

TRIBUTE TO NEWFOUNDLAND, TRIBUTE TO FATHERLAND: MICHAEL CRUMMEY'S SWEETLAND IN A GEOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Brno Studies in English
Volume 46, No. 2, 2020

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2020-2-7>

EWELINA FELDMAN-KOŁODZIEJUK

Abstract

The article invites a reading of Michael Crummey's *Sweetland* (2014) from the geocritical point of view. The novel is a fictional record of the resettlement of a fishing town situated on an imaginary island off the coast of Newfoundland. The main character refuses to leave his home, and by feigning his own death manages to stay behind when all other inhabitants depart. The proposed analysis employs such geocritical tools as geobiography, cartography, sensory experience of the land and its agency, regionalism as well as Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire*. The article analyzes the geobiographical elements in the novel to underscore the book's status as Crummey's tribute to his fatherland. It investigates the factors that prevented the protagonist from taking the resettlement package and the transformations that the deserted island undergoes. It also elaborates on the motif of the map in the discussed narrative and reflects on the role of Newfoundland literature in preserving regional identity.

Key words

Michael Crummey; Sweetland; geocriticism; regionalism; resettlement; lieu de mémoire

The Newfoundland writer Michael Crummey's novel *Sweetland* pertains to recent events in the history of his home island, namely, the aftermath of the cod moratorium introduced in 1992. The economic crisis that followed in the wake of a supposedly temporary suspension has brought an end to a number of fishing communities across Newfoundland. Deprived of their source of income, numerous inhabitants of the Rock were forced to abandon their homes, leaving behind their elderly relatives. In order to lower the costs of providing bare necessities and healthcare to remote towns and villages scattered across Newfoundland's archipelago the government decided to re-institute a resettlement program suspended in the seventies. The necessary condition for the relocation of a particular community in exchange for financial aid was the unanimous agreement of all residents. Crummey's novel is a fictional record of the resettlement of a fishing town, Chance Cove, situated on Sweetland, an imaginary island off the coast of Newfoundland. The main character, Moses Sweetland, refuses to leave his home, and by feigning his own death manages to stay behind when all other inhabitants depart.

The following article invites a reading of the novel from the geocritical point of view that "unlike most literary approaches to space – such as imagology, ecocriticism, or geopoetics (à la Kenneth White) – ... tends to favor a geocentred

approach, which places *place* at the center of debate” (Westphal 2007: 112). The article employs such geocritical tools as geobiography, cartography, sensory experience of the land and its agency, as well as the concept of literary places of memory. It commences with an analysis of the geobiographical elements in the novel to underscore the book’s status as Crummey’s tribute to his father and his fatherland, also read as his father’s land. It investigates the factors that prevented the protagonist from taking the resettlement package which are entrenched in his strong bond with the land, as well as analyzes the transformations that the deserted island undergoes, with a special focus on Gothic elements. It also elaborates on the motif of the map in the discussed narrative. Finally, it reflects on the role of Newfoundland literature in preserving regional identity, and employs Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieu de mémoire* to demonstrate the commemorative function of Crummey’s novel.

Family geobiography underlying the novel

“The family geobiography is the multigenerational history that traces how one’s family came to be where they live today” (Kahn 2019: 2). Unlike any other family narrative, it focuses on the place or places a particular family has lived in or abandoned. It may take a form of nostalgia for the lost land but it may as well be an attempt to account for the individual’s or family’s peculiarity and inadaptability. Family geobiographies “typically report on past events and circumstances, including a decision, an action, or change” and as such they have “the power to interface self and society” (Kahn 2019: 2). While in his previous novel *Galore* Crummey primarily explored stories that lay at the heart of Newfoundland’s mythology and identity, *Sweetland* is teeming with references to the writer’s family history. Though the novel is a fictional account of an invented island and its inhabitants, many characters and events bear resemblance to people and incidents from the stories Crummey’s father used to tell his son. The point of departure for the analysis of geobiographical elements in the discussed novel was Crummey’s poetry-cum-fiction collection *Hard Light* from 1998, which, apart from poems, contains “retellings of his father’s and his grandfather’s fishery lore” (Coleman 2000: 301). Seemingly random recollections, interspersed with family photographs, offer a captivating intimate family story, but simultaneously give an insight into the life of Newfoundland’s fishermen. In the story that inaugurates the collection a young boy carefully watches his father’s weary hands, unaware of what stories they hold or “the world his hands carry with them like a barely discernable tattoo” (Crummey 1998: 9). Yet the reader knows that

[these hands] have a history the boy knows nothing of, another life they have left behind. Twine knitted to mend the traps, the bodies of codfish opened with a blade, the red tangle of life pulled from their bellies. Motion and rhythms repeated to the point of thoughtlessness, map of a gone world etched into the unconscious life of his hands by daily necessities, the habits of generations. (Crummey 1998: 9)

When the boy, who is a thinly disguised Michael Crummey, eventually learns all these stories through his father's reminiscences, he will feel the urge to commemorate and celebrate his ancestors' way of life, to pay a tribute to the fishery lore that has been rendered obsolete in a world without cod.

