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# Newfoundland Poetry as “Ethnographic Salvage”: Time, Place, and Voice in the Poetry of Michael Crummey and Mary Dalton

PAUL CHAFE

“**W**HAT THE WATER DOES to your hands when you’re fishing, well there’s no telling it really” — so says one of the many voices in Michael Crummey’s *Hard Light* (18). The apparent impossibility of “telling it,” of putting to paper the lives and hardships of a disappearing breed of Newfoundlander does not deter Crummey, as he attempts throughout his collection to capture not only the instants that form the world of these people but also the moment when that world is lost. Mary Dalton’s work often centres on similar flashes of time and place, but more importantly tackles the “tangly quality” of the “out-rushes of verbal energy” that comprise Newfoundland’s “oral culture” (*Merrybegot* 71), transferring to page the seemingly untransferable and varied island tongue. In a province where time and place can be ingested at ever-increasing “heritage sites,” and the very “voice” of the place is served up on T-shirts brandishing “Newfie” sayings like “Oh Me Nerves,” the poetry of Crummey and Dalton resists consumption. Such poetry is a vital part of the public culture of Newfoundland, for it reflects a reality not captured in tropes and clichés: a reality not defined by culture but lived by individuals negotiating their own space within that culture.

Dalton’s *Merrybegot* converts into poetry the words particular to the Newfoundland dialect, yet she refuses to provide a glossary — despite the fact *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* was readily available to her. Crummey’s *Hard Light* is an example of preservation without sentimentalism. Crummey’s collection is the linguistic preservation of dying trades (boat building, fish “making”) and disappearing traditions (Orangemen’s parades, Bonfire nights), but it is not laden with lament or

nostalgia. In truth, Crummey's work is shot through with the darkness and the difficulties of this life, a life that required one "to live cruelly" (31). These poems are not palatable pieces of Newfoundlandia; they refuse to explain, romanticize, or commercialize. These poems are the preservations of places, times, and voices — the plurality so important because their existence resists a pervasive, singular Newfoundland identity and reflects a culture not lamenting its losses, but rather living in flux.

In *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan uses the phrase "anthropological exotic" to describe a "culture" captured in texts and made readily consumable for outside readers: "The anthropological exotic ... describes a mode of both perception and consumption ... that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (37). Focusing on African literature, Huggan notes that anthropological exoticism "allows for a reading of African literature as the more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous — and of course readily marketable — African world" (37). Shifting his gaze to India, Huggan explains how a text can become an accepted "reliably informative guide-book to a nation's recent cultural past" (70). Such was the case with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a fact lamented by the author: "Many readers wanted [the book] to be a history, even the guide-book, which it was never meant to be. ... These variously disappointed readers were judging the book not as a novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia" (Rushdie in Huggan 70-71). A similar fate befell Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. The novel has become something of a guidebook one presses upon another when Newfoundland is mentioned. Despite Johnston's creation of a fictional Newfoundland landscape, reviewers invariably comment on the "vast, haunting near-continent ... already made familiar to American readers by Annie Proulx and Howard Norman" (Powell), as if, after reading Johnston's text, first-time visitors to the island could effortlessly navigate their way through every cove.

Historian Stuart Pierson (in)famously chastised Johnston for "his casual attention to geographical and historical detail" (283) in his extensive review of the novel for *Newfoundland Studies*. In Johnston's St. John's, roads that should run parallel intersect. Ice accumulates where it never has before, allowing Johnston's Smallwood "to walk the ice floes into

the next point of refuge” (284) on Newfoundland’s ice floe-less south coast. These discrepancies are listed by Pierson as valid criticisms, as if Johnston’s fictional novel is somehow obligated to depict Newfoundland as it really is. Perhaps this sentiment grows from a thought voiced by Lisa Moore in the episode of CBC Newsworld’s *Hot Type* dedicated to Newfoundland literature. As the narrator of “The Rocks Here Tell Stories,” Moore notes that unlike New York, London, and other places that have been “papered over” with literature, Newfoundland is “uncharted territory” (*Hot Type*). Perhaps there exists in Newfoundland an anxiety over “getting it wrong.”

