiancé “had been buying furniture for three years always with the same plan in mind, when they had enough to furnish a small apartment they’d get married” (142). Even the institution of marriage is shaped by material possessions and consumerism. Frank knows that he has no need for a wet bar, as he knew he had no reason to own a waterbed. However, he has, even if only unconsciously, already bought into a branded consumerist culture and it permeates his subjectivity.

The desired result of capitalism, whether speaking of branded products, companies, or cultural tourism, is to make money. Money is what drives capitalism and what further divides, identifies, and classifies the characters in *Alligator*. The title creature of the novel symbolizes money and consumer capitalism; the book, otherwise, has very little to do with alligators. Even when Colleen meets the alligator farmer, Loyola, he does not reveal very much to Colleen or to the readers about alligators. However, Loyola has a lot to say about another dominant force in the narrative:

There is in the making of money a propelling forward. Energy is exerted and boardrooms come into being. They form themselves seconds before you open the door and if they are in Houston the walls are glass and there are seven or eight men in suits and a blast of sun that eradicates history. (250)

Loyola has a picture on his wall of himself and President Bush from a time when he gave the President a tour of the reserve, and says “he liked the man and he found himself agreeing with his decisions on Iraq” (245). Loyola is a businessman and is compelled to make money even though he “had no need for money other than the action of making it” (250). He believes that “money moves by instinct. . . . It will lie still and then it will move” (250), which describes the alligators and his sordid experience with their species. Money is likened to the movements of alligators — it has killer instincts — and aside from Loyola’s observations on the reptilian characteristics of capital, there are numerous

references to money or to commerce more generally in the text. Some of these allusions include: “25¢ written in ballpoint pen” (206); “he was a person worth \$27 million” (200); and “the cash register tings and the drawer flies open and the coins in the slot slap against each other. . . . The ordinary noise of money changing hands” (205). The characters are all involved — even consumed — with the accumulation of wealth, such as when Beverly is reminiscing on her past, “thinking about how close [she and her husband] had come to extravagant wealth” (98). Before David’s death, “the two and a half years of wealth had been the best years of her life,” and sometimes when she remembers how close they had come to extravagance, “the exercise gave Beverly pre-migraine symptoms [and] she vaguely associated the condition with the supernatural. When she felt a migraine coming she almost always bought a lottery ticket” (98). Beverly grieves not so much the memory of her dead husband as her loss of the accompanying wealth; this segment of the text indicates the impact consumerism has on Beverly, as she uses lotto tickets to sublimate her headaches. The many specific references to money throughout *Alligator* further highlight the pervasiveness of economic systems in the formation of subjectivity, but money is also shown to be a destructive force, something that reinforces inequalities and promotes materialism and greed.

Alligator also depicts a number of negative social consequences of this consumerist culture, one of which is that there must be victims, or, as Chafe (2008: 301) notes, “the characters can be placed in either of two categories — predator or prey.” The biggest victims in the narrative are those of poor or working-class backgrounds, yet even as characters prey on each other there seem to be no outright winners in *Alligator*, as little comes to fruition for any of them. Madeleine, for example, dies of a heart attack before completing her film. Ironically, the final section of the narrative depicts her “dying in a chair she bought at the Salvation Army” (306), waiting for a phone call to tell her “they’ve completed the winter shoot” (305). Valentin is incarcerated, and he knows that “wherever he was going he would never come back; he would never get out” (298). Colleen, while having come to some kind of acceptance of her stepfather’s death, is wracked with guilt over the wrong she has done Frank, though he is not at all receptive to her pleas. Isobel, who is the recipient of the \$82,000 insurance settlement on her torched house, is still “off-kilter and afraid” and is still on the “pills she’d been taking” (293). However, it is Frank who most obviously falls prey to other characters’ greed as the victim of Colleen’s theft and the victim of both extortion and a more sinister plot by Valentin. He quite literally gets burned. Frank does not overcome these assaults

in the narrative; and by the end of the novel Frank's situation has not improved markedly, except that he is staying well clear of Colleen. He is working at a minimum wage job, no longer selling hotdogs but "cutting business cards at the photocopy shop" (294). Frank has become totally disillusioned; indeed, it might be said that one commonality between the characters in the novel is a general sense of disillusionment and alienated subjectivity.

