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Once Upon A Virus

Diane Goldstein

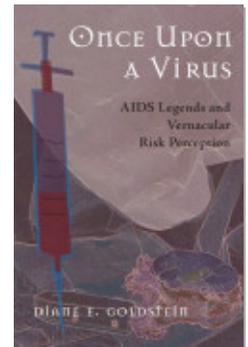
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Welcome to the Innocent World of AIDS

Cultural Viability, Localization, and Contemporary Legend

The headline on the front page of the St. John's *Evening Telegram* on April 22, 1991, announced "Bizarre AIDS Story Likely a Concocted Tale." The article went on to discuss a rumor about a person who knowingly transmitted the HIV virus and an inquiry into the rumor conducted by the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary's Criminal Investigation Unit. The story under investigation was not the bar pickup story extensively circulating around the world at that time. It was not the story of a man who meets a woman in a local bar, sleeps with her, and awakens to find the message "Welcome to the World of AIDS" scrawled in lipstick on the mirror. The message was the same, but the story itself was quite different. The story, according to the *Telegram*,

involves a young woman who goes on vacation in the United States, has a one time affair, returns to Newfoundland, and some time later receives by mail a package containing a miniature coffin with a note "Welcome To The World of AIDS." (April 22, 1991)

While the *Telegram's* synopsis gives an accurate basic description of the story circulating in Newfoundland, it left out some of the essential details—motifs that are crucial to understanding the

narrative. The following text, collected from one of my students, gives a fuller sense of the story.¹

This girl needed a break and decided to go to Florida for a month or two holiday, I think. While she was there she met a man, who seemed to be . . . the man of her dreams. He had money, he treated her like gold and he gave her everything she wanted. She fell in love with him and . . . during her last night there they slept together. The next day he brought her to the airport for her return to St. John's. He gave her a small gift-wrapped box and told her not to open it until she got home. They . . . said goodbye and she left, hoping that someday they would be married and the gift would be an [engagement] ring. The suspense was killing her and . . . she decided to open the gift on the plane. It was a small coffin with a piece of paper saying "Welcome To The World of AIDS."

This fuller typical text gives an idea of the significance of the deviation of the new localized variation on "Welcome to the World of AIDS" from the bar pickup narrative, which was previously in circulation and which had been extensively written about by folklorists (Brunvand 1989; Fine 1987; Goodwin 1989). Although Smith (1990) noted variation in male and female role reversal and an occasional narrative coda in which the man stalks the woman for revenge in the "Lipstick on the Mirror" narrative, variation as extensive as the coffin version of this legend had not yet been reported by 1991. While personal communication² and the reports of two syndicated news features make it clear that the coffin variation of the legend existed

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1. Paul Smith, Carl Lindahl, and Bonnie O'Connor thoughtfully provided me with parallel versions of the narrative discussed here. Enormous thanks are owed to the students who assisted me with collecting. These include my graduate research assistants, Marie-Annick Deplanques and John Harries and several students in my Introduction to Folklore class, who made versions of the narratives they collected during the 1991 winter semester available to me for research and publication. Included in this latter group are April O'Grady, Heather Lilly, Shirley Harnum, Jerry Best, Cynthia Pye, Karen Hutchens, Jennifer Parsons, Bridie Mulrooney, Karen Osmond, Heather Keilly, Debbie Saunders, James Wheeler, Corrine MacDonald, Tina Collins, Darryl Keating, Rhonda Halbot, and four other collectors who wished to remain anonymous.
 2. Mark Glazer, Carl Lindahl, Bonnie O'Connor, Gary Butler, and Paul Smith indicated that they had encountered examples of similar versions of the narrative in Texas, Philadelphia, Toronto, and England. The coffin version appears, however, to be much less common than the "Lipstick on the Mirror" version even in those places where it has been occasionally reported.

beyond the confines of the Canadian province of Newfoundland in 1991, they also indicate different adaptation of the motifs and different patterns of adoption of the narrative in tradition from one place to another. To date, there has been no academic work done on regional and cultural variation in the legend. Clearly, however, "Welcome to the World of AIDS" is a narrative that by virtue of its messages about sexuality, trust, disease, intimacy, mortality, and morality will be molded and shaped in narrative tradition to reflect regional and cultural values. The narrative cries out for analysis in *cultural context* as a means of accessing local concerns and attitudes toward AIDS. In this chapter, I will focus on the legend "Welcome to the World of AIDS" as it took on shape and meaning in Newfoundland. In particular, I will look at the ways in which the specific Newfoundland variations of the narrative reflect the larger cultural concerns of Newfoundlanders.