One remedy to the anthropological exoticization of Newfoundland literature is the confrontational route taken by Newfoundland poet Des Walsh in some of the poems that comprise *The Singer’s Broken Throat*. In Walsh’s poetry there resounds the echo of the famous “Anti-Confederation Song” first published anonymously in 1869, which dared the “Canadian Wolf” to “come near at your peril” (Heritage). Walsh moves from sorrow as he writes of Newfoundland hearts “crushed by a maple leaf” (15) to jingoism when he declares Newfoundland “the real home of heroes, where / one hundred miles of ocean / separates Canada from perfect language” (26). His most bristling piece is undoubtedly “Oh Canada,” a portion of which he is portrayed reading in “The Rocks Here Tell Stories”:

I have seen the damage and I hate you [i.e., Canada] for it.  
 I hate your maple leaf and your anthem.  
 And for those of you who accuse me,  
 those of us who are left with the truth  
 say to you with honour and passion,  
 damn you and your thievery,  
 damn you and your cold, calculating colonialism.  
 And while guarding what’s left  
 of our pine clad hills,  
 we bend over and moon the Gulf, Oh Canada,  
 and ask you to kiss our collective arse. (33-34)

Such poetry works to re-establish a strong sense of anti-Canadianism, while Walsh’s other depictions of the Newfoundlander’s “seaweed heart” (60) or the tragically heroic “one lone trap boat ... echoing off our hearts” (56) work toward the creation of a Newfoundland both lauded and lamented by Sandra Gwyn in “The Newfoundland Renaissance.”

Gwyn claims “a collective tragic muse” marks the art and literature of Newfoundland as “entirely distinct,” imbued with a “Newfoundland mystique” and a “sense of place destroyed” (40). This “collective tragic muse” is seen in Walsh’s “Mornings mourning” in which “A nation of people fall to their knees / bowing to Canada’s years of abuse” (9). Walsh’s collection both laments loss and casts blame, and either motive informs “non-Newfoundland” readers that this poetry is not for them. The Canadian reader is either to blame for the loss, or cannot fathom the depth of it. For Walsh, to write of Newfoundland is to write of Canada’s “cold, calculating colonialism.” By its very definition, Newfoundland, and her poetry, is anti-Canadian and either inaccessible or confrontational to “mainlanders.”

Crummey’s *Hard Light* and Dalton’s *Merrybegot* function and play somewhere between the too-simple, too-familiarizing anthropological exotic and the offended and offensive sensibilities of Walsh’s poetry. These poems and their subjects constitute what Homi K. Bhabha has termed (citing performance artist Guillermo Gomez-PeZa) “the stubborn chunks [that form] the basis of cultural identifications” (219). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha asserts that cultural and individual identities are performative and hybrid — “stubborn chunks” that refuse to be dissolved into a single and pervasive national ethos:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, ‘opening out’, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference — be it class, gender or race. Such assignments of social differences — where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between* — find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. (219)

So many of the poems by Dalton and Crummey focus on the *something else besides* and the *in-between* — the characters occupying a space but not defined or limited by it. In this fashion, these poems are an expansion of Huggan’s notion of “ethnographic salvage” (43).

“The Western romantic ideal of ethnographic salvage” (43) discussed by Huggan has its roots in James Clifford’s “On Ethnographic Allegory,” in which the disappearing culture of a particular place is revealed to be “a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: ‘sal-

vage' ethnography in its widest sense" (Clifford 112). Clifford questions the "assumption that with rapid change something essential ('culture'), a coherent different identity, vanishes" (113) and that the recorder of this vanishing/vanished culture becomes, through the act of preservation, a "custodian of an essence, unimpeachable witness to an authenticity" (113). The most dangerous aspect of this recuperation, according to Clifford, is that "since the 'true' culture has always vanished, the salvaged version cannot be easily refuted" (113). In *The Post-Colonial Exotic*, Huggan discusses how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* refutes anthropological exoticist readings while at the same time parodying the romantic notion of salvaging "disappearing cultures" and "untrammelled cultural authenticity" (43). According to Huggan, the strength of *Things Fall Apart* is that it is a "self-consciously hybrid African novel [that] succeeds in attaching a local — largely ancestral, orally transmitted — body of cultural knowledge to an imported ironic sensibility, the sensibility of the modern European novel" (43). Ironic sensibilities are certainly more exported than imported in the case of Newfoundland (see *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, *The Rick Mercer Report*), and it is a self-awareness, touched with irony, that separates these poems from the anthropological exotic.

