Kenneth J. Harvey's *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*: Gender in the Twenty-First-Century Newfoundland Novel

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Kenneth J. Harvey's novel *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* (2003) introduces its reader to a fictionalized version of Bareneed, a Newfoundland outport whose colourful townspeople are no longer able to respire without the assistance of medical devices. In addition to this mysterious symptom, the majority of the residents have become increasingly angry, violent, and dissatisfied with their lives in recent months. The reader gradually realizes that these behavioural changes are physical manifestations of the community's historical and ancestral amnesia following the cod moratorium in 1992, approximately ten years before the action of the novel.

The moratorium on cod in Newfoundland had significant economic, political, and social impacts on the province. Martina Seifert states that, as a result of the moratorium, "more than 30,000 fishermen were put out of work," and "80% of families in the small fishing communities had to depend on government assistance programs" (19). Newfoundland writer Lisa Moore has similarly observed how "Newfoundlanders [at the beginning of the twenty-first century] are in the process of coping with the shock of losing the fishery, the industry upon which our ancestors constructed our concept of identity and our sense of place" (qtd. in Seifert 19). Although Moore rightly acknowledges here the impacts of the moratorium on Newfoundlanders, her own writing does not focus on this event, nor does it suggest that contemporary Newfoundlanders are somehow less authentic as a result of recent shifts in their economy.[1] Instead, Moore, and many other contemporary writers, showcase in their writing a cosmopolitan Newfoundland that does not entirely rely on its past, or its outports, for its cultural identity (see Mathews; and Wyile, *Anne*).[2]

The Town That Forgot How to Breathe, however, implies that the "real" Newfoundland can exist only when the island embraces historical modes of living. This real existence includes a rejection of technological advances and a return to past gender roles. In Harvey's novel, the narrator states that

> Bareneed [had been] sliding downhill since the elimination of the cod fishery. People moving away to the mainland, others becoming bitter or passive about the grave injustices the government had perpetrated against them, cutting off their livelihoods. Many residents still retained the fiery Newfoundland spirit and the ingenuity of true islanders, but a lifestyle had been destroyed for approximately half the community and the despair was palpable. (140)

In this way, the text suggests that, much like the cod, Newfoundlanders are in danger of being eliminated. The text is heavy-handed with its comparison of the post-moratorium people to the decreased cod stocks. For example, when infected townsperson Lloyd succumbs willingly to the breathing illness, he has a vision before he dies. Instead of finding fish in a net that he pulls from the water, Lloyd discovers two dead bodies, and he asks himself, "Where are the fish? Why are there human bodies now? Is this my new trade, fishing the dead from the sea?" (53). The text becomes an allegory, or parable, meant to teach the reader about the importance of regional identity, ancestral heritage, tradition, and the role of place in defining and preserving an ostensibly authentic sense of self.

Cynthia Sugars writes that the novel suggests that "contemporary Newfoundlanders . . . need to be rescued from the influence of modernity" ("Genetic" 33). This comment echoes what others have argued about the economic and social forces of globalization as threatening the extinction of rural Newfoundland (see Delisle; and Overton, "Sparking"). Harvey's novel is certainly not the only example of twenty-first-century Newfoundland fiction that presents such an argument. Novels by Michael Crummey (*Sweetland*, 2014) and Michael Winter (*Minister without Portfolio*, 2013) similarly honour and promote the "real" Newfoundland as connected to the past and the outport and as requiring protection and promotion. Moreover, *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* anticipates the blending of hypermasculinity and ancestral history that marks Harvey's later work.[3] Particularly troubling in

this trend is how, in an effort to renew a more traditional way of life, stereotypical gender roles are necessarily glorified. That is, to return the island to its beginnings, it is unavoidable that the activities, and the very identities, of men and women must revert to what the novel perceives as ideal historical iterations. Primarily, the novel connects maintenance of the island's identity, allegedly threatened by changes in technology, the economy, and politics, with notions of patrilineality, emphasizing hypermasculine father figures as the saviours of traditional Newfoundland. Although it is not exactly a revelation to conclude that Harvey's novel ratifies these particular ideas, since they are explicit in its rebuke of contemporary culture and obvious in its celebration of traditional gender roles, the text remains significant for the way that it seemingly prefigures this trend in contemporary Newfoundland fiction.[4]