Sometime around 1987 the "Lipstick on the Mirror" version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" appeared in the St. John's rumor mill but was quite limited in circulation. A questionnaire I administered early in 1988 on the campus of Memorial University to approximately 300 students indicated that a very small number of respondents actually knew the narrative.³ In 1989 the coffin variation entered the scene⁴ and since then, has circulated very widely as evidenced by the constabulary investigation. Together with the help of several of my students at that time, I collected over 500 accounts of this narrative. A random sample of one hundred of these

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3. It should be noted here that this questionnaire did not ask specifically for this narrative but, rather, addressed the larger issue of AIDS folklore on campus. The specific question that resulted in reports of the narrative was as follows:

Have you heard any stories about AIDS (e.g., anecdotes; true personal experience stories; made up stories)? Please relate the story as close to the way you heard it or tell it as you can.

This same question one year later indicated that virtually all respondents knew one version or the other and that nearly 80 percent of those who responded with a version knew the coffin narrative.

4. It has been suggested that the Newfoundland coffin variation might be the earliest tracing of these motifs as associated with "Welcome to the World of AIDS." While the Newfoundland narratives may be the oldest recorded examples of the coffin variation, I have serious doubts that the variation originated in Newfoundland. My argument here is not one about origins but rather concerns the enormous popularity of this version in the province. The narrative clearly made greater sense to Newfoundlanders than the earlier version.

produced twenty-six accounts of the “Lipstick on the Mirror” story and seventy-four of the coffin story. By spring of 1991 the narrative’s vitality had accelerated. Of seventy-five students in my Introduction to Folklore class that term, only three had heard the lipstick story, and seventy-two knew the coffin narrative.

The limited transmission of the more standard version of this narrative, combined with the wide circulation of the coffin variant, seems to be indicative of a process of cultural selection and correction in tradition, which replaced a narrative that was not culturally viable with a narrative that more accurately reflected the concerns and worldview of the culture. It created what folklorists call an *oicotype*, a term used today to refer to a localized narrative variant. The coffin version of “Welcome to the World of AIDS” is not only an oicotype in the contemporary sense but also in the original classical sense of “a special version of a . . . tale, developed by isolation in a certain cultural area, by which on account of special national, political or geographical conditions it takes a form different from that of the same tale in other areas” (Bødker 1965:220). It is my intention here to address the reasons why the lipstick version of “Welcome to the World of AIDS” was not viable in Newfoundland and precisely how the coffin variation more accurately reflects the beliefs, attitudes, and values of Newfoundlanders.

To facilitate this kind of discussion, certain reminders about the geographical context of Newfoundland might be helpful. As an island in the Atlantic, miles away from larger bodies of land, Newfoundland has always experienced a degree of geographical and cultural isolation. In recent years this isolation has lessened considerably with the building of roads and airports, increased access to technology and transportation alternatives, development in business, tourism and provincial resources, and developments in education. Newfoundlanders, however, are still island peoples, and part and parcel of living on an island is the simultaneous feeling, on the one hand, of geographical protection provided by the absolute boundaries of land and sea and, on the other, a zest for, and curiosity about, the mainland.

An important aspect of this island existence is the feeling that everyone on the island is known to you, either in terms of their social role, kinship status, and family name or by virtue of an extremely efficient and trustworthy social network. One of the AIDS narratives began,

Well, there were these girls from Trepassey, that's a place close to home in St. Mary's. Anyway they went to Florida on a holiday. One of the girls, I believe she was a McNeil, met up with this guy.

This kind of introduction is quite standard in many Newfoundland narratives. You supply the community and follow it with the family name. In this way anyone can identify the characters involved (and it does seem that many people can identify connections to virtually any name). In this context, the unknown deliberate transmitter of HIV present in the standard version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" makes little sense. The trust of Newfoundlanders in traditional information networks simply does not allow for the anonymity required for the narrative to work. Another local legend about AIDS brings this point home. In the same year that the coffin narrative became popular, a story cropped up in St. John's that one of the students called "Top Forty."⁵ In this story a St. John's resident who is HIV positive is determined to infect a list of forty people. He frequents the bars in order to pick up women and infect them; but, according to the story, everyone knows who he is, and as a result no one will accompany him home and his mission is thwarted. The "Top Forty" narrative suggests a belief (at least on some level) that a person is not likely to be hanging around the bars downtown picking up partners and infecting them without everyone knowing who it is and what they are doing. It simply makes no cultural sense. While the notion is indeed dangerous, it reflects the faith in traditional information networks that are characteristic of traditional culture.