This mobilization of postcolonial theories to (re)read Newfoundland poetry owes much to *Is Canada Postcolonial?: Unsettling Canadian Literature*. The contributors to this text work to reposition such "post-colonial" notions as Bhabha's *in-between-ness* in a Canadian space. Terry Goldie believes "the best answer to 'Is Canada Postcolonial?' is another question: what opportunities for understanding Canada are provided by the question?" (311). For Laura Moss, one of the benefits of asking the question is that it draws attention to a "plurality of Canadas" (4) that exist for individuals within the country. Neil Besner contends a post-colonial reading does not lift a Canadian text "out of a national context" but leaves it "more deeply embedded in a more various understanding of Canada" (46). A reading of Crummey's and Dalton's poetry can benefit from such ideologies, for these poems do not focus on individuals in order to lift them out of a Newfoundland context, but rather places their individuality into a "more various understanding" of Newfoundland.

Not all of Dalton and Crummey's work can be classified as "Newfoundland poetry." *Hard Light* and *Merrybegot* mark for Crummey and Dalton concentrated efforts at a particular "ethnographic sal-

vage.” The salvage practised by these poets differs from that defined and derided by Clifford and Huggan, for it takes into consideration Bhabha’s notion of the “performative nature” of identity that permits one to continuously negotiate the space one occupies. These poems mark the preservation of actions and expressions without turning into caricatures those whose work, play, and speech is being reflected. This is the salvaging of a culture without the savaging of its people. The ironic sensibility that Huggan sees in Achebe can be seen in these poets’ flirtation with well-established and expected stereotypes that turn into “*something else besides*.” Dalton’s work provides readers with several of these instances.

“Spry” is an obvious instance of the poet writing against expectations to create an individual from an apparent stereotype:

Eighty-four and spry as a goat.  
 He set eight drills of potatoes the spring —  
 His son just got on the construction,  
 And he was looking to get on, too.  
 Yes, he’s sharp as a tack and  
 He’s a good hand to sing,  
 Knows a hundred songs,  
 Get him going, out they’ll  
 Tumble — you’ll here him rattling,  
 Working one up, him leaning  
 Into the song, all six foot of him,  
 His head full of tunes,  
 Feet tapping,  
 Eyes capering after the women. (59)

The elder as repository of folk songs and folklore is hardly particular to Newfoundland, but it is a trope that has been made popular over the years by Ted Russell’s radio plays *Tales from Pigeon Inlet* (transcribed by Elizabeth Miller in 1977), in which the sage Uncle Mose retells the events of his fictional community, more often than not moulding each vignette into a life lesson. More recently, Gordon Pinsent’s portrayal of Billy Pretty in the film version of Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, offers a further example of the clever and quirky outport dweller in the twilight years of his life of labour who can dispense advice and local lore as it is required by Kevin Spacey’s beleaguered Quoyle. Such a man constitutes local flavour, becomes — as Huggan puts it — “the local ‘native inform-

ant', owner-guardian of cultural knowledge" (49), the smiling face that permits (eventual) access and understanding of this other culture. Yet it is in the face — in particular the eyes — of this keeper of communal memory that Dalton inserts *something else besides*.

An octogenarian gently coaxed by friends and family to sing a song, no doubt of local importance, could hardly be a more quaint and welcoming scene. Yet Dalton unsettles this moment with a sexuality that is as much a part of this old man as his music: "leaning / Into the song, all six foot of him, / His head full of tunes, / Feet tapping, / Eyes capering after the women." The desire that still occupies this eighty-four-year-old frame gives definition, even danger, to this character. While it is hardly the "kiss our collective arse" antagonism of Walsh, it is an instance that resists knowing, a reminder that traditions are practised not by tropes, but by multifaceted complex individuals.