Together with the breathing illness, other supernatural phenomena in *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* — from the sighting of mermaids to the appearance of corpses in the ocean, impossibly preserved and still dressed in eighteenth-century clothing — gesture toward the mythical quality of Newfoundland's past that the text argues must be renewed. Thus, in keeping with its genre, this gothic novel uses paranormal devices to explore the profound cultural and social changes that the island has recently experienced. Jerrold E. Hogle explains that a "gothic tale" usually takes place in "an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space," often a castle or graveyard, "a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, [or] an aging city or urban underworld" (2). Within this setting, characters are often faced with "secrets from the past" that "haunt" them "psychologically, physically or otherwise" (2). In this way, the designation of gothic fiction neatly describes the general structure and content of *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*: the isolated outport community surely can be described as antiquated, it is part of an island, and the plot follows protagonist Joseph Blackwood as he gradually learns that he is no longer able to hide from the problems that plague his failing marriage.

Hogle states that the gothic is "consistently about the connection of abject monster figures to the primal and engulfing morass of the maternal," adding that one of the "greatest horrors" in gothic literature is "the pull of the masculine back toward an overpowering femininity" (10). Part of the conflict in Harvey's novel is that "townies," such as Joseph and his father, have become "soft," the inevitable consequence

of leaving the outport and their heritage behind for life in the city. It is only by overcoming the ghosts and monsters in the novel — and resisting the wicked temptations of seductive women — that Joseph can regain a greater sense of his masculine identity. Yet an alternative critical perspective exists for the role of gender in gothic fiction. Diana Wallace argues that, "from the late eighteenth century, women writers, aware of their exclusion from traditional historical narratives, have used [gothic fiction] as a mode of historiography which can simultaneously reinsert them into history and symbolise their exclusion" (1; see also Cassidy; Huizar; Taylor; and Wilks). In *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*, we certainly see various characters who question their expected gender roles, but the outcome is not to highlight women's exclusion or to undermine traditional patriarchal structures. Rather, it is to ensure that there is an overt return to structures of gender more firmly held in the past. Whereas Hogle argues that gothic fiction is often expected to juxtapose "extremes" — of gender, race, class, and sexuality — and leave the reader with endings "far less resolved" than initially assumed (11), Harvey's novel gives us a fairly obvious, and emphatic, ending: the townspeople return to their historical way of life, rejecting technology and assuming traditional gender roles. That the author of a gothic novel rejects one of the genre's more popular tropes is revealing, and this particular subversion of genre highlights how a return to traditional gender roles is essential for Harvey's ideology in the novel.

Also significant about the novel's efforts to glorify the past in Newfoundland is that they oppose what Herb Wyile argues is the most predominant trend in contemporary fiction from Atlantic Canada. In *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Fiction*, Wyile describes the "veritable explosion of writers" in the past two decades for whom "the stereotypes by which the region is framed have presented a substantial challenge" (5). He explains how, over the past twenty years, "the fictional worlds" of these writers, including Moore, have become "largely urban, cosmopolitan, and middle class, built around characters working in the service and cultural industries" (6). These authors typically offer a view of Newfoundland based neither upon the outport nor upon any historical conception of the region. Other critics have made similar arguments. Jon Parsons contends that "the so-called real Newfoundland . . . [and] its appeal to a nostalgic longing for traditional values and quaint people in a place

untouched by the depredations . . . of modern society" is "not the version of Newfoundland in Moore's [*Alligator*, 2005]," "an urban novel set in the heart of cosmopolitan St. John's" (5). Terry Goldie suggests that "the end result" of Michael Winter's *This All Happened* (2000) is to "present both the urban Newfoundlander and the heterosexual man as rather more complex than is often suggested" ("Angel" 185). Paul Chafe presents Edward Riche's *Rare Birds* (1997) as a novel that "criticiz[es] a culture that peddles an 'authenticity' based on unfounded romanticism and perpetuated through 'historical' re-enactments" (171).