The notion of things and time ineluctably changing will permeate all of his novels, with *Sweetland* being the finest example, verging on nostalgia. However, it is not nostalgia for the crude reality of a fisherman's life: hard toil, poverty or premature death. Crummey is all too aware of that when he writes in the poem *The price of fish*:

Show me a map and I'll name you a dead man for
every cove between home and Battle Harbour
I am twenty four years old,
there is no guarantee I will ever see twenty five. (Crummey 1998: 73)

The nostalgia present in *Sweetland* acknowledges the sense of loss without turning it into a trauma or implying an end to Newfoundland's character. Life on Newfoundland will go on despite the cod moratorium, the resettled inhabitants will continue to be Newfoundlanders regardless of their new residence, while the abandoned islands will thrive without people. Though the shutting down of islands is a factual loss since people will not be able to visit them, it does not indicate that Newfoundland will cease to be what it is. Yet, as Chafe (2016: 685) remarks "the fear of today washing away and leaving no trace, while being replaced by an uncertain and unhomely tomorrow" drives many contemporary Newfoundland narratives. The deep understanding of the inevitability of change in a world that is already in the process of dynamic transformation lies at the very heart of the discussed novel. Even the hard-headed Moses Sweetland eventually acknowledges that bitter truth. As for Crummey himself, the writer had lamented the loss of Newfoundland's character due to the fishery crisis until he realized that despite growing up in a mining town in the centre of the island, his identity as a Newfoundlander was unquestionable to him. "I'm a Newfoundlander to the core," asserts Crummey, "In some ways my experience was a precursor to what this generation of Newfoundlanders is dealing with, which is growing up in a world hearing about what Newfoundland used to be like but seeing a very different world" (Crummey qtd in Ansari 2014). Yet, as an artist he must have felt compelled to retell those stories of a different world lest they disappear irretrievably along with his ancestors.

Sadly, the power and emotional load of the narrative also stems from Crummey's personal loss, that is the death of his father. In a number of interviews he admits that not until he finished the book did it dawn on him that the story is primarily about dying, and *Sweetland*'s plight is a thinly disguised account of his parent's struggle with cancer. If, as the author reveals, he was interested "in what how we face mortality says about us people" (Crummey 2014a), then Moses Sweetland passed the test with flying colours. As his own end is inevitably approaching due to the scarcity of food supplies, Sweetland reminisces about his life and the people that populated it. These vivid recollections not only account for who Moses

has become, that is, a rather coarse recluse, but surprisingly they reveal him to be a man with a heart of gold who was always there for those who were in need, misfits such as his brother Hollis, the Priddle twins, his blind friend Pilgrim, his agoraphobic friend Queenie, and his autistic grandnephew Jesse. Refraining from judgment, he embraced those people the way they were, a task others would find overwhelming. He is a beautifully drawn character, a paragon of a bygone era of personal responsibility and self-reliance, who was supposedly modelled on someone the writer knew personally. Moses Sweetland is incredibly strong and fit for his age, sixty-nine, performing tasks some present day forty-year-olds would not be able to do. His strong physique is modelled on Crummey's father's best friend, John Fitzgerald, a man that impressed the writer with his physical condition way into his eighties (Crummey 2014b). But apart from that, the biography of Moses Sweetland teems with details and events from the life of Michael Crummey's father. The immediate family of the protagonist, who is one of three siblings, along with his brother Hollis and a much younger sister, is the actual family setup of the writer's parent, including the brother's name and the fact that their mother was twenty years younger than her husband. The anecdote in the novel about the boys' ignorance of their mother's third pregnancy until the actual labour can be traced to a reminiscence from *Hard Light*, the story entitled *When the Time Came*:

Well you didn't talk to children about that sort of thing. We found out when the time came, and I guess they figured that was soon enough. ... What woke us the next morning was our sister, squalling. You can't imagine this, it was like she was conjured out of nothing, from the air. I walked down the hall to Mother's room and she was sitting back against a wall of pillows, holding a child. It was as sudden as an unexpected death and just as disconcerting. A sister is something you need some time to prepare for. (Crummey 1998: 24)

Hilarious as it gets, this particular memory reveals a non-particular but universal observation, namely that though only two generations away, these people and tales belong to ancient times, to a different world. They are a part of a world that has passed irretrievably, a world that should be commemorated though not necessarily mourned since, as Crummey remarks on his parents' restrained sentiments for the changing character of Newfoundland, "those circumstances were not great" (Crummey 2014a).

Other stories that were incorporated into the novel from the collection *Hard Light* include a complicated cow labour that resulted in the animal's death, a mining accident of Uncle Bill Rose, who in the novel is Uncle Clar, and the celebration of Guy Fawkes' Night, a tradition that had disappeared before Sweetland's times but which he reignited for Jesse, who obsessed about it. However, the memory that is almost rewritten word to word is that of Crummey's grandfather's death and the last meal the old man had. In *Hard Light* the writer's father reminisces:

We thought he was getting better, he'd managed a decent meal that Sunday for the first time in months, salt beef and cabbage, peas pudding, he

ate the works. Mother used to make fruit puddings in the old Baking Soda cans, Hollis and myself carried one up to him for dessert. He took three or four mouthfuls from the can and then he slumped over in his bed, never made a sound. (Crummey 1998: 37)

In the novel *Sweetland* ponders upon his father's insatiable appetite and "how incongruous that was" (Crummey 2014: 130) in the face of his death as if the body wanted to rejoice in earthly pleasures one last time. And it is precisely this attention paid to peculiar details that is reminiscent of his earlier novel *Galore*, where the odd and eccentric meant Newfoundland. The other element that Crummey creatively transplants into the novel from his family history is the fact that the window had to be taken out in order for the grandfather's coffin to be carried out of the house. In the book it is Queenie, Sweetland's childhood sweetheart, who has most likely been suffering from agoraphobia for the past forty years, and who is taken out through a window as if she refused to cross the threshold of her house even posthumously.