So the scene switches to Florida (sometimes Jamaica, Hawaii, California, or Australia, but usually Florida) and most specifically St. Pete's (St. Petersburg). Since winters in Newfoundland are long and hard, the development of easy air travel to the mainland has provided an attractive alternative for winter vacationers. Newfoundlanders flock in droves in the winter to Florida; and due to the establishment of charter flights, St. Pete's has become a particularly popular destination. As one of my students put it, "the streets of St. Pete's are positively paved with Newfoundlanders."⁶ Not an attractive image, but one that certainly communicates the general

5. I would like to thank John Harries for this appropriate title.

6. Susan Vardy, a graduate student in folklore who has worked for some time with government tourism, came out with this apt characterization one day in response to my questions about the history of Newfoundland charter flights to St. Pete's.

understanding of this location as a regional favorite. Jeff Howard, past director of the Newfoundland AIDS Committee, responded to the AIDS legend by saying, "People head to glamorous resorts with the expectation of having Love Boat or Fantasy Island-type affairs for a couple of weeks while they're on vacation. The number who have contracted the AIDS virus in this way is very high" (*Evening Telegram* April 22, 1991).

The Florida dimension of "Welcome to the World of AIDS," however, is a bit more complicated than can be conveyed in a simple description of popular fantasy getaways. Florida is not just a warm sunny fantasy land for fun in the sun; it is the *mainland*—a place without the natural island protection of home, a place where anything could happen, and where the social controls of the island do not apply. It is, after all, a place beyond the protected boundaries of the sea. For Newfoundlanders, AIDS is a part of that world, the other world to the south and east of us. This image, however, is not simply based on the cognitive map of island peoples. It has its basis both in the initial facts and in the early mistakes of local public health and the news media.

It was 1986 before the first two cases of the HIV virus were diagnosed in Newfoundland. Until then, local newspapers continually printed headlines declaring "Newfoundland Low Risk for AIDS"⁷ in an effort to quell AIDS panic. When the first two cases were finally reported, it was made clear that these were people who had contracted the virus on the mainland; HIV was essentially imported. This publicity was to have dire effects. Public health officials quickly discovered their mistake and launched a poster campaign that announced "AIDS, IT'S NOT JUST A MAINLAND DISEASE."⁸ The message, however, never really got across. "Welcome to the World of AIDS," along with a host of other local AIDS folklore, continually depicts AIDS as a mainland disease. In the narratives, even in those

7. Articles and reports from the *Evening Telegram* carried the following headlines: "No AIDS Victim in Newfoundland" (May 13, 1985); "Risk of AIDS in Newfoundland Almost Zero, Says Doctor" (July 14, 1985); "One Case of AIDS So Far in Newfoundland" (August 8, 1985); "AIDS Kills Two in Low Risk Newfoundland" (October 10, 1986); and "AIDS Not a Major Concern in Province, Says Doctor" (October 31, 1986).

8. A version of this slogan was resurrected for use in the 1992 AIDS campaign and appeared on the bottom of some of the literature issued by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Health. The newer pamphlets say "AIDS Is Not Just a Mainland Disease or a Gay Disease. Everyone Needs to Know the Facts about AIDS."

cases in which the victim did not go to the mainland and contract the virus, mainlanders came to them. When the story does take place in Newfoundland, narrators are frequently careful to introduce the antagonist in the story as a mainlander. It would typically begin as follows:

I've heard a story about a guy here on campus. Actually, he's blond and he has blue eyes. We're told that he was of medium build. He goes by a lot of different names and he's from Vancouver or that area.

On other occasions the antagonist is black, which, since Newfoundland does not have an indigenous black population, marks the character as a "CFA" or "come from away."

Ultimately, the Newfoundland version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" appears to be as much a story about the dangers of the world outside the island as it is about AIDS. Many of the legend tellers indicated that the story was told to them by mothers or friends as a warning when they were about to travel. Others distanced the victim in the narrative not just once from the island but twice, as indicated by this excerpt:

This is a story, right, of a person from Newfoundland . . . well, Newfoundland originally. He moved to Ontario, where he grew up. He and a friend decided to go to Florida for a holiday. . . .