Speaking more broadly, Lawrence Mathews makes a similar deduction in "Report from the Country of No Country," arguing that "the thematic preoccupations" of Newfoundland writers such as Harold Horwood, Percy Janes, Bernice Morgan, and John Steffler "seem to have disappeared." More recent Newfoundland authors do not have "any interest in developing an overview of Newfoundland identity. . . . [It] is as though the issues of collective identity addressed by the other writers have now been settled or become irrelevant, and the texture of their characters' lives has taken center stage" (12). *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* subverts this trend, however, returning to the traditional concerns and historical themes that Wyile suggests are no longer of such great importance. Although Harvey's novel meets Wyile's claim that many Atlantic Canadian writers have recently concerned themselves with "the reverberations of changing occupational patterns, changing work conditions, and . . . the broader ideological culture within which these changes are taking place" (*Anne* 30), the novel does more than simply highlight changes in work or communication.[5] Rather, its open lament for what has been lost does more than just present "ambivalence about the future" (Wyile, *Anne* 2). It firmly suggests that Newfoundland simply cannot exist without embracing all of the past elements that once constructed its regional identity. In what follows, I examine how this embrace of the past manifests itself specifically in the promotion of strict gender roles in Harvey's novel. In its celebration of all things historical, the novel also glorifies how men and women were clearly separated in the past, praising stereotypes such as the rugged outdoorsman and the "placid" woman (58).

Elaborating on the idea of cultural extinction in Newfoundland requires a consideration of what has been called the "Newfoundland Renaissance." In *Making a World of Difference*, James Overton explains

how, in the 1960s, some Newfoundland academics started to suggest that attempts to industrialize Newfoundland were a mistake, and they subsequently promoted a critique of modernization as potentially weakening the traditional way of life on the island. This critique was partly provoked by Premier Joey Smallwood's resettlement plan in the 1950s, which saw the abandonment of over three hundred rural communities in an effort to diversify and modernize Newfoundland's economy. James K. Hiller explains that "Smallwood was a modernizer" who believed that it was "his job to bring about a 'New Newfoundland' . . . with the help of the federal government and outside investors" (129). However, by the end of the 1960s, with an increasingly difficult financial situation and a growing realization that the resettlement program was destroying the outport culture of the island, the Smallwood government became the object of criticism and ridicule. The subsequent neo-nationalist atmosphere encouraged the celebration of traditional practices, with an emphasis on producing art that glorified the island's past or lamented how much Newfoundland had changed.

Following this, journalist Sandra Gwyn noted what she called a cultural renaissance. Writing in *Saturday Night* magazine in 1976, she observed that this revival was aimed at reconstructing the authentic culture of Newfoundland (see also Brookes; Pocius; and Rompkey).[6] The revival included fiction — from writers such as Ted Russell (*The Holdin' Ground*, 1954) and Farley Mowat (*This Rock within the Sea: A Heritage Lost*, 1969) — that promoted an anti-materialist and often romantic rejection of certain aspects of urban-industrial society. With Newfoundland culture purportedly threatened with extinction, this renaissance was marked by its effort to defend and maintain (if not wholly to reconstruct) the "genuine" Newfoundland identity. This identity revolved around the idea of Newfoundland as a "welcome antidote to the alienating, consumerist modernity of life in more cosmopolitan parts of the country" (Wyile, *Anne* 2). The Newfoundlander was promoted as a colourful, friendly individual who was proud, hardworking, simple, and content. The "real" Newfoundland came to include only those parts of the province remote from cities and towns; it was the supposedly natural, primitive, authentic areas of the island where one could experience tradition, history, and a genuine regional culture untouched by the homogenizing influence of globalization. Over fifty years later, Harvey's novel epitomizes this trend.