Perhaps the most tragic victim in the narrative is the unnamed "Inuit guy" (14) who lived in the same building as Frank. He was a drinker, and "they'd seen him with his cases of beer." Frank and Carol, the building's elderly caretaker, realized that "he was in trouble, but they'd tried to mind their own business. They'd listened to him shouting and crying in the middle of the night. . . . Then there had been no sign of him." The police show up and gain access to the room only to find his dead body. He has taken his own life. One of the police officers says to the other, "he's after hanging himself in here" (16). His suicide, his silencing in the narrative, speaks of the legacy of domination under which disempowered people struggle to live. Moore's use of a violently negative representation of Aboriginal people reinforces the tragic hypocrisy of branded Newfoundland. As with Mr. Harvey's disappearance, the unnamed Inuk's suicide is less a case of *Alligator* giving voice to liminal characters as to bearing witness to the silenced voices of liminal characters. Like Mr. Harvey, the Inuk is unable to enact a functional identity and is not able to conform to the structures of capitalist society. Because he is not productive, he suffers the ultimate marginalization, and his dead body is removed by the police. He embodies disillusionment and alienation taken to their extreme ends: the literal loss of subjectivity.

Some of the characters in *Alligator* are able to act out against the structures of capitalist society, while others find no outlet and submit to docility. Not only are they pacified and made docile by a dominant cultural ethos, but many of the characters actively subdue themselves: there are numerous references to self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. Valentin sells drugs, among other criminal enterprises, and is shown at one point waiting in a bar for an "OxyContin addict" (79). When the police finally raid his apartment they find "two beef buckets full of tiny bottles with rubber stoppers that were some sort of prescription drug" (287). Isobel is self-medicating and Valentin at one time observes that "her cupboards were full of pharmaceuticals" (75). Colleen's stepfather, David, in a phone call just before his aneurism, said that "he'd taken some kind of pill, something a woman had dropped in his drink" (103). Frank's mother is also anaesthetized near the end of her illness when she is given morphine (87),

though this medication is institutionally administered (or corporate), rather than a self-medication. Aside from drugs, there are also many references to alcohol and to characters drinking liquor. Colleen steals a bottle of vodka from the “liquor store at the mall” (120); Beverly drinks bottles of “homemade wine” (53); Valentin, while waiting to make a drug deal, “drank the last shot and ordered five more” (79); and the unnamed Inuk is a heavy drinker. Drugs and alcohol are another form of anaesthetic, paralleling Moore’s comments on the branding of Newfoundland culture as an anaesthetizing impulse. Just as branding brings about a disillusioned culture, references to drugs and alcohol demonstrate the pervasive effects of disillusionment and alienation triggered by consumerist influence on subjectivity.

With so much inequality and victimization associated with systems of consumer capitalism, it comes as a surprise that some characters are not completely subdued and are able to act out. Even Frank, who is generally more reserved, has an outburst on the day Colleen stole his life savings: “he gouged his key into the side of the landlord’s Jaguar and dragged it from the taillight all the way to the headlight feeling the paint crust against the tip of his key” (229). His act is one that inflicts an economic injury against the landlord, who is branded by the luxury car he is able to afford. Frank’s keying the car is also, in some respects, a futile act, as the Jaguar will be repainted and the incident will not have any real impact on the victim. Even though this violent act is relatively small, it still constitutes a move away from societal norms and could be framed as a crime (vandalism or destruction of property). Valentin, a self-titled “thug” (72), is the epitome of the criminal element of society. His greed and his desire to get ahead at all costs are deeply rooted in his disillusionment with society, and his rationale for theft and extortion is that he “was convinced that the way to escape a dark fate was never to stand still . . . when the signs advised action” (79). Valentin’s protest against capitalist society is expressed in crime, and though he is in no sense heroic, his viciousness is a pragmatic response to a society from which he is marginalized and shunned. After asking for a “loan” of \$1,000, Valentin shares some advice with Frank that brings to light his *modus operandi*: “I like you because you are a businessman. You are like me. This is what we have to understand: there is a system but it is like a suspension bridge, it has give. People like us must exploit the give” (227). The climax of his thread in the narrative occurs when Valentin decides the time is right to burn down Isobel’s house in order to gain access to the insurance money. Valentin drugs Frank and leaves him unconscious in the living room of the burning house, with the idea that “if his body was