Dalton extends this definition and danger to each of the characters in her "community" of *Merrybegot*. In "Janneying," Dalton captures the Christmas custom of mummering — disguising oneself and roving from house to house within the community performing skits, dancing, and waiting for the owners of the home to discern each visitors' identity:

We'd rig ourselves up in any old fit-out,  
Pillows and nets, cotton drawers on our heads.  
The boys let out squeaks, the girls spoke all gruff —  
One fellow missing a finger made up a  
False one so he couldn't be guessed.  
Once we'd get in, we'd kick up the mats,  
Fire up the accordion, dance the whole night —  
The floor-boards'd shiver, the funnel turn red. (35)

In "First Boat," Dalton details what has elsewhere been called "the rugged individualism which is supposedly characteristic of Newfoundlanders" (Overton 14), a tenacity that has inspired Newfoundland Department of Industrial Development to issue pamphlets promoting Newfoundlanders as a "hardy, fun-loving race" (7), unrelenting, undaunted labourers and lovers of life:

Eyes like the cornflower. And a  
Real devil-ma-click —  
I knew when I married him.  
First boat on the water —  
"Where's that sun to,



Lollygagging about?" he'd grin  
 On his way out the door.  
 Ours the highest woodstack.  
 Ours the stable stuffed with hay.  
 Our goats the fattest.  
 Our quilts the most rumped.  
 He'd ruffle my hair,  
 Grin, "Where's that sun to,  
 Lollygagging about?"  
 Our sweat on his shoulders.  
 His blue eyes blazing. (Dalton 31)

In such poems, Dalton reflects a *joie de vivre* first captured by Newfoundland columnist Ray Guy, whose sunshine sketches of "Juvenile Outharbour Delights" have helped to create the notion of outport Newfoundland as a place of fun and freedom. Yet like Guy, whose less-than-idealistic portrayals of Newfoundland counter the creation of the island as a quaint pastoral paradise, Dalton mixes liberal portions of shadow with light to paint a complex portrait of various Newfoundland existences.

Newfoundland author Patrick O'Flaherty claims that "outport life had a raw edge, a harsh and violent tenor" and that such an "existence was carried on next door to danger and death, and the frightening proximity of life to austere nature ensured that there was always a gamble to take, a risk to run" (7). O'Flaherty believes the devil-may-care attitude of the "devil-ma-click" ("adroit, versatile worker; jack of all trades," *DNE*) in "First Boat" reflects the "recognition [on the part of many "old" outport Newfoundlanders] of the futility of grief or protest in the face of irresistible forces." The supposed irrepressible cheeriness or "derring-do" of such people "is a way of coming to terms with inescapable disaster" (7). The missing finger so casually mentioned in "Janneying" also reveals the danger that was an accepted part of "outport life." Dalton's poetry abounds with disasters of various forms and levels of seriousness.

In "The Cross-Handed Bed" a spouse is recalled in much the same way as in "First Boat": as a husband remembers his wife as "a bit of a woman" with "a waist like a wasp" who "welcomed / Each youngster that came." The always imperilled position of joy is revealed when the husband's reflective reverie abruptly ends with the lines: "But the ninth tore her open — / Now she's in the ground" (22). In "Cullage," the

equal parts bitter and anxious voice of the speaker demonstrates how close these characters actually live to “danger and death”:

Not a bit of drite.  
 Day after day of this mauzy old stuff —  
 Now the fish is maggoty and it's slimy,  
 And I got to get out on the flake again  
 With small tubs and pickle and wash it.  
 And rewash it and perhaps the weather'll  
 Marl on like this for a fortnight,  
 And when 'tis all over I got nothing —  
 Nothing to show but a mess of cullage. (23)

The lack of drite (“Dryness in the air,” *DNE*) has all but destroyed this man's life — the months' long labour of catching and preparing the fish reduced to nothing by a run of damp weather. As Crummey demonstrates in “Making the Fish,” even when all went well, the labour of a fisherman was barely enough to keep ahead of starvation:

You could expect \$2 a quintal [i.e. 112 pounds of cod] for your trouble, a good season for a crew was 400 quintals. Anything more was an act of God. The Skipper took half the voyage, out of which he paid the girl her summer's wage, and squared up with the merchant for supplies taken on credit in the spring. The rest was split three ways. \$130 for four months of work, it could cut the heart out of a man to think too much about what he was working for. (17)

Here again one can see evidence that the joy of Dalton's “real devil-ma-click” is truly a warding off of desperation. If it “could cut the heart out of a man” to dwell on his poor pay, then it is best not to ponder it. To stop working, to take time to “protest in the face of irresistible forces” is to risk starvation. Acceptance is the only alternative — to try every morning to be the “first boat on the water.”