Various characters in *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* are meant to represent certain qualities that the novel unquestioningly values. For example, Doug Blackwood, Joseph's uncle, who was born and has spent his entire life in Bareneed, argues that

> The frigging council was always trying to drag in a crowd of tourists to show them the beauty of Bareneed. Like anyone needed to be convinced. . . . Why did they assume they had to peddle the beauty to everyone, try to make a fortune from it when the fortune was already here? Put the people of Bareneed on display like they were museum pieces. . . . [See] how they wriggle like fish on the ends of a hook, gasping their final breath. . . . See how their boats are rotting and their children don't have a clue what a codfish even looks like. No more children going out to sea with their fathers, no more passing of the trade. It was a crime against existence itself. (149)

Here Doug not only overtly connects the breathing illness of the people to the closure of the fishery but also specifically denounces the tourism industry, asking why anyone would try to make money from the beautiful outport when the real riches can easily be found in the simple enjoyment of the land and the water by its residents. Doug laments the loss of the "passing of the trade," highlighting the importance of ancestral heritage and the continuance of tradition. The novel, with its omniscient narrator, encourages the reader to interpret Doug's opinions as an ideology supported by the entire novel.

Moreover, *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* specifically values Doug as a model of ideal Newfoundland masculinity. The reader is told that "Doug, a hardy fisherman like his father, had disowned [his brother, Peter] when Peter resolved to pack up his family and head to the city" (42). Specifically, Peter's wife states that "Doug accused Peter of going after the easy life, turning soft, becoming a townie" (42). As a result of this comparison, Peter and Doug are established as foils. The narrator tells the reader that, "if all the stories were true, Uncle Doug was nothing less than indestructible" (43), immediately before stating that Joseph's parents had both passed away, "his father [Peter] first, of brain cancer, thought to have been caused by toxins in the building where he worked for thirty years as a government clerk in the tourism department" (44). Joseph's father is thus literally killed by contemporary consumerist culture, whereas the indefatigable Doug, who chose to remain in his rural hometown, continues to thrive physically, surviving

as one of the few characters in the novel not affected by the breathing disease.[7] The contrast between Doug and his brother provides insight into the text's fundamental philosophy: "real" men live in the outport, whereas "weak" or effeminate men live in the city.

This philosophy relates to a popular debate spanning centuries. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams writes that

> On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness, and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, and limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (1)

According to Harvey's novel, in the city one is surrounded by dangerous toxins, oppressive government control, stifling work opportunities, and loneliness. In the Newfoundland outport, however, men can express their rugged outdoorsmanship and prove their masculinity through feats of physical strength and endurance. The novel describes Doug in such a way: he is as "solid as a rock" with "scarred and callused hand[s]"; his face is "a strong one, lined by wind and weather" (whereas Joseph is "weaker, paler in his uncle's presence"); Doug "[creates] large wavering shadows that fully [occupy] the room" (251). He also "[revels] in . . . forest solitude" (214). The text leaves little room for misinterpretation. Doug is the ideal, authentic Newfoundland male, whom all other males — represented here by his nephew, Joseph — should aspire to emulate.[8]

Other characters in *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* convey similar beliefs. Joseph's neighbour, the eccentric but lovable Miss Laracy, looks down on Joseph because he is a fisheries officer. She tells him that he is unable to see the "shimmerin'" on the ocean: "[It] wouldn't be made plain ta da likes of ye . . . if ye be a fisheries officer. . . . [Secrets] fer fisher folk 'n da blessed, not da likes of ye" (14). From the first few pages on, the novel establishes that Joseph, who works for the federal government in the decade following the cod moratorium, is not imbued with the ancestral mysticism that Miss Laracy believes is so important. Although Joseph is a Newfoundlander, she judges him immediately

from his clothes — "his manner of dress indicated a townie: scarlet shirt, jeans and new summer shoes" — that he is not "one of them" (13), though she also tries to make a connection between him and the other Blackwoods living in the community. Such familial ties are important to Miss Laracy and many other locals. The ideas of kin and of belonging are essential for establishing whether or not someone is a true Newfoundlander.