found after the fire, the police would think he had started it” (271). Frank is a disposable subject, similar to the unnamed Inuk and Mr. Harvey. He is supposed to be Valentin’s cover; however, Frank foils the plot when he comes to in the burning house, “made a ball of himself and he flung that ball at the window” (280). If not for this miraculous escape, Valentin’s crime would have been the only “successful” act of protest in the narrative. However, as he is arrested and jailed, like Frank’s act of keying the car, his protest is a futile one.

The most apparent act of protest against consumer capitalism is Colleen’s sabotaging the bulldozers. The crime is another act of futility as Colleen’s victim, “Mr. Duffy of the destroyed bulldozers” (170), decides after meeting her at the courthouse that “he had no intention of giving Colleen Clark’s vandalism another thought” (171), and the logging machinery would simply be repaired. The biggest problem for him when Colleen sabotages the bulldozers is that “it would take a few days to replace the machines [and] there would be men who would be paid to sit around and do nothing” (68). By enacting her protest, Colleen resists what she sees as the imposed patterns of production and consumption, though her rationale for doing so is dubious. Colleen’s deviant act, and her revulsion against clear-cutting, is influenced by her idolizing a Californian environmentalist, Julia Butterfly Hill, of whom she makes “a model or a saint” because she had “lived in a tree in the middle of a clear-cut in northern California” (167). Colleen feels motivated to undertake “eco-terrorism,” and sneaks into the clear-cut at night and pours sugar into the gas tanks of the machines. The targets of Colleen’s attack, the bulldozers, quite literally cover the text. There are numerous references to them, often quite innocuous, but the proliferation of references is a persistent reminder that there is heavy machinery at work behind the scenes of the narrative. Bulldozers connect to a discourse of consumerism as they are iconic of production; however, they are a destructive force, signifying the rampage of consumerism against the environment.

Although Colleen’s motivation is less than fully informed, she is, nonetheless, the character who comes closest to enacting authentic resistance. Her refusal to be docile can be understood as a form of anti-capitalist protest. Two instances of the word “eco-terrorism” from the narrative may shed some light on the connections Moore seems to be implying:

Eco-terrorists had kidnapped her daughter and turned her from her mother and everything she’d ever been taught, such as being polite at all costs, using cloth napkins, wiping the sink if there’s toothpaste crusted on it, achieving excellent marks at school, avoiding sexual

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intercourse, and oral sex in the back of the school buses, which is the rage, recycling, and eating what's on your plate — all of this had been erased. (48)

This first notion of eco-terrorism is cast in a rather naive light; however, another instance of the word is more telling of its implications:

Colleen had been saying eco-terrorism, but Beverly had not been listening. Colleen had been saying change the world, the plight of animals, the environment, radioactive waste, the World Trade Organization. She had said Seattle, she had said Quebec City. She had been going on, but Beverly had not listened.

Are you listening? Colleen kept asking.

Beverly had said about new shoes.

We should get you a nice pair of shoes, Beverly had said. (54)

When Colleen voices her concerns about the state of world affairs, about the movements that oppose a rich-versus-poor world, Beverly's answer to her daughter is "we should get you a new pair of shoes." For Beverly, buying things is the anaesthetic, and her tendency to pacify through purchase and possessions is why she is blind to the reason her daughter acts out.⁷ Through her apathy Beverly teaches Colleen apathy, and teaches her to use consumer products to sublimate, such as when Colleen is in a car accident and "tried to think of the shoes" she had worn to her stepfather's funeral in order to calm down (151).