One would expect that in communities frequently visited by poverty and desperation, fellow outporters would work together to ward off disaster. This was frequently the case — as even the most shallow wades into Newfoundland history, folklore, and folk music will reveal — yet a willingness to help others is hardly ingrained in the DNA of Newfoundlanders. In spite of the claims on the Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism Website that Newfoundlanders possess a “down-home friendliness” (*Western*), there have been countless deaths and

disasters in which indifference or stinginess by one's neighbours has played a part. Such is the case in Dalton's "Winter Coal":

They trotted right up to the foot of the lane,  
 Cart piled with coal for the light-keeper's shack.  
 But the cousins said no, no crossing their land —  
 So they turned round the horse and headed back  
 For the boat, loaded her up for the Point.  
 Jam-packed to the gunnels, she rode low in the water.  
 A stiff wind from the west and over she went  
 Over she toppled, tossed them out in dark water.  
 One of them got fast to the boat,  
 Held six hours to the side of her,  
 His fingernails tore off of him;  
 His brother's luck broke —  
 She flipped him in first  
 And the coal down on top of him. (68)

Here a man's cousins — his blood relatives — inadvertently cause his death through their seemingly pointless refusal to permit him and his brother to cross their land. Were the cousins jealous of the profit these men stood to make? Did the "cart piled with coal" represent a comfort and an extravagance they coveted? Could any reason be enough to send the man to his drowning? In this instance Dalton seems to be reminding her readers that just as this island seems to give rise to a hospitality and sense of community, a life "carried on next door to danger and death," can also foster a sinister sense of self-preservation. This care for oneself almost borders on an ill-will toward others, resulting in what one reviewer of *Merrybegot* has referred to as "island-born *schadenfreude*" (Chafe 111). The best (or worst) illustration of this is "The Ragged Jacket":

He'd pinch a quarter till it squeaked —  
 He'd begrudge the very breath you took.  
 Might as well try to get blood from a turnip  
 As ask him for the loan of a copper —  
 That was the word all over the harbour.  
 Now he's caught up with that shady outfit;  
 Now he's the one in the ragged jacket.  
 Now it's all one to him  
 That the grave's got no silver sock,  
 That the shroud's got no pockets. (52)

Dalton also hints at “the terror of farms” (12) and the darker side of small community life — a life that is often difficult to escape, as experienced by the abandoned wife in “A Ring for Her Troubles” or the wife of an alcoholic in “Bull Arm Money” who cannot leave her home for she fears her husband will one night “go in on her youngsters” (16). Dalton examines all sides of the words she uses, and the environment out of which they grow. At times this leads her to unsavoury moments and places where colourful words like “merrybegot,” “puff-up,” or “macadan-dies” are revealed to be bright paint brushed over secret shames.

Yet, at various moments throughout the collection, the most cutting words are tempered with love, resulting in what can only be called endearing criticisms. In “Clutch” a woman has a torrent of names for her ne’er-do-well son: “Mister Codder; Twister; / Mister Tongue-hinged-in-the-middle- / And-flapping-both-ways; / Mister Prate-Box; Mister / Put-that-in-your-pipe-and-smoke-it” (20); but the boy remains the “apple of her eye” despite “the whopper[s]” he tells her. In “Devil-Ma-Click” and “Like Something,” the criticisms — “Stop and sit down, him? / He doesn’t know how / To buckle his legs” (24) or “Like something the cat dragged in, / Like something dragged through the hedge backwards” (39) — presume such familiarity that they can only spring from a genuine in-spite-of-it-all (or, as Dalton puts it, “after all that” [11]) form of affection.

Crummey’s poetry is excellent at capturing a way of life without compromising the individuality of those who live it. Like Dalton’s “poems,” Crummey’s pieces need to be qualified, for some are surely found poems or transcriptions of actual dialogue. Crummey admits in his note on the text that “much of this book is a collaboration between myself and Newfoundlanders past and present” (126). The various voices in the text describe many instances of “Newfoundland” life without coming close to discerning a Newfoundland character. Two of the most startlingly different pieces are “The Law of the Ocean” and “Bay de Verde.”

