


January 2018

## The Booze Blues

Napatsi Folger  
napatsi@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Fiction Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Folger, Napatsi (2018) "The Booze Blues," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 6 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss6/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [tadam@uwo.ca](mailto:tadam@uwo.ca), [wlsadmin@uwo.ca](mailto:wlsadmin@uwo.ca).

# The *Word Hoard*

*/ward/hôrd/* *n.* 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

## The Booze Blues

Napatsi Folger

In 1975, in the small arctic town of Frobisher Bay, Northwest Territories, a child was killed by a drunk driver. The incident spurred public outrage, and stories of family breakdown and alcohol-fuelled violence drew the attention of N.W.T. Commissioner Stuart Hodgson. Hodgson took immediate action, heeding the public call, circulated by petition, for the closure of the retail liquor store in Frobisher Bay. Frobisher Bay has since been officially re-named the traditional Inuktitut name, Iqaluit, and it is the same town where I was born, grew up, and—after spending 12 years in Vancouver—returned to live in 2004. For the entirety of my existence, Iqaluit has been without a liquor store. But like the Murray, Kentucky, that Joshua Adair describes in “Chasers,” Iqaluit was, until very recently, a “moist town.” While “moist” meant that the sale of packaged alcohol was prohibited, Adair explains, it also “meant that restaurants and bars in Murray were able to serve alcohol by the glass or pitcher so long as those sales were roughly equally matched by a food purchase” (Adair 1). I want to dig deeper into Adair’s idea of a “cultural hangover” and explore the importance of historical context when trying to understand social norms, even—perhaps especially—if those norms are contrary to the logic of an outsider.

What struck me immediately about “Chasers” were the parallels between Adair’s descriptions of Murray, Kentucky, and my own town, 3296 km away. I found myself laughing and nodding as I read situations I had experienced many times but had yet to articulate or even consider as phenomena. Everyone in Murray with whom Adair spoke, prior to accepting a position there, seemed obsessed with the topic of alcohol, advising him to stock up on his favourite booze before moving in—advice that he, in his haste to uproot and move to a new city, did not heed. He surprised himself when the fear and desperation set in. When and where would his next drink come from? These are the kinds of thoughts that regularly plague residents of Iqaluit, where the only means of access are by plane and by annual ships that come in when the bay is ice-free.

After yet another warning to bring his own drink when he moved to Murray, Adair writes, he “imagined abandoning all [his] worldly goods and opting instead for a booze-filled U-Haul” (Adair 3). It’s an amusing thought, but it reminds me of another aspect of having limited access to liquor: what happens when you do get access. I’ll never forget my first adult vacation south, in 2005, to one of Iqaluit’s gateway cities—Ottawa. It was great to escape the greasy

burgers and limp, sketchy produce of Iqaluit and to taste sushi, pho, and Indian food again, but what my boyfriend and I were most excited about was drinking draft beers on sunny patios and visiting the liquor store to stock up for the coming winter. I can think of nothing that has made my cheeks burn hotter—with the exception of actually being drunk—than walking into a liquor store with a cart and having the locals gawk at me while I weigh the benefits of enjoying a good bottle of wine over the quantity I could lug back if I bought boxed. Quality over quantity is not a truism in anyone's twenties, however, and we had more than one box of wine burst in our luggage on its way back home. It's another trait we northerners share with the people of Murray: even though I could never shake that shopping cart shame, I would always feel a wave of relief when I saw a fellow resident of Iqaluit, cart in tow, filling it to the top with spirits. We always acknowledged each other with a nod of silent solidarity.

The other popular mode of import, if you have patience and a credit card, is sealift. Every year between June and October (depending on the breakup of the sea ice), freighters come into Iqaluit bearing dry goods, furniture, lumber, vehicles, all manner of non-perishable goods, and, of course, crates and crates of booze. It is, for the middle classes, the most economical and logical choice for bringing up your year's supply of libation. It also affords much broader choices than the local restaurants and the territorial liquor warehouse, which is located in another city and

region of Nunavut. With sealift, you can bring home whatever your heart desires (as long as you have a permit from the liquor commission). You can forego the Coors Lite and Molson Canadian for anything from Ontario craft beer to Japanese whiskey. Being notoriously disorganized and lazy, I finally took the plunge last year and put in my first sealift order. What I found most interesting about my ready access to alcohol was the change in my social habits. My desire to hit the bar lessened dramatically, and I more often opted for bringing a bottle of prosecco (okay, two bottles) to a friend's house and sipping chilled happy juice in the comfort of a home. This is a luxury that most people who drink in Iqaluit can't afford, which is how the historic closure of the Iqaluit liquor store gave rise to the pernicious bootlegger trade.