However, Colleen is not altogether pacified. She refuses to be docile, and though her decisions and actions are not always admirable, the one thing that can be said of her is that she acts. More than any other character in the text Colleen embodies the protest against the disillusionment and alienation of a consumerist society. She is a lapsed capitalist, who finds she is holding an anarchist flag. Yet it must be said that her protest, like the others noted above, is ultimately unsuccessful because the capitalists, embodied in Mr. Duffy, regard her resistance with benign neglect. Furthermore, at the close of the narrative there is no indication that Colleen has come to a functional identity; although she experiences a kind of metamorphosis and is finally able to feel empathy for Frank, it remains to be seen if this is a form of liberation or instead an acceptance of her role in capitalist society. If the latter, one would have to say Moore has simply set her on a path to the evolution of alienation and disillusionment in a branded, money-hungry world.

CONCLUSION

Alligator offers an idealized model of the mechanisms and effects of consumer capitalism. The text highlights the effects of selling out a society and the stark realities of a consumerist social order. By subverting the iconography of branded Newfoundland, and by showing the price paid by those who live in a supposedly self-propelling consumerist society, *Alligator* takes a critical stance on the effects of consumer capitalism and suggests it is a destructive force in Newfoundland. With respect to the characters' lives, it leads to materialism, inequality, disillusionment, and social decay. However, the maintenance of an image of pluralistic society is the prerogative not only of individuals but of society as a whole, and those not conforming to the paradigm are marginalized and made abject. Consumer capitalism, metaphorically, feeds on its own children, as the characters in *Alligator* are essentially consumers, and none are involved with primary or secondary modes of production. One wonders if there is economic life in this fictional St. John's at all, as the most apparent depiction of production is the omnipresence of bulldozers, knocking down trees, presumably to make way for subdivisions.

Finally, the novel comes back to feed on itself. It resists branded Newfoundland, but only by entirely embracing capitalist consumer culture. Although *Alligator* offers a scathing critique of consumerism, the novel is nonetheless a consumer product, branded for the marketplace. This does not necessarily make resistance tokenistic, since the novel resists by appropriating the resources and means available. The novel works against the system from within it, as a kind of literary culture jam. In this case, resistance is best expressed in the subversion of branded Newfoundland and the stark depiction of consumerist culture and its outcomes. Even as *Alligator* critiques capitalist systems, it remains true to the branded culture it reproduces, offering no recourse to ideological structures outside capitalism.

NOTES

- 1 Recently the campaign has turned to digital media as well. See, for example, the province's tourism website: <www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/>.
- 2 F.T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. R.W. Flint (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972).
- 3 Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1927).
- 4 Located in downtown St. John's near the harbour, George Street is entirely bars, restaurants, and nightclubs and is a popular destination for tourists and locals alike. Until the 1970s the street was filled with mechanic shops and tinsmiths. For more on George Street, see PHB Group (2007).
- 5 Newfoundland has become a regular port of call for a growing number of cruise lines. The provincial government reported that during the 2010 cruise ship season a total of 133 vessels made scheduled stops, bringing with them an estimated 22,100 visitors: <www.economics.gov.nl.ca/E2011/TravelAndTourism.pdf>.
- 6 Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming (1792-1850) was an important figure for the Irish Catholic population of Newfoundland. For more on Fleming, see Cadigan (2009: 98-124).
- 7 Tracy Whalen (2008) offers an interesting counterpoint to the reading offered here, noting that while the characters are at times absent (for example, Beverly not listening to Colleen) the novel is punctuated by extreme moments of presence in which characters experience a deep connection (such as Beverly's empathy, as expressed in the scene in Atlantic Place). Whalen examines this immediacy and presence in relation to Moore's hyper-realistic style, suggesting this is a potentially redemptive move in the face of disillusionment.

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