Miss Laracy further connects these notions to the fairies, tying together heritage, ancestors, authenticity, identity, and the supernatural. She describes the fairies as being "filled with the blaze of their ancestors, lineage that trailed after them like a stream of unbroken dusty amber" (10). She thinks most highly of those who believe in (if not actually see) the fairies, and the mutual recognition between Miss Laracy and Robin, Joseph's daughter, when they meet emphasizes these themes. Because Robin is a child, she has not yet been conditioned not to believe in the fairies; she has not yet succumbed to the pull of technological and industrial advances, unlike many adults. Wyile explains how Miss Laracy "connects the disappearance of [the fairies] to the appearance of television, implicitly linking the erosion of oral culture to the advent of the technology facilitating the dissemination of mass culture." She is "the voice of anti-modernism" (*Anne* 51), proclaiming that "nuttin' been da same since da snowmobiles 'n da chainsaws 'n all dat jewellery. Where be da horses 'n da sleds 'n da healthy men who could clear a forest widt a bucksaw?" (Harvey, *Town* 297). Especially significant here is her lamentation for the "healthy men" who could single-handedly "clear a forest" with nothing more than a hand-held saw — she, too, connects the advent of modernity with the loss not only of tradition but also of traditional, and valuable, masculine roles.

The introduction to Miss Laracy in the novel also reinforces stereotypical gender expectations or clichés. The first woman whom the reader meets, Miss Laracy takes the form of the archetypal hag or witch, a wrinkled old woman who sees auras, talks to fairies, and has great knowledge of the past.[9] Next the reader is introduced to Claudia (58), Joseph's new neighbour in Bareneed and the mother of Jessica, who we later learn was recently murdered by her father, Reg, and has been haunting her mother's home ever since. The narrator, speaking from protagonist Joseph's point of view, describes Claudia as possessing "sensual" arms and ample breasts and hips. She possesses this traditionally

ideal feminine figure in addition to her "porcelain complexion," which the narrator has Joseph describe as reflecting "Victorian beauty." The narrator states that Claudia presents a "seemingly placid femininity, that gouged at Joseph's heart. . . . She was what he believed, in his idealist and unrepentant male core, to be the consummate woman." The text describes Claudia in ethereal terms: she is soft spoken and "floats" when she walks; she says little, and her gestures are graceful; she is always clothed in long dresses and skirts that still manage to highlight her young, feminine shape. Upon first meeting Claudia, Joseph immediately compares her with his estranged wife, Kim, who "had embraced the age of openness" and had "obliterated any whiff of mystery in her" (58). Joseph describes Kim as such in order to explain why they no longer belong together. It is clear that he finds her "embrace" of "the age of openness" — likely a reference to the feminist movement of the 1970s — something that has made her less attractive to him as a woman and less ideal as a romantic partner. For example, Joseph blames their separation in part on money and work, explaining that their arguments always revolve around questions such as "Who was the busiest? Who slaved the hardest? Who did the most work?" (35). In this way, he implies that, if their gender roles were more clearly defined, and if Kim were more like Claudia, then such arguments would not exist.

His views on women are further explained when Joseph flashes back to his first meeting with Kim. He tells the reader that he was surprised that Kim, whom he found attractive and stylish, was also intelligent, with a master's degree in marine biology: "She had [a] winning smile, but was an exceptionally private person. . . . [She] drank beer instead of fizzy wine. She was a beautiful contradiction" (35). Joseph seems to be unable to reconcile the different facets of her personality and her appearance. For some reason, it is surprising to him that women possess such full, multifaceted identities.

The Town That Forgot How to Breathe not only outlines the "correct" way to be a woman but also, as noted earlier, highlights the rugged and independent Doug as a model of masculinity. A nightmare that Joseph has further emphasizes this view. He dreams that Kim is with another, faceless man,

> the burly exciting man Joseph always assumed Kim wanted, the man full of tall tale adventures, the mountain climber, the scuba diver, the half-frozen, half-eaten, record breaking explorer. . . . Kim

> had once thought that Joseph was such a man. A man of the sea, a man of rugged fisherman stock. When they were first dating he had proudly detailed his lineage. Kim had expected outlandish stories from him, but beyond the tales he had been told of his Uncle Doug, Joseph could offer nothing more, seemingly stripped of historical significance in his move from outport to city. (87)

Again there are references to Doug and the outport as possessing those elusive qualities that form a real man, qualities denied to Joseph as long as he lives in the city and embraces modern life. Overall, the novel situates the ideal forms of both masculinity and femininity as existing in the outport, revolving around a more traditional way of life, one that discards technological advances, social movements, and consumerist practices.