The death of the protagonist's father is the actual moment that Crummey's father's and Sweetland's biographies diverge, for after an unsuccessful spell in fishery the first one gave it up for a mining career. Thus, the novel may be read as an alternative life of the writer's parent had he continued to fish for cod, and the question that concomitantly hangs in the air is "What would he do faced with the resettlement package?" What decision would the descendant of Ellen Rose of Western Bay make bearing in mind his grandmother's will that bequeathed to her daughter (his mother and Michael Crummey's grandmother) a meadow garden "bounded above by the sky, by the blue song of angels and God's stars. Below by the bones of those who made [her]" (Crummey 1998: 53)? Would he, like Moses Sweetland, stand by the dead buried in the local cemetery rather than live anywhere else?

Sweetland's refusal to resettle and his bond with the land

Although the main character cannot himself explain his obstinate refusal to resettle, one can argue that it is entrenched in his strong local identity as much as it is connected to his loyalty to the dead, both factors *de facto* tightly intertwined. Moses Sweetland is of the place, he *belongs to* it, a phrase an older Newfoundlander will most likely use instead of "I am from" (Crummey and Locke 2004: 18). Sweetland's identification with the place he inhabits is underscored by the island's eponymy, which reminds contemporary residents that Moses' ancestors of Swedish origin were the first people to settle on the island. Yet, there is no sense of ownership, superiority or appropriation in the protagonist's attitude towards the place. On the contrary, his relationship with the land brims with a reverence that possibly results from acknowledging the crude truth that it is he who needs the island, not vice versa. He relies on it for food, water, and firewood, and despite its name the island is far from being a sweet land; a more accurate name would certainly be Sweatland, for it is hard toil to survive in this place.

Naming the imaginary island *Sweetland*, Crummey most likely alludes to the first name given to Atlantic Canada, namely, Acadia, which “derived from Arcadia—its Greek root from Arcas, the hunter—and its Renaissance usage connoting both a wilderness unspoiled and, from that, a pastoral felicity” (Tremblay 2016: 659), both names brimming with undue optimism and false claims. The moment the island is officially shut down and electricity cut off, the way of life on Sweetland regresses to that of the early settlers, its history and narrative making a clever circle. Thus, in the absence of a refrigerator Moses needs to recall the traditional ways of preserving meat and salting fish, as well as extend his vegetable garden in order to gather sufficient supplies to survive a severe winter. It is impossible, indeed, to feel nostalgic about such a traditional harsh way of life. Astoundingly, despite the adversities Moses has been experiencing in the aftermath of the resettlement, the sound of spring meltwater running down the hills does not cease to arouse in him the sense of belonging to Chance Cove:

He'd always loved that sound, waited for it each spring. Hearing it made him certain of the place he came from. He'd always felt it was more than enough to wake up here, to look out on those hills. As if he'd long ago been measured and made to the island's exact specifications. (280)

He is an islander tailor-made for the requirements of his island, which in its generosity provides him with shelter from the indifferent ocean.¹

In an essay on nature writing, Barry Lopez (1996: 12) urges a change in people's relationship with a place, from controlling and appropriating it towards “an ethical and reciprocal relationship,” something Moses Sweetland is a paragon of. Further, Lopez (1996: 11) offers a short instruction on how to “enter a local geography” to those who feel disconnected. He advises keeping quiet and activating all the senses in equal measure in order to fully take in the place, with its bird-song, air movement, the ground beneath and the sky above. Though the reader can easily imagine a smirk on Sweetland's face at hearing such guidance, Lopez's technique of connecting with a place indeed reproduces Moses's instinctive everyday practice, with the sea and the sky being pivotal points of reference since the ocean and clouds are fraught with telltale signs of unpredictable weather. Thus, unlike most city dwellers, Sweetland need not enter a local geography; he is deep rooted in it and his weather lore goes back a few generations. Moses's ties with the land of his forefathers can be aptly summarized in Lopez's words: “paying intimate attention; a storied relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place” (1996: 11). Indeed, Sweetland knows the island intimately, its every nook and cranny, which in turn trigger a myriad of memories from the place's past. Inadvertently, Moses becomes the living repository of these reminiscences and local history. The most intriguing of Lopez's (1996: 11) notions on human-land relations, however, is his belief in the latter's agency:

If you're intimate with a place, a place with whose history you're familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that fol-

lows is this: the place knows you're there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned.

When all residents are gone, the island engages in a dialogue with Sweetland, demonstrating its agency.