But the story is also about Newfoundlanders—Newfoundlanders as innocent victims. Great pains are taken by the narrators to portray the protagonist as pure, respectable, and proper. Consider these descriptions from the narratives:

1. Yes. There was this girl once, eh, I think she was from Corner Brook and she was a *hard worker*. She was working on the staff at the University there and she had a two week vacation.
2. The story I heard starts off with a girl in the Confederation Building. She is only a young girl, *pretty quiet*, everyone said. . . .
3. I heard this story about a year ago . . . 3 or 4 girls go down to Florida, they are students or something. One of the girls met a man, as *anyone would*. They date a bit and have a relationship. The guy seemed like a really nice person, very *sincere*.

As indicated by these descriptions, the protagonist is usually a professional person; generally a nurse, teacher, government worker, or a university student. She or he is portrayed as quiet, hardworking, innocent, pure, and upstanding. The girl normally travels with a group of friends or her parents, counteracting the notion of the woman who travels alone looking for trouble. She meets a man, often through a friend or in some other situation in which they are properly introduced. She acts responsibly in everything she does. He is also portrayed as the perfect man, he treats her well, and as several of the narrators said,

They started dating and he was a real gentleman. He wined her and dined her and he gave her flowers and everything.

It is made clear by virtually every narrator who tells the story that the couple did not simply fall into bed and, further, that this was *not* a one-night stand. The length of time that they are together varies, but it is seldom less than two weeks and frequently exceeds two months. They were in love; and, in at least half of the narratives, they discuss marriage or things have gotten to the point where she has reason to think the gift is an engagement ring. In many of the stories she sleeps with him only after mention of marriage is made. In others she initially refuses his attentions, unsure of her feelings. Many of these elements are combined in the following excerpt:

About a year ago there was this young girl and she must of been in her mid 20's and anyway she went to Florida . . . she was going on a trip with her parents. . . . so anyway she wanted to meet some friends so she met this really nice girl who introduced her to this young fella . . . so they were getting along. He took her out to dinner and he brought her flowers and everything like this and then [eventually] he asked her to go back to his place because he had his own place. . . . So that was alright, she went back. And anyway he wanted to make love to her and at first she said no because she didn't want to and she didn't want to really but anyway things started to get serious and finally she gave in and they started to make love. . . . So then, that was alright. . . . The girl really cared for him.

Other narrators use the airport scene to show, through a display of affection and emotion, her feelings for the man. One narrator put it this way:

And so anyway when she was going home she got together with her man, and they were at the airport and they were saying goodbye to everyone. And she was all lovey dovey holding him going “Oh sweetheart I love you I’m going to miss you.” And like, she was crying and he says, “Oh I’m going to miss you too.” And he was being all sweet and all the girls were saying, “Oh, what a swell guy, what a hunk.” And so he gave her a little gift. He said, “Now you’re not allowed to open this gift ’till you’re in the air.” And she goes, “No, no, I want to open it now with you, I want to see the look in your eyes.” He goes, “no, no, this is very serious.” “This is from me to you,” and he said, “don’t open this till you’re on the plane.” So she said, “O.K.” and she kissed him and they kissed and kissed.

While the Newfoundland protagonist who goes to the mainland in the story is portrayed as innocent and responsible, this is not the case for mainland protagonists. Mainlanders meet in bars and participate in one-night stands. Interestingly, they also find lipstick on the mirror, not coffins in boxes. Consider this story:

There was this girl and she was from the mainland or something. And she went one night to this bar. While she was there, this guy came over and asked her to dance. And they started dancing together a lot and had a few drinks and he came over to her table. So at the end of the night she went back to his hotel room. He was in town on business and he said he was leaving the next day. So she went back to the hotel room with him and they slept together and when she woke up the next day, he wasn’t in the room. So she went to the bathroom and on the mirror written in lipstick was “Welcome To The World of AIDS.”