In “The Law of the Ocean,” Crummey offers his readers an instance of Newfoundland sa(l)vagery. The speaker of the piece recollects a time when “we were out jiggging one afternoon, mid-August, the weather fine enough until the breeze turned and a wind as warm as a furnace exhaust came up” (19). Despite the warning from the fishermen to the American servicemen aboard, a “little survey boat” refuses to head to shore and

gets caught in a squall. The following morning, that boat “was sitting on dry land, blown twenty feet up off the water.” Men and boys from the surrounding communities “made pretty short work” of the scuttled vessel: “Took anything that wasn’t bolted down, food, silverware, bedding, books and maps, compasses, liquor, clothes.” The speaker claims it was the “law of the ocean, you see, salvage,” but his critical (shameful?) eye reveals itself when he says, “We were like a pack of savages ... Cleared the boat in fifteen minutes, as if we were trying to save family heirlooms from a burning building” (19). These people seem condemned to the shameful ranks of the “wrackers” in Proulx’s *The Shipping News*, the barbaric ancestors of Quoye who lured ships with false fires to wreck on the rocks below. Yet the very people who stripped the ship bare return later in the evening to help relaunch the boat: “we all helped out where we could ... rocking her back and forth until she shimmied free and slipped into the water” (19).

In “Bay de Verde” the speaker talks of selling a “truckload of potatoes” to the then-isolated town of the title. The truck is mobbed and “in ten minutes the truck was empty and we didn’t have a copper to show for it.” The owner of the truck was “stunned, like an animal that’s just been fixed. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he said, ‘I’m ruined.’” But these people had only momentarily stepped away to deposit the potatoes in their root cellars or pantries and within moments the shocked purveyor of potatoes “had every cent he was owed and he never lost a bag besides” (32). The honesty in this piece seems as leisurely and instinctive as the savage thievery of “The Law of the Ocean,” yet both present two widely differing depictions of Newfoundlanders.

Crummey resists the imposition of a pervasive “Newfoundland” character and permits the poems to stand as moments rather than pieces of culture. In “Stones” the speaker remembers the common and necessary castrating of cats and horses and the drowning of kittens in a burlap sack that moved “like a pregnant belly only two feet out of reach.” The speaker claims he “had to force [him]self to turn away” and cannot seem to forget that those “kittens were barely a week old but ... took a long time dying.” As much as folk music and janneying are inextricable parts of Newfoundland culture, much of the outport life around which this “culture” is based is about “learning to live with cruelty. To live cruelly” (Crummey 31). Crummey rarely lets judgement or ethics enter into his poetry, but prefers to show how individuals react to common activities

and events — thus is the space of “culture” “continually” and “contingently” “opening out” *à la* Bhabha to reveal individuals not defined by culture but performing and negotiating their space within it.

In “Making the Fish” and “Jigg’s Dinner,” Crummey’s “poetry” consists of step-by-step instructions for two such common activities: the cutting, gutting, splitting, salting, and drying of cod, and the preparation of a large family meal of vegetables and salt meat. In “Boat Building,” Crummey makes poetry of words that tumble almost without thought from the mouth of his speaker:

Scarf the joints to frame her out,  
fit the beams, sides and stanchions,  
then caulk her timber tight with  
old rags or moss chinked in  
with maul and chisel.  
Give her a name before you  
fit her out with rigging,  
christen her bow with a prayer. (92)

Crummey (re)creates a world of common rituals, habits, work, and instincts. “Boat Building” converts to song the common practices of so many Newfoundlanders. This poem is reminiscent of the songs memorized by fishermen, sealers, and sailors who did not wish to be lost at sea or shipwrecked:

When Joe Batt’s Arm you are abreast,  
then Fogo Harbour bears due West.  
But unkind fortune unluck laid,  
a sunken rock right in the trade. (Doyle 70)

Survival necessitated that many Newfoundlanders share a common knowledge, but the people who share this life are varied and individual. The back cover of *Hard Light* encapsulates the purpose of the poetry collected within: “In *Hard Light*, Michael Crummey retells and reinvents his father’s stories of outport Newfoundland and the Labrador fishery of a half century ago. Events long vanished are rendered here in a myriad of voices, with the clarity and intensity of lived experience.” Crummey’s poetry is not about the archetypal heroic Newfoundlander but individual Newfoundlanders. His poetry is not the lament over the loss of this trope, but the marking of places where individuals have been. The opening piece of the section entitled “Water” is a deed bequeathing a

fishing room to “Arthur Crummey of Western Bay”: “To have and to hold the aforesaid premises unto the said Arthur Crummey, his heirs, executors, administrators and assigns forever” (13). While the ruins or remains of that “Fishing Room with Dwelling House, Stage, and Store House” will remind Newfoundlanders and inform visitors of the work these people did, the personality of these people can never be known, despite assertions of a “collective muse” or Newfoundland ethos.