At this point, it is worth underlining that the island is not as deserted as it may seem, for it is populated by those who lived and died there, and now walk in a dark procession to stand on Fever Rocks in anticipation.

There were hundreds of them standing on the headlands. All clustered close to the cliffs of the Fever Rocks, as many as ever lived in the cove, he guessed, and not a word among them. All facing the ocean where the intermittent light stirred the blackness. (264)

Regardless of the reader's interpretation of the scene either as a Gothic element or the delusions of a lonely man, the presence of dark silhouettes resonates with Sweetland's conviction that the dead do not vanish entirely and need someone to attend to their memory and their graves. Long-dead Uncle Clar, who used to live with Sweetland and his mother and whose portrait still hangs on the wall of Moses's house, is, for example, frequently addressed by Moses or acknowledged by visitors as if he was a silent inhabitant of the household. Hollis, Sweetland's dead brother, for a change, is an imaginary friend of Jesse, who constantly accompanies the boy to the protagonist's dismay. Interestingly, Sweetland does not undermine the veracity of his grandnephew's visions, for he ventures the possibility that his brother, drowned in the sea, may be a spirit roaming the island. Moreover, the boy seems to know such intimate details of Hollis's life and his relationship with Moses that it is impossible to totally discard his invisible presence. The protagonist has been "the unofficial custodian of the cemetery for years" (203), and when contemplating retrospectively the reasons for his staying behind on the island he discovers that "watching over Jesse's grave" (203) was a major factor. In his essay on utopias and heterotopias, Foucault explicates the shift or even a change in the meaning of the graveyard as a purposefully designed spacio-temporal entity with a specific function, which reflects the deep needs and character of a community that occurred in the nineteenth century:

It is curious to note that in an age which has been very roughly defined as "atheist," Western culture has inaugurated the so-called cult of the dead. After all, it was very natural that, as long as people actually believed in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, not a great deal of importance was given to the mortal remains. On the contrary, from the moment when people were no longer so certain of survival after death, it became logical to take much more care with the remains of the dead, the only trace, in the end, of our existence in the world and in words. (Foucault 1997: 333)

Moses Sweetland is far from being religious. Therefore, in his lay reverence to the dead, leaving "the mortal remains" of his relatives unattended is tantamount

to forsaking them. Hence, he stays alone on the deserted island to keep his dead grandnephew company so that he, a fragile child who hated change more than anything else in the world, would not feel abandoned.

When discussing Sweetland's relationship with the land, it is absolutely indispensable to emphasize that it is devoid of any romantic projections for, as Paul Chafe (2016: 688) observes, the harsh, unwelcoming island defies romanticization. The protagonist knows all too well that the land, just like the ocean, is indifferent to human activity, let alone the human need to preserve things. Moses's approach towards his homeland mirrors the lyrical I in one of Crummey's poems:

When I was a boy in Twillingate
the sailors would say
the ocean is a cruel master,
but I know now it is merely
indifferent, distant,
like the stars;
that it will go on being
what it is long after other things
are lost forever in the dark (Crummey 1998: 101)

The lack of the land's concern for human endeavours is particularly conspicuous in Sweetland's visit to Tilt Cove, the village resettled in the 1960s, where "the community's remains might have been a thousand years old for all that was left of them" (136). The island is far more than a passive observer. The winds, the cold, snow and rain efficiently bring an end to human dwellings, which become dilapidated and get covered by moss. "The land is not so much a constant as it is a constantly self-regenerating entity" (Chafe 2016: 686).

Land's agency steeped in the Canadian gothic

Before discussing the prevalence of Gothic elements in *Sweetland*, it is indispensable to emphasize that they are steeped in the Canadian Gothic rather than its European counterpart, the genre's original form. As Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte observe, "Gothic tropes have emerged in Canadian literature as integral to the postcolonial interrogation of national identity constructs and dominant representational practices," and "are used to convey the ways in which the Canadian national project is inherently haunted" (2009: x-xi). In *Sweetland*, the experience of dispossession, a recurrent theme in the Gothic tradition, takes the form of the resettlement and eradication of the fishing communities of Newfoundland and functions as a challenge to the dominant unifying national narrative. Sweetland's peripheral counter-history, to use Foucault's term, defies and informs a Canadian national project, bringing to light the marginalized and the repressed. In the face of the eradication of fishing communities and the irretrievable loss of lore, Crummey employs Gothic discourse to "initiate forms of cultural mourning (signalling a loss of cultural memory/history resulting from colonialism or migra-

tion)" (Sugars and Turcotte 2009: xi). The ghosts of hundreds of inhabitants in the two-century history of the island should not be easily dismissed, nor should their lived experience on the island go unrecorded for they also "have contributed to the project of Canada" (Polić 2018: 88). Thus, on a metafictional level, the ghostly procession becomes a Gothic representation of cultural memory which resists erasure.