With the inclusion of RCMP Sergeant Brian Chase, *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* gestures to another culture lost to the damning influence of so-called civilization and its industrialization. Chase describes the horrors that he witnessed when previously working in "the Native communities of Saskatchewan" (59). He explains that he and his wife, Theresa, moved to Bareneed in an attempt to escape the depression that she was suffering from as a result of the crime that they witnessed living in both cities and reserves in western Canada: "His talk of rapes, child abuse, suicides, and murders had seemed to actually wound her" (59). Notably, the manifestations of her illness that the narrator highlights affect Chase's ability to fulfill a stereotypical masculine identity. For example, the reader is told that her illness leads to "the eradication of intimacy of any sort between them" and to "her utter disregard for his accomplishments" (60). Chase also informs the reader that he "had accepted these symptoms, helping out around the house, doing his own cooking, washing, ironing" (60). As a result, Chase "felt compelled to seek a transfer to a detachment with a low crime rate, in a region rural and remote," and the reader is told that "Theresa had taken to country living" (61), gradually weaning herself off her medication. The novel therefore suggests that, whereas living in an urban area has only negative effects on its inhabitants, in the outport one can find peace and restoration — and women can return to the duties traditionally assigned to them, such as cooking, washing, and ironing.

Moreover, in Harvey's novel, references to First Nations reserves serve as cautions of what can happen when natural habitats are imposed

upon. Although the destruction of First Nations peoples and their lands is not of primary interest to the novel, it aims to foreshadow what could happen to the authentic Newfoundlander of the outport. In doing so, the text essentially enacts its own sort of erasure by refusing to acknowledge the "original" Newfoundlander, who would have been an Indigenous person. Terry Goldie argues that,

> in Newfoundland, [the death of the Beothuk] enables assertions of white presence which exceed those usually made in Canada. There is a constant concern in Newfoundland with who is a "native Newfoundlander." This means in its essence that the individual was not only born in the province but is a product of generations of residents. The extinction of the Beothuks leaves no "native" contradiction. (*Fear* 157)

Although Harvey's novel gestures toward the loss of Newfoundland's Indigenous peoples, it is much more concerned with preserving the "traditional" Newfoundland culture that began with white settlers, as also symbolized through the appearance of only white bodies in the harbour. Including Sergeant Chase in the novel thus has a dual purpose. First, his move to the community affirms that the outport is inherently safe and reflects the importance of maintaining traditional gender roles. Second, and unintentionally, his inclusion reveals a problem with the text's objectives. In trying to establish a mythology for the island that should be celebrated, the novel ignores a large part of Newfoundland's history. In this way, the novel's efforts — including its promotion of distinct genders — ultimately appears to be arbitrary. The text's willingness to choose which historical events to remember and celebrate makes its portrayal of gender also seem to be indiscriminate.

The presence of ghosts in *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* further supports its goal of promoting the traditional elements of outport culture. A spectral presence in a literary text often suggests a precarious existence or a liminal space. Here it underlines how the Newfoundland outport is perilously close to extinction, occupying positions on both sides of the imaginary boundary that separates past and present. In *Canadian Gothic: Literature, History, and the Spectre of Self-Invention*, Sugars explains that ghosts often serve to imbue Canadian works of fiction with a "collective history" (3). She writes that ghosts "assert and overcome . . . cultural and historical belatedness" (4), thus actually serving — perhaps somewhat counterintuitively — as a symbol of a

cohesive, communal psyche, the ghosts directing the reader's attention to a shared past from which all individuals have descended. Often the ghosts in Newfoundland fiction haunt the post-Confederate moment, drawing attention to how Confederation with Canada haunts the province.[10] Newfoundland emerged as ontologically ambiguous: no longer an independent nation, it nonetheless did not celebrate its newly formed provincial status (Hiller). Yet, for Harvey's novel, the central event is not Confederation but the moratorium on cod fishing, the divisive moment that the text claims has significantly altered the way of life for Newfoundlanders.