Though Adair doesn't comment on bootleggers or any illegal booze-related activities, he does note that the moistness of Murray harkens back to the American Prohibition—legislation that, as Daniel Okrent writes in his book *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, “would provoke the establishment of the first nationwide criminal syndicate” (4). The significance of bootlegging trends is intrinsically linked to the social ramifications of mandatory temperance on societies that have already been soaked, for generations, in alcoholism. When a commodity becomes illegal or restricted, the risks of trade become greater, and thus the cost of the commodity increases substantially. I can't speak to specifics in twentieth-century America, or even

modern-day Murray, but what I do know are the astronomical costs of contraband liquor in Iqaluit and a few other communities in Nunavut. If, for example, you were looking to buy a 60oz bottle of liquor (usually with very limited options, probably Russian Prince Vodka or Bacardi White Rum), you could expect to pay a bootlegger \$150. The same bottle could go for \$180 in Rankin Inlet and a whopping \$600 in Pangnirtung, a completely dry community. These are average rates that don't take into account the inflation prompted by holiday seasons or customer desperation. Okrent points out that the women's temperance movement that began in late nineteenth-century America was driven by the misery that alcoholism had inflicted on women's lives—first as children, then as wives and mothers. The desire to bring sobriety into their homes, to stop watching helplessly as husbands and fathers drank their livelihood away at saloons, was one of the major factors that rallied hundreds of thousands of women across the United States (Okrent 15-16). What followed the Eighteenth Amendment, and the enactment of Prohibition, are those dominant tropes of 1920s America: speakeasies and illegal moonshine production. Temperance movements went awry because they failed to take into account that addiction trumps regulation every time. The habits instigating the temperance movement were not eliminated because—for those who struggle with alcoholism or even a semi-regular desire for a night of drinking—prohibition does not hinder consumption. It merely makes the acquisition of liquor more expensive, risky, and (for some) exciting. In the United

States, it served to exacerbate domestic situations for the majority of families across the country that depended on the wages or the physical work of men to support the household. The situation is mirrored in Nunavut, where the build-up of family and community violence and domestic misery erupted into action with the death of that child in 1975.

What people couldn't see, through the haze of outrage and concern for the community, was that alcohol was and continues to be not the problem but just one in a multitude of systemic colonial legacies that have led to the social issues that plague our communities. The same can be said for the generations of working class and farming families that made up the United States over a century ago. It is the nature of complex social systems: they are not easily dismantled or fixed by a single focused solution. Adair highlights the point well, though somewhat morbidly: “[I]f the law passes,” he said, “none of your womenfolk will be safe. There’ll be rapes and robberies ever’where” (Adair 4). This statement struck me immediately, not because of its grandiosity but because rape and theft already are huge problems in my community and in the world at large. Perhaps this is where Iqaluit and Murray differ. But rape, violence, and other illegal behaviours don't stop because people are sober. They're woven into the fabric of our lives—some lives more frequently than others, unfortunately. I am certainly not saying that alcohol does not contribute to the lowered inhibitions that might lead to such actions, but the bigger picture—the problematic effects that alcohol has on a community—can-

not be viewed as a single issue. Alcohol directly causes many physical problems when abused, but it is also linked to many farther-reaching problems. For most, the actual alcohol is either a distraction from these or an exacerbating contributor to them. It is not the one, hard-line cause.

Recent discoveries in addiction research have illuminated the long reach that alcoholism has on generations of people. Neurological studies taking place all over the world, but notably in Italy and the United States, have shown that “addiction remolds neural circuits to assign supreme value to cocaine or heroin, or gin, at the expense of other interests such as health, work, family, or life itself” (Smith 36). It excites a neurological change in us that can’t be undone by deprivation but can—even after days, months, or years—trigger relapse in the most devoted of people. It’s not a wonder, with that in mind, why the people of Murray, Kentucky, were so obsessed with the idea of alcohol or why we take our liquor orders so seriously in the north. It’s a destructive drive that I have seen so often in my life that it’s small comfort knowing “addiction is a disease, not a moral failing” (Smith 37). A small comfort not because it should provide hope that my town, my friends, or my family might be magically cured by electromagnetic therapies that aren’t yet available to the public. When you see a wayward childhood friend wandering the convenience store—drunk off the contents of a stolen bottle of mouthwash, sadness permanently etched into every feature—and you know the hard life that led them to this place but still can’t understand how someone could get to such a point, it is a small

comfort to know that there is a reason, beyond the scope of emotional or spiritual strength, why someone you once loved has fallen so far.

#### Works Cited

- Adair, Joshua. “Chasers.” *Word Hoard*, vol. 6, 2017, pp. 1-6.
- Okrent, Daniel. *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. Scribner, 2010.
- Smith, Fran. “The Addicted Brain.” *National Geographic*, Sept. 2017, pp. 30-51.