The notion that the world of the living is inseparable from the realm of the dead, characteristic of the Gothic tradition, especially permeates the second part of the novel, "The Keeper's House," which opens with verse 20:13 from Revelations: "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it." The final scene of the first part portrays Sweetland clinging to Jesse's corpse, unable to go up the ladder, and waiting for Barry Priddle to fetch help in the vain hope that the old man will manage to survive the bitter frost before any assistance arrives. In fact some reviewers suggest this scene can be read literally, along with Barry's words: "I expects you'll be dead before I gets back" (157), and may mark the actual death of Moses Sweetland (Brinklow 2016: 140). Although such an interpretation is not unsound, the following article gives Moses Sweetland the credit of doubt and assumes the second part of the novel, that is a self-inflicted Robinsonade, features him still in bodily rather than spectral form. However, the boundary between him and the dead does commence to blur with every page of Part Two. After all, his status on the island is ambiguous.

On the one hand, he is the only person living here, whereas on the other, according to the official record, Moses Sweetland has been rendered dead, drowned in the sea. The moment this suspension between the two worlds (i.e. of the dead and the living) begins to dawn on the protagonist is his first visit to the local cemetery after everyone has left Chance Cove. Seeing a new marker inscribed *Moses Louis Sweetland 1942-2012* becomes a liminal experience that forces the main character to question his ontology. Since he did not expect to be allocated a grave due to the lack of a corpse, he hastily leaves the cemetery feeling anxious "though he couldn't settle on what was disturbing him exactly" (203). Naturally, what perturbs him and what he initially refuses to acknowledge is having been buried alive with the white cross marking the place of his final repose, and even more so, on a metaphorical level, being stranded on the deserted island which will eventually become his grave. When he dies, there will be no-one to bury him. His mortal remains will be at the mercy of the island and its wildlife, a very bleak prospect. However, his own demise is a metaphor for a larger loss, the shutting down of the island and all islands alike. Their end is the actual source of multiple hauntings in the novel, which become "a strategy of resistance against historical amnesia, but also as testaments to belonging" (Polić 2018: 77). The dead occupying the island refuse to be effaced, and the place itself commences to demonstrate its agency.

Nonetheless, the most prevalent Gothic aspect in the novel is the feeling of the Uncanny that Moses Sweetland experiences soon after the island has been abandoned. Freud's 'uncanny', as Sugars and Tercotte explain, "is integrally linked to the paradox of home and 'unhomeliness' —those moments when the familiarity of home [...] is infected by unhomeliness and elicits an 'uncanny' or unsettling experience" (2009: ix). With the departure of its residents the island changes its

character. It becomes a dark and sinisterly quiet place, qualities reminiscent of a tomb. Roaming around Chance Cove and rifling through the inhabitants' houses, Sweetland has the eerie notion of knowing and not knowing the place at the same time. The moment of transition from a realistic account towards a Gothic tale is the scene in which Moses and a newly found dog, Smut (alias Mr. Fox), get lost at sea, enclosed by "fog that had closed in without his noticing" (217). The very fact that such an experienced fisherman as Sweetland allowed himself to be surprised by fog suspends the realistic mode and introduces the supernatural. "The white muffle of fog" (217) acts as a liminal space which enables the protagonist to reenter the island with a changed perception that discerns the normally invisible world of spirits. In order to be rescued Moses needs to reject his rational thinking and follow the voice of Tennessee Ernie Ford singing *The Old Rugged Cross*, a hymn which he knows cannot be being sung in the long shut-down church. Yet, the sound of this religious song, also audible to the dog, brings both safely to the shore of the island. Another unlikely event that follows in the wake of a miraculous rescue is the discovery that there is a game of chess in progress at Duke's barbershop played by invisible entities. Additionally, on New Year's Eve Sweetland hears celebratory gunshots in the distance.

The most poetic scene exploiting the Gothic tradition, nevertheless, is the visit to Queenie's house, which the protagonist initially resists. The recurring light, however, eventually lures him, and to his awe he witnesses the following:

Saw the child standing near the glass. ... The girl was naked and stared out at the night with the same brazen look she had sixty years ago, her hair cropped short as a boy's. Her child's body stripling and oddly beautiful and distressing, just as he remembered. It took him a moment to register the fact she wasn't alone in the room, that there was a woman seated in the chair at the window. Her hair in curlers and her head bowed toward a book in her lap. They were holding hands, the girl and the old woman beside her, though they each seemed oblivious to the other's presence. (279)

The vision of a young and old Queenie holding hands and existing simultaneously annuls the linear character of time and points to the overlapping nature of the past and present. The self always contains multiple past selves which coexist, contributing and shaping it. This multi-layered nature of identity is particularly evident in the reminiscences of the dead, for like the photographs they leave behind there are many emanations of their selves. Thus, the Queenie that inhabits the space of the island, which is synonymous with the space of Sweetland's memory, is the sum of all Queenies of different ages. By extension, the present day Newfoundland is a palimpsest, the sum of all its inhabitants and their stories that continue to shape its nature in manifold ways. On the narrative level, however, Queenie's posthumous confinement to home amplifies her refusal to leave Chance Cove and makes her Sweetland's accomplice in subverting the government resettlement program. Most importantly, it mirrors his confinement to the island with no chance of successful escape. Sweetland is a living ghost, "situated in the in-between space of the displaced" (Polić 2018: 80). Even though he has

remained on his island, he is estranged and displaced due to the absence of his community, which, he eventually comes to realize, was his home.