Jessica, the recently deceased daughter of Joseph's neighbour Claudia, is one of the few ghosts named in the text, and her role is partly to show the real victims of the moratorium. Jessica is the ultimate casualty: an innocent girl, she is killed by her father when he resorts to violence after losing his job. The text states that Reg was "the perfect father . . . a devoted husband . . . a quiet yet strong presence, until his job was taken from him. That was the turning point" (39). The narrator explains that, after the loss of his job, Reg "started neglecting his family, keeping to himself, uttering a bare minimum of words" (39). He begins to watch his wife and child with "a menacing scowl" (40), making them afraid. He becomes violent, cursing his daughter for making a mess and shaking her "until she screamed" (40). Claudia believes that his violence "had churned out of nowhere, had perverted him, made him evil" (39), and in this way she excuses his actions. Reg is not a "bad" man; the novel situates him as a victim of terrible circumstances in which he is unable to enact his masculine identity.

This language strongly echoes the rhetoric of "the crisis of masculinity" perceived by critics in the 1990s.[11] Melissa Bell and Nichole Bayliss argue that many "white men . . . see themselves as victims of feminists or the advancement of minorities" in contemporary society (567). Canadian historians of gender Christopher J. Greig and Wayne J. Martino provide an economic reason for this notion of men as victims, stating that "many social and cultural commentators have recently suggested that Canadian men are the 'new disadvantaged'" because of the loss of work in the contemporary neoliberal economy (6). Sociologist Michael Kimmel elaborates on the idea of male victimhood:

> Although white men still have most of the power and control in the world, [some] white men feel like victims. [Their] ideas reflect a

> somewhat nostalgic longing for that past world, when men believed they could simply take their places among the nation's elite, simply by working hard and applying themselves. Alas, such a world never existed; economic elites have always managed to reproduce themselves despite the ideals of a meritocracy. But that hasn't stopped men from believing in it.

Kimmel draws attention to an important element of this belief, that a type of misplaced nostalgic longing for the past has inspired this ideology. That is what we see so clearly in Harvey's novel.

At the end of the novel, when the tsunami has washed away all traces of technology from the community and has literally returned the bodies of Bareneed's lost ancestors to their home, and the fish to the sea, the reader sees Claudia, Reg, and Jessica together, "a family snapshot in which everyone was so very happy" (426). Now that the "evil" effects of the moratorium have been reversed, no one is angry with Reg for killing his daughter; he has been cleared of any culpability. Furthermore, Jessica informs Robin that only if Robin's own parents — Joseph and his recently estranged wife — can similarly come together, forgoing their planned divorce, will their "energies" multiply, and the family will be happy again, thus reinforcing the text's support for heteronormative traditions.

Harvey's epilogue informs the reader of how the town thrives without electricity, with a return to storytelling enacted not only by the now-grown-up Robin, who narrates the epilogue, but also by the much happier, electricity-free community. Robin informs the reader that "the residents of Bareneed returned to the sea as the fish were gradually replenished," and while "every last person reverted to lamplight and wood stove . . . stories were told of hardships overcome while children sat around and listened in wide-eyed wonder" (470). This ending is almost parodic in its zealous effort to be sincere: the idea that a twenty-first-century community would knowingly and happily reject the convenience and reliability of electricity is arguably more difficult to accept than the text's many ghostly figures. Yet the text's final line — "the people of Bareneed forgot how to breathe, until they came to recognize who they truly were and . . . reclaimed their lives as their blessed own" (471) — is incredibly telling and firmly situates the novel's message as an earnest one. The conclusion asserts that it is only by embracing the traditional elements of a culture that such a community can recognize

its "true" self. In the novel, neither the present nor the future is as important as the past.

Ultimately, this way of thinking promotes a romantic ideology in which technological, economic, and political changes are viewed as negative and not progressive. One problem with a text that makes such an argument is its inability to picture a realistic future. As Jennifer Delisle argues,

> That there is an authentic "essence" of Newfoundland is highly problematic. It homogenizes Newfoundland culture, excluding experiences of life in the city in the process. If the outport as motif represents a "dying culture" and the loss of the old ways, then a Newfoundland identity defined by outport culture is deeply troubling, for this identity is seen as being under imminent threat, or even already dead. (97)