This contract is mirrored later in “Her Mark.” The speaker of the piece, “Ellen Rose of Western Bay,” has nothing to leave behind; “her mark” on this world appears not in ledgers, contracts, or deeds to fishing rooms. While the loss of such an individual is often the source of lament, Ellen does not fret her passage into obscurity:

I leave nothing else. Every word I have spoken the wind has taken, as it will take me. As it will take my grandchildren’s children, their heads full of fragments and my face not among those. The day will come when we are not remembered, I have wasted no part of my life in trying to make it otherwise. (53)

In these words is reflected O’Flaherty’s sentiment that “to suggest that volumes of folk-tales and folk-songs will tell our story will satisfy few who know in their bones the nature of life on the island” (3). According to O’Flaherty, the culture, in particular the cultural identity that is now created and consumed as authentic Newfoundland, never existed. There simply was not enough time to create it: “the old outport had no culture at all, because in its deflection away from ‘everyday urgencies’ was almost impossible” (3). The culture stamped on T-shirts and preserved at tourist attractions is the creation of a modern culture industry bent on marketing Newfoundland’s “significant history, distinct culture and genuine people” (*Tourism*). What the work of Crummey and Dalton does so masterfully is wade through the “cullage” (“An inferior commercial grade or ‘cure’ of dried and salted cod-fish ... Refuse” *DNE*) to find the “performative nature of differential identities,” the “*something else besides*,” that separates the individual from the cultural.

Crummey’s *Hard Light* captures a people in continuous flux without the now clichéd mourning for a lost existence. In “Root Cellar,” Crummey remembers the “mound of sod like a single upturned breast” that protruded from the ground of almost every yard, yet he is neither nostalgic nor foolish enough to grieve for its loss: “No one uses them anymore now, there’s a refrigerator in every kitchen, every second corner

has a grocery store.” Though the abandoned root cellar is described as “hollow skull of sod in a meadow, a blank eye of darkness staring behind the doorway’s empty socket,” there is no indication of a desire to return to a lost and simpler time (28). This is not the “window in an empty room in an abandoned house” that constitutes Gwyn’s “collective tragic muse” (40).

Dalton’s *Merrybegot* neither confronts nor coddles its readers, as she refuses to bastardize the voices of her various speakers with a glossary, nor does she keep these words entirely inaccessible to an uninitiated audience. Dalton permits the words to speak for themselves; they are put into context rather than placed under glass. Garnering meaning from the words and phrases surrounding the “Newfoundland word,” the reader gains something of a friendly familiarity as opposed to an anthropological “knowing.”

The work of Dalton and Crummey is unique to Newfoundland literature in that it walks over the well-trod ground of fisher-tropes and “unique language” but refuses to become a celebration (or condemnation) of the Newfoundland identity. To steal a metaphor from Dalton, it is “[a] thin line a good salter walks” (18), and it is an equally thin line dared by these poets. Both writers acknowledge the reality of the harsh pre-Confederation Newfoundland existence, yet both are careful not to mould their Newfoundland subjects into a tragic-heroic race of noble survivors. It is interesting that both Crummey and Dalton liken the split codfish to a crucified man. In Crummey’s “Making the Fish,” the prepared cod looks more like a prepared martyr: “Two cuts down each side of the sound bone, curved keel of the spine pulled clear and the cod splayed like a man about to be crucified” (16). In “Jesus and His Gashes,” Dalton seems to compare a life dependant upon the fishery to a life lived under an oppressive religion: “Jesus and his gashes / Everywhere you laid your eyes. ... The salt cod, cruciform, / The shape of our days” (36). Both Crummey and Dalton acknowledge the undeniable difficulties of life lived in “frightening proximity ... to austere nature,” but they do not get so caught in this mire that their work becomes a platform from which to mourn the collective tragedy of Newfoundlanders or spew hatred at non-Newfoundlanders who could (however inconceivably) be held responsible. Neither do Crummey or Dalton assume that shared hardships, work, and place result in a definitive, singular “Newfoundland character.” Neither the common tragedy



of Gwyn nor the common folksiness touted by the tourist industry are presented as a shared characteristic of Newfoundlanders. Good salters, these poets preserve instances and individuals, and the “thin line” separating identity from culture is salvaged.

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