The gender of the protagonist in these stories appears also to be intricately tied to the image of the innocent Newfoundland victim. In nearly all of these stories the victim is a woman. In the beginning of my work with these narratives I thought this was due to the actual facts of HIV infection on the island. Although incidence of

HIV infection was relatively low in the province at the time of narrative collection, it was *three times* the national average of percentages of women to men.⁹ Despite the fact that the general population usually does not know these kinds of statistics, they have been very well publicized in Newfoundland; and most people will have at least noticed that recent local AIDS educational campaigns have been directed at women. Further, as Gary Alan Fine notes (1987), it is surprising that in the standard version of the narrative the perpetrator is a woman and the victim a male, when medical evidence indicates that the virus spreads from man to woman more easily than from woman to man. Initially, I felt that perhaps the local story had corrected the gender due to an increase in public awareness of the facts of HIV infection.

As I began to work more closely with these narratives, however, I began to see a set of patterns that indicate that traditional Newfoundland gender roles may account more accurately for the reversal. Newfoundland women, like women in many traditional communities, are expected to be the level-headed, controlling factor in sexual relationships. Men, on the other hand, are generally accepted as sexually active or even promiscuous. In cases of accidental pregnancy, for example, women's health educators continually note that the woman traditionally is seen as the one who lost control of the situation, while the man was simply "being a man." The image of the innocent Newfoundlander in the "Welcome to the World of AIDS" narrative requires a *woman* to gain the sympathy of the tale-teller and audience. If you put a man into the role of victim, the protagonist loses innocence and credibility and therefore jeopardizes the image of the Newfoundlander tainted by the mainland. Such an argument requires a closer look at the narratives in which men do play the role of protagonist. Much to my amazement, such observation produced not only information about gender roles but further complications on Newfoundland notions of HIV infection.

In every case in which the protagonist was male, the narrative contained the "Lipstick on the Mirror" motif. The coffin motif

9. These statistics have been put forward by the Newfoundland and Labrador AIDS Committee. Since the statistics are based only on individuals tested in the province, the figures may be misleading. A study, however, of pregnant women tested anonymously for HIV throughout Canada showed a higher per capita level of positive tests among pregnant women in Newfoundland than anywhere else in the country. The first eight months of this two-year study put the level of infection for Newfoundland pregnant women at one in 900 (*Evening Telegram* July 23, 1992).

seemed to be reserved for local female protagonists. This made a certain amount of sense since in terms of traditional gender roles, gifts are expected to be given by men to women and seldom the reverse. But this proved to be an overly complicated observation. Eventually, I concluded that male protagonists don't receive coffins with messages because they don't go to Florida. Male protagonists generally get AIDS *at home*, sometimes through interactions with mainland visitors but sometimes without this information stated. The coffin provides a portable message, one that is not necessary if the interaction with the aggressor occurs at home.

So, the question then is why do men get AIDS at home and women go to the mainland to become infected? The answer, I believe, lies in the one-night stand seemingly always present in the "Lipstick on the Mirror" narrative. Newfoundland men engage in one-night stands in the narratives, Newfoundland women do not. The Newfoundland male, however, who participates in a one-night stand at home and encounters the message on the mirror has, in virtually every case, broken some other social taboo related to the encounter. The most common social violation in these narratives is the transgression of marriage bonds. For example,

[this story] was about this man that cheated on his wife and he went out with a hooker. It was just one night. He had never done it before. And he woke up the next morning and the hooker had marked on the window, on the mirror with lipstick "Welcome to the World of AIDS."

Men who cheat on their wives in these narratives are, most often, straying for the first time. Their partner, the aggressor, as in the example just given, is a prostitute. But other social violations are also discussed in the narratives. In a few of the versions, the man has a fight with his wife, hits her, and stomps out of the house. Perhaps the most interesting of these violations is from a narrative offered as a second version heard by one woman. The teller volunteered the following:

A priest had an extra-marital affair or extra-priestly affair, I guess. The same thing happened. He went to the bedroom to the bathroom in his hotel room and there was the same phrase "Welcome To The World of AIDS."

The taboo behaviors suggested in these narratives break local norms and violate local cultural values. As such, they place the protagonist in a position of liminality.

The variations on “Welcome to the World of AIDS” as found in the Newfoundland corpus of texts indicates quite specific cultural concepts of the disease and its relation to the social world of Newfoundlanders. If the question “Who gets AIDS?” is put to this material, the answer generates an interesting list—a list that includes (1) mainlanders; (2) innocent Newfoundlanders who go to the mainland; (3) Newfoundlanders who engage in intimate relations with mainlanders at home; and (4) Newfoundlanders who engage in taboo behavior and who might therefore be said to be “behaving as mainlanders.” The process of selection in tradition has shaped a new narrative that makes sense locally and has manipulated the older narrative to facilitate localized commentary on social transgressions.