Not only does Harvey's novel reject any notion of economic, political, or social progress — something that encourages the underdevelopment of the province — but also, by glorifying the past, it necessarily glorifies *all* elements of that past, intentionally or unintentionally. Perhaps most troubling is the novel's exaltation of stereotypical gender roles, which even includes forgiving Reg for Jessica's murder, as the novel suggests that maintaining patriarchal structures is more important than charging a man who is guilty of murder. Positioning Newfoundland outports as "havens" for traditional gender identities ultimately establishes the island as a place where alternative gender identities are not welcome: any man or woman who expresses gender in a way that the text dismisses as inauthentic will fear being rejected by and excluded from the community. By implying not only that Newfoundland society will succeed only if it eschews technological advances but also that separate spheres for men and women are advantageous, *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* situates Newfoundland as a space where progressive gender notions are not viable.

Notes

[1] For example, Herb Wyile argues that "Moore's retrospective engagement with the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* [in her second novel, *February*] provides a good example not only of the increasingly cosmopolitan sensibility of the literature of Newfoundland and

Labrador, but also its incisive understanding of the political and economic tensions of the province's position in a neoliberal, globalized economic order" ("February" 56).

[2] Mathews and Wyile include Michael Winter, Michael Crummey, Edward Riche, and others as examples of this trend.

[3] For example, *Blackstrap Hawco* (2008) creates its own Newfoundland mythology, centring on the many generations of the Hawco family, as led by its hypermasculine (i.e., physically strong, stoic, alcohol-abusing, violent) protagonist. It blends the importance of history and ancestry with the adherence to rigid gender roles. *Inside* (2006) features a group of violent men whose tragic downfalls are blamed partly on the lives that they are forced to lead in the city, a place that the novel suggests has been stripped of tradition (familial and otherwise). In his online review of *Blackstrap Hawco* for *The Toronto Star*, Alex Good writes that the novel establishes "townies" from St. John's as "outsiders," presenting readers with a protagonist who is "strong and silent, hard drinking and violent." In the novel, there exists a sort of "defensive pride in an economically depressed region" with an emphasis "on family, native rituals of violence and local codes of honour." Good also notes how, by the end of the novel, the eponymous "Blackstrap seems to have turned into an archetypal folk hero, his story the story of the people, bearing scars and injuries that represent all of their lives filled with hard luck and struggle."

[4] This is not to say that the novel initiated the trend; rather, published in 2003, it is one of the earlier examples of this period.

[5] Wyile explores this topic in a section of his book entitled "'No Urgency to Draw Another Breath': Kenneth J. Harvey's *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*."

[6] Gwyn included in her article theatre troupes such as Codco and the Mummers Troupe, literary works by authors such as Harold Horwood and Al Pittman, specific texts including *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story et al.), and so on.

[7] The narrator of E. Annie Proulx's novel *The Shipping News* similarly describes the deaths of protagonist Quoyle's parents: "First the father, diagnosed with liver cancer . . . [and then] a month later a tumor fastened in the mother's brain like a burr. . . . The father blamed the power station. Two hundred yards from their house sizzling wires, thick as eels, came down from northern towers" (33).

[8] This portrait of Newfoundland masculinity is not unique to Harvey's novel. For example, Quoyle, in Proulx's *The Shipping News*, describes himself as "immense," noting that "he guessed he was at some prime physical point" (354) after living in a Newfoundland outport for a year. Crummey's eponymous protagonist in *Sweetland* is similar: a physically powerful man who has spent his life performing manual labour, Sweetland dies after his community is resettled, suggesting that this type of masculine identity is no longer feasible in an increasingly modernized Newfoundland.

[9] Poet Robert Graves denies the idea that women can be poets — "she is either a silent muse or she is nothing" (754) — and places them into one of three narrowly defined categories: "virgin," "whore," and "hag" (398).

[10] This is a topic explicitly explored in Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and Paul Bowdring's *The Strangers' Gallery*, among other texts.

[11] Although Joseph Beynon argues that "the precise nature of [a] crisis of masculinity (that is, how it manifests itself and is actually experienced) is ill defined and elusive" (75), he states that the primary cause of this alleged crisis is that questioning men's innate masculine identity also questions, and thus potentially undermines, their position of power.

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