The protagonist treats all these extraordinary occurrences as eerie, or as he says, the “queerest Jesus thing” (223), yet he does not consider them to be threatening until one event, namely, the sighting of Jesse’s corpse during a seal hunt. The vision of his grandnephew’s mutilated body, which was given a proper burial, is a wake-up call for Sweetland. Suddenly, it dawns on him that there is no Chance Cove without its community, that a place is more than just a space, and the dead seem to be unconcerned with his presence. The beloved island becomes a trap, a grave which he needs to leave as quickly as possible if he does not want to go totally insane.

The motif of the map

Maps appear to be a recurrent motif in Crummey’s works. The notion of mapping a new territory and the map as a political tool permeated *River Thieves*. The inscription to ‘A Map of the Islands,’ a collection of poems from *Hard Light* points to the contingent nature of this cartographic tool: “a map is but one of an indefinitely large number of maps that might be produced for the same situation or from the same data” (Crummey 1998: 103). A map always fails to be an objective representation of a given territory, for even the names of the same places may differ depending on the speaker. As Crummey observes in his poem *Naming the Islands*: “You Say Napakataktalic I say Manuel Island” (1998: 107). The place in the language of the indigenous people does not designate the same space in English for they are rooted in disparate traditions and cultures, in which the attitude towards land is one of the crucial contrasts. White settlers saw the land as their prospective property, while First Nations believed that they belonged to the land and not vice versa. The latter were convinced that even after death their spirits would roam around the places they used to inhabit, just as the spirits of their ancestors populate the present-day territory. Chief Seattle expressed this conviction in the following terms:

Every part of this soil is sacred, in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks ... thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people. ... In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. (Bagley 1931: 255)

There are three significant parallels between Chief Seattle’s and Moses Sweetland’s treatment of the land. Firstly, the strong belief that people belong to the place they inhabit; secondly, that they share the territory with their ancestors’ spirits, the dark procession heading for Fever Rocks in the novel being a perfect illustration of this notion. The third similarity between the two men’s approach

to the space is its potential to tell stories, or “a storied relationship to a place” (Lopez 1996: 11). When Moses ventures out, every place he encounters recounts a past event from his island’s history, inadvertently forcing him to reminisce. In the absence of others to remember the place and acknowledge its stories, Sweetland feels it is his duty to sustain the island’s status as a once inhabited space. Therefore, in an attempt to prevent the island from sinking into oblivion, he spends sleepless nights mapping its territory in minute detail:

He took his time, being careful to include as much detail as possible, as though the island was slowly fading from the world and only his ritual naming of each nook and cranny kept it from disappearing altogether. Coffin Pond, Cow Path Head, The Tom Cod Rocks, the Offer Ledge, Gansy Gulch, Lunin Cove, Lower Brister, Watering Gulch, the Well. (239)

The listed names would never appear on a printed map for they are of little use or interest to visitors from outside the island. Producing such a detailed representation of the island would not be justified economically because of the lack of widespread tourist interest in this territory. Even the commemorative map of Newfoundland Moses comes across at the Priddles’ cabin, targeted specifically at Newfoundlanders to exhort them to visit their old homes as a part of *Come Home Year*, fails to name his island or the adjoining Little Sweetland. The absence of the printed names reinforces the marginal status of both islands. Like many other communities, they have existed on the periphery of St. John’s, which in turn functions as a Canadian periphery. The island of Sweetland is thus doubly deprived of its centrality; it is ex-centric and ec-centric. Yet for Moses it is the centre of his world and deserves recognition. Therefore, as a form of subversive practice, not only does he write the name of the island “where he had spent almost his entire existence” (247–248) on the commemorative map, but he adds other missing names up and down the island, too. As Vanja Polić notes, “The naming of surroundings signifies emplacement, appropriation and, ultimately, settlement into the space” (2018: 82). Analogically, the omission of names becomes a form of historical erasure, especially because numerous toponyms are “evocative of the early settlers naming the landscape around them to counter the acute feeling of displacement in a new space” (Polić 2018: 82). An unnamed space on a map is devoid of its at least two-hundred-year-old history; it has no human-related stories to tell. The most creative endeavour of Moses is his addition of made-up names onto the map of Newfoundland, such as *Queenie’s Island* or *Jesse’s Head*. This subversive practice of resisting historical erasure is a desperate attempt to mark his lost community, in the manner first settlers left their trace for posterity by naming new outposts. With Sweetland, both the man and the island, gone, the map will remain a silent witness to the community’s existence.

Naturally, the lack of a name doubles the island’s status as non-existent to the outside world since it has been erased from the official records and the country’s narrative. Sweetland’s efforts to commemorate the island and its stories are encapsulated in some of the local geographical names. On the other hand, they mirror Crummey’s artistic endeavours to save the lore of fishing communities

that are disappearing at an alarming rate. While Moses's attempts at preserving the memory of his community fail, for the islands of Sweetland and Little Sweetland vanish altogether from the map at the end of the novel, Crummey's stories do have the power to commemorate the traditions and tales of Newfoundland's fishermen. Cleverly, the novel, whose title also signifies the name of the protagonist and his place of origin, becomes a repository of lost lore, providing legends and tales of the territories that are marked on Sweetland's map *Here Be Monsters*. This thought-provoking reversal of colonization, for the land that was known is anew relegated to the status of uninhabited and the unknown, perfectly interacts with the Gothic imagination, which is fraught with ghosts and their tales. The novel itself becomes a ghost narrative that haunts the reader to reflect upon and acknowledge a variety of absences that are currently taking place due to global processes, absences "so insignificant [they] would go unnoticed by anyone not looking for [them]" (317).