While reports of the coffin version of “Welcome to the World of AIDS” in other parts of North America indicate that the variation is not purely local, the specific constellation of motifs does appear to suggest a particular cultural shaping of the narrative. Syndicated columnist Judy Markey published a similar version of the narrative, which appeared in her newspaper feature in the *Houston Chronicle* in June 1990. Under the title “Teen-agers Remain Invincible,” she summarized the story as follows:

Becky’s friend’s friend, a college sophomore, apparently went to Florida for Spring Break. She met a guy and spent most of her time with him. And on the day that she left, he brought her a present and he said, “I hope this doesn’t seem stupid but I got this for your parents.” When her parents opened the box, they found a small plastic coffin with a note that said, “Congratulations. Your daughter has just been welcomed to the wonderful world of AIDS.” The girl got herself tested last month and she apparently tested HIV positive. At least according to Joy, who got from her friend about a friend of hers. So for a few days I’ve been trying to check out this story.¹⁰

10. The exact date of publication is unknown. The article was passed on to me by Carl Lindahl, who received it undated from a student. Efforts to find an exact date have proven fruitless, but we do know that the story ran in the *Houston Chronicle* (circulation 750,000) sometime before but close to June 24, 1990.

While Markey's version is similar to the Newfoundland story, it differs in emphasis, leaving out the extended courtship motifs, the Newfoundland theme of innocent love, and the focus on the good girl who meets with an evil foreign stranger. It is not clear from the column how popular this version is in Markey's experience since she comments only on the widespread nature of narratives with the same "punch line" but with variation in motif. She notes,

It turns out that college kids from Connecticut to California all have heard a version of this story in the past few months. It's one of those tales that have come to be called an urban legend—a story that gets started (no one knows where) and then compounds and transmogrifies exponentially throughout thousands of American rumor mills.

Jan Harold Brunvand also reported a "coffin" version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" in his syndicated column of February 1992, but in this case, "coffin" becomes "coffee maker." In the feature a thirteen-year-old girl writes in with her version of the story. She writes,

A woman meets a man in a bar. They hit it off right away, and the man asks her to join him on vacation at his beach house in the Bahamas. She accepts and goes with him. They make love and the woman has never been happier. On the day she has to leave, the man sees her off at the airport. He gives her a present telling her not to open it until she gets home. Back home, she finds a coffee maker inside. A note on it says "this is for all the lonely nights you'll be facing. Welcome to the World of AIDS." (1992)

Brunvand cites spring of 1990 as the date for the variation, which he dubs "AIDS Harry." This variation he describes by highlighting the following:

Usually the couple visited some tropical setting, after which the woman got the AIDS message. At first it was just a note in an envelope, but soon the note was described as found hidden inside a gift. (1992)

Brunvand's summary of the narrative as he has collected it, combined with the example he gives from the letter written in to his column, focuses on a couple who meet at home and travel together to the south—creating a different kind of antagonist from the Newfoundland example. Although Brunvand's antagonist is a stranger, he is nonspecific in terms of nationality or regional affiliation, and the implication is that he shares the background and affiliations of the protagonist. The cultural issues involved in the narrating context are different and, therefore, so are the motif patterns.

While the clustering of these motifs can be seen as an index to the cultural concerns of Newfoundlanders, the popularity of the specific narrative images remains to be explained. Why summer resorts, why planes, why coffins? The winter exodus south for Newfoundlanders suggests a local reason for the choices. But there are also parallel traditions and events that may help in arriving at an explanation.

In 1987, Randy Shilts published his best-selling book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the Aids Epidemic*. The book described the sexual exploits of a twenty-eight year old Montreal man named Gaetan Dugas, dubbed "patient zero," who continued to have unprotected sex with a large number of lovers even after he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1980. The book argued that patient zero brought the disease to North America after having contracted it in Europe through sexual contacts with Africans. According to Shilts of the first nineteen cases of AIDS reported in Los Angeles, four had had sex with Dugas, and another four had sex with one of his partners. Shilts further reported that at least 17 percent of the first 248 AIDS cases diagnosed in the United States were linked to Dugas's exploits. As he is described in Shilts's book, Dugas bears a striking resemblance to the aggressor in our story. Shilts reports several of Dugas's sexual encounters ending in a message quite similar to "Welcome to the World of AIDS." Arranged chronologically, the book entry for June 18, 1982, notes,

It was around this time that rumors began on Castro Street about a strange guy at the Eighth and Howard bathhouse, a blond man with a French accent. He would have sex with you, turn up the lights in the cubicle, and point out his Kaposi's sarcoma lesions.

"I've got gay cancer" he'd say, "I'm going to die and so are you." (1987:165)

But the similarities between Dugas and our story don't stop there. Dugas worked as an Air Canada steward, and Air Canada was at that time the major sponsoring airline for charters between Newfoundland and Florida. Dugas also used his job and his flying benefits to travel to resort areas to meet potential lovers in clubs and on the beaches. The book follows his visits to these communities in his deliberate attempts to spread the disease.

Because Dugas was a Canadian, the press in Newfoundland latched onto this part of Shilts's book. The local newspaper printed four articles on Dugas in 1987,¹¹ and although I did not trace television coverage, we can probably safely assume that it matched the newspaper's interest. Two particular versions of "Welcome to the World of AIDS" from the Newfoundland corpus point to the Dugas story as a possible influence. In one the aggressor is an airline pilot; in the other the protagonist is a stewardess for Quantus Airlines in Australia. While Dugas's story bears a resemblance to the standard version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS," it has even greater similarities with the Newfoundland version and may help to explain the resort and airplane motifs popular in the corpus.

But the notion of going south and becoming involved with a contaminated sexual partner is not restricted in contemporary legend to this narrative or even to the AIDS epidemic. Jean-Noel Kapferer discusses this motif in relation to another contemporary legend: the "Spider Boil":

In this story, a girl has been vacationing in some southern land (e.g., Africa or the West Indies), and when she comes back she has a boil on her cheek. The boil swells even larger and finally bursts one night; a lot of small spiders crawl out of the boil, covering her whole cheek. Interestingly enough Klintberg (152) found a gothic short story from the nineteenth century, Jeremias Gotthelf's "Die Schwarze Spinne" (1842), that is set in a medieval feudal community where villagers make a pact with the Devil, and a woman receives the Devil's kiss to seal the pact; when the villagers try to cheat the Devil out of his payment, a black boil starts growing on the woman's cheek. It eventually bursts, and poisonous spiders crawl out. Although the modern story is not identical to the Gothic

11. For example, "Book Says Montreal Man Brought AIDS to America," October 6, 1987. Two years later the book again appeared in the press with an article entitled "Some Doubt Man First Carried AIDS to America," October 7, 1989.

one, the meaning of the black boil is similar. In the modern story, the girl has typically come back from vacationing in some southern land; she has met a dark southern man with whom she has a fling. The story typically targets women travelling south on vacation who have sexual relationships with black men (the equivalent of having commerce with Satan in the feudal plot). (1990:123)

While the story of Gaetan Dugas points to very specific kinds of motifs that may have influenced the Newfoundland version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS," the "Spider Boil" narrative indicates a wider legendary concern with the dangers of holiday relationships. Kapferer discusses this story in terms of a natural inclination for cultures to seek scapegoats who are taken to be responsible for the community's sins. He argues that "to designate a guilty party when one is confronted with an unexplainable crisis is to point to the cause of the problem" and that the "guilty party is always the same: foreigners, those who are not integrated into the collectivity, and those that do not share [their] beliefs."

The Newfoundland world of AIDS is perhaps a world of mainland scapegoats, but I believe the narratives tell us more than that. It is also a world that reflects the life and the complex culture of Newfoundlanders. It is a world of trust in home and trust in your own. It is a world that alters foreign messages that don't make sense and that creates local ones that do.

That world is not only about rumor and story. It points to crucial issues in AIDS education and risk perception and provides a clear example of the applied potential of contemporary legend. Clearly, the cultural notion of who gets AIDS is one central to educational endeavors, not just from the standpoint of understanding stereotypes of people with AIDS, but also from the perspective of perceived personal vulnerability. The upshot is that Newfoundlanders who stay home, don't get involved with mainlanders, and don't engage in the violation of cultural norms are not seen as "at risk" despite participation in risky behaviors. "Welcome to the World of AIDS" points to the possibilities for using selective tradition as a form of educational needs assessment. The narrative tradition speaks of a very specific world of AIDS, a world that might make bad health sense but that nevertheless makes good cultural sense.