Lieu de mémoire: The preservation of little homelands

Through the inclusion of two passages devoted to Queenie's reading habits, Crummey engages in the debate on the status of regional literature, and interrogates its function in "offering mimetic or true-to-life representation of its places and its peoples" (Hulan 2017: 286). Neither Moses's agoraphobic friend nor the protagonist himself can stand books written by Newfoundlanders or set in Newfoundland. Though these novels promise to offer "authentic Newfoundland" (206), in fact they have little to do with the region's realities. "Half the books supposedly set in Newfoundland were nowhere Queenie recognized and she felt insulted by their claim on her life. They all sounds like they was written by townies, she liked to say" (32). In Sweetland's opinion, "Whoever wrote the book didn't know his arse from a dory ... and had never caught or cleaned a fish in his life" (206). What the books seem to lack above all is the lived experience of the described territory; they reduce Newfoundland not even to scenery but a scenography for their tales. They fail to recognize that "places are at once a fact of geography and a social and literary construction" (Hulan 2017: 281) that possess their unique mythologies. Therefore, it takes more than a Newfoundland setting to produce a veracious representation of its varied communities. It is precisely the use of the plural in communities, rather than a Newfoundland community, that Crummey points to. He does not undermine a writer's capacity to offer a mimetic representation of the region, but he does insist on acknowledging its diversity.

In an interview, Crummey (2014a) reveals that in an earlier version of the novel the book that upset Moses Sweetland was *Galore* and, thus, the angry comments the protagonist made were addressed at the writer himself.² Honestly, it is difficult to find Crummey's ironic self-criticism grounded, since the diverse communities he so painstakingly evokes in his novels do not even pretend to represent "authentic Newfoundland". Like a map that is "one of an indefinitely large number of maps that might be produced for the same situation or from the same data" (Crummey 1998: 103), they each tell one of a multitude of Newfoundland

stories. The aspect that lends veracity to *Sweetland* is indisputably its rooting in Crummey's father's and grandfather's lived experience, which prevents the novel from becoming "a simulacrum, a signifier without a referent" (Polić 2018: 89). Undeniably, the novel is a tribute to his ancestors, whose life revolved around harbours, coves and shoals, around nets, cod and capelin. It is a homage to a way of life that has been rendered obsolete in the last few decades. Crummey admits: "In the short span of time after my father moved inland to work ... the world he grew up in disappeared completely. I've spent my whole life watching him watch it go" (Crummey and Locke 2004: 31). Yet, apart from commemorating his forefathers, Michael Crummey manages to create a *lieu de mémoire*, which will preserve the memory of the disappearing and disappeared fishing communities.

In "Between Memory and History" Pierre Nora explicates the need for and nature of *lieux de mémoire*, that is, sites of memory. He argues that they emerge as a result of the ongoing struggle between memory and history, with the latter trying to erase or alter the former. History, which aspires to create a unified and cohesive version of past facts, tends to exclude any narratives that are of minor importance or divert attention from the mainstream. Therefore, only memory, both individual and collective, has the power to validate and sustain the counter-narratives of marginalized groups or communities. As Nora observes:

if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de mémoire*. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces *lieux de mémoire*—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not death yet, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded. (1989: 12)

The movement of global history has brought about the cod moratorium and the extinction of fishing communities, whose memory cannot even be preserved in local museums, for the islands on which these villages were situated are not accessible anymore. The only space available for the commemoration of these people and their way of life is art. The need for the creation of *lieux de mémoire* comes from the fact that "there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (Nora 1989: 7). There are no environments of memory since resettled communities hardly ever form diasporas, the majority of island inhabitants joining their children and relatives dispersed all over Newfoundland or mainland Canada. Therefore, Crummey's novel becomes a unique space where the counter-narrative of a peripheral Newfoundland fishing community is given its voice to tell a story that is as legitimate as any other Canadian story.

Ironically, the global changes such as those that resulted in the overfishing of cod and changed the face of Newfoundland irretrievably have also brought a positive change in Canadian character and literature, namely, the appreciation of regional distinctions and writing rooted in locality (Fiamengo 2017: 261). In fear of becoming another global nation, artists and writers have begun to celebrate little homelands, and the word "regional" has ceased to denote worse or inferior. As Paul Chafe reasserts: "To read any contemporary novel about Newfoundland is

to become witness and participant to the active refashioning and reconsideration of what it means to be a Newfoundlander” (2016: 676). For Crummey, “To be of that place ... is to acknowledge the influence of the past and to be self-reflective about that influence” (Bowering Delisle 2016: 44), to recognize that people are made of storied places. Regardless of its regional focus, or rather precisely because of it, for as Northrop Frye (qtd in Bogdan 1986) asserts, “the more specific the setting of literature, the more universal its communicating power,” *Sweetland* is a universally poignant tale about loss and change. It is a literary testament to the deep truth of John Donne’s “No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe ... any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde” (1923: 98), for the loss of any community, despite its marginal status, impoverishes our world.

Acknowledgement of funding

The project is financed from the grant received from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education under the Regional Initiative of Excellence programme for the years 2019–2022, project number 009/RID/2018/19, the amount of funding 8 791 222,00 zloty.

Notes

- ¹ I borrow the notion of “indifferent ocean” from Crummey’s poem ‘Pulling along toward the last end of Warp of life and the man changes.’ (1935) from *Hard Light* (Crummey 1998: 101).
- ² Forsaking the actual name of the book within the novel seems the right choice, for the author’s postmodern winking at the reader could mar the otherwise serious and mournful tone of the discussed narrative.

References

- Ansari, Sadiya (2014) Crummey’s latest novel takes on resettlement of coastal Newfoundland towns. *The Canadian Press*, August 20. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://www.citynews1130.com/2014/08/20/crummeys-latest-novel-takes-on-resettlement-of-coastal-newfoundland-towns/>
- Bagley, Clarence B. (1931) Chief Seattle and Angeline. *The Washington Historical Quarterly*, 22 (4), 253–255.
- Bogdan, Deanne (1986) Moncton, mentors, and memories: An interview with Northrop Frye. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études En littérature Canadienne*, 11 (2). Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/8052>
- Bowering Delisle, Jennifer (2016) Michael Crummey *The presence of the past*. In: Carrière, Marie, Curtis Guillespie, and Jason Purcell (eds.) *Ten Canadian Writers in Context*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 39–55.
- Brinklow, Laurie (2016) A man and his island: The island mirror in Michael Crummey’s *Sweetland*. *Island Studies Journal* 11 (1), 133–144. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://www.islandstudies.ca/sites/default/files/ISJ-11-1-H-Brinklow.pdf>

- Chafe, Paul (2016) 'If I were a rugged beauty ...': Contemporary Newfoundland fiction. In: Sugars, Cynthia (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 676–690.
- Coleman, Victor (2000) Review of *Hard Light*. *Newfoundland Studies* 16 (2), 300–303. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/NFLDS/article/view/1024>
- Crummey, Michael (1998) *Hard Light*. London, Ontario: Brick Books.
- Crummey, Michael (2014) *Sweetland*. London: Corsair.
- Crummey, Michael (2014a) In the company of the dead, interview by A. Fitzpatrick. *Hazlitt*. September 3. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://hazlitt.net/feature/company-dead-interview-michael-crummey>
- Crummey, Michael (2014b) *Sweetland*, interview by Karin Wells. *CBC radio*. August 22. Accessed May 28, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2495034915>
- Crummey, Michael and Greg Locke (2004) *Newfoundland. The Journey into a Lost Nation*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Donne, John (1923) *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, edited by J. Sparrow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Accessed on May 28, 2020. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7135850M/Devotions_upon_emergent_occasions
- Fiamengo, Janice (2017) Regionalism and urbanism. In Kröller, Eva-Marie (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature. Second Edition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 261–282.
- Foucault, Michel (1997) Of other spaces: utopias and heterotopias. *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. NYC: Routledge, 330–336.
- Hulan, Shelley (2017) Canadian criticism in English: Literature and nation. In: Kröller, Eva-Marie (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature. Second Edition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 283–299.
- Kahn, Jennifer (2019) Learning at the intersection of self and society: The family geobiography as a context for data science education. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 1–24. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2019.1693377>
- Lopez, Barry (1996) A literature of place. *U.S. Society and Values* 1 (10), 10–12. *Electronic Journals of the US Information Agency*. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://web-archive-2017.ait.org.tw/infousa/zhtw/DOCS/ijse0896.pdf>
- Nora, Pierre (1989) Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations* 26, 7–24. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- Polić, Vanja (2018) The hauntings of Canada in Michael Crummey's *Sweetland*. *London Journal of Canadian Studies* 33 (6), 77–93. Accessed on May 28, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ljcs.2018v33.006>
- Sugars, Cynthia and Gerry Turcotte (2009) Canadian literature and the postcolonial gothic. In: *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* edited by Cynthia Sugars, and Gerry Turcotte, vii–xxvi. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Tremblay, Tony (2016) 'People are made of places': Perspectives on region in Atlantic-Canadian literature. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*, edited by Cynthia Sugars, 657–675. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Westphal, Bertrand (2007) *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, transl. by Robert T. Tally Jr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

EWELINA FELDMAN-KOŁODZIEJUK is an assistant at the University of Białystok, Poland, working on her doctoral dissertation devoted to the fiction of Margaret Atwood. Her primary area of academic interest is North American literature and culture. She is a member of the Polish Association for Canadian Studies and the author of several articles that oscillate around the themes of motherhood and geopoetics. In 2015 she was awarded a scholarship from the Corbridge Trust in Cambridge.

Address: Ewelina Feldman-Kołodziejuk, M.A., ul. Wiejska 57/6, 15-351 Białystok, Poland.
[email: e.feldman@uwb.edu.pl]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.
