

**INTELLIGIBLE HISTORY, NEGATED SUBJECTS:
THE PRESSURES OF INTIMACY IN MICHAEL
CRUMMEY'S AND MICHAEL WINTER'S
HISTORICAL NOVELS**

**HISTORIA INTELIGIBLE, INDIVIDUOS NEGADOS:
CONSECUENCIAS DE LA INTIMIDAD
EN LAS NOVELAS HISTÓRICAS
DE MICHAEL CRUMMEY Y MICHAEL WINTER**

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Abstract

This article explores the implications of Lauren Berlant's essay "Trauma and Ineloquence" (2001) regarding the therapeutic effects of narrative, also addressing the critical work of other theorists that have tackled the question of the artificiality of personal and historical narratives. By connecting Berlant's insights into the notion of intelligibility with those of Roland Barthes, of testimony theorists and of other critics on ineloquence, my analysis aims to throw light on two historical novels that are articulated through intimate events that prevent certain speakers (Berlant's negated subjects) from producing testimony and, therefore, participating in mainstream narratives and accessing justice. The novels *River Thieves* (2001) by Michael Crummey and *The Big Why* (2004) by Michael Winter hold the past as a scandal where carnal entanglements degrade the epic sweep of the events and show the disruptive effects of non-normative knowledges. Intimacy, thus defined as a lawless and shameful element in society, intersects with the economic and sexual pressures imported into the colonies by the empire (Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2006a). In this context, Newfoundland, in Canada, represents a colony where the ethics of European and American civilization are called into question.

Keywords: historical novel, intimacy, testimony writing, colonialism, Newfoundland.

Resumen

Este artículo explora las implicaciones que se desprenden del artículo de Lauren Berlant “Trauma and Ineloquence” (2001) con respecto a los efectos terapéuticos de la narración, en un estudio que reúne las conclusiones de críticos que han examinado la cuestión de la artificialidad de los relatos de carácter personal e histórico. A través de una comparativa de interpretaciones sobre el discurso inteligible que conecta las premisas de Lauren Berlant, de Roland Barthes y de otros teóricos de literatura testimonial, este análisis persigue ahondar en las estrategias de dos novelas históricas que se articulan en base a una serie de sucesos íntimos, sucesos que impiden que algunos personajes (individuos negados, según Berlant) produzcan testimonio públicamente, lo que les aleja de narraciones socialmente dominantes y de la acción de la justicia. Las novelas *River Thieves* (2001) de Michael Crummey y *The Big Why* (2004) de Michael Winter configuran el pasado de Terranova como escándalo, un espacio donde los enredos carnales degradan el alcance épico de los sucesos y nos muestran las perturbadoras consecuencias de ciertos tipos de conocimiento no normativos. La intimidad, definida así como elemento desordenado y vergonzante de la sociedad, entra en comunicación con las presiones económicas y sexuales que las colonias importan del imperio (Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2006a). En este sentido, Terranova, en Canadá, viene a representar una colonia donde se cuestiona la ética proveniente de las culturas Europea y Americana.

Palabras clave: novela histórica, intimidad, literatura de testimonio, colonialismo, Terranova.

It ruins people, this reconciliation with majority perception.

Rockwell Kent, *The Big Why*.

1. Introduction: The Role of Intelligibility in Narrative Genres

In her essay “Trauma and Ineloquence”, Lauren Berlant claimed that some genres such as testimony and autobiography tend to turn the raw material of experience into repetitious stories that diminish their transformative power and fail to make the reader critically committed (2001: 44). By conventionalizing traumatic

narratives, by “an insistence on the self as a traumatic story that must be told endlessly” (46), certain familiar patterns are created and, consequently, the story’s potential for creating a transformative effect is cancelled out. Our very familiarity with the story mitigates, so to speak, the harrowing content of the work. For Berlant, this repetition, this “hiccupping form” that traumatic accounts circulate (47), robs the vitality of stories that should, instead, be mobilized beyond the narrated scene in order to create an enduring anxiety in the reader, necessary to change ourselves in relation to the newness of the information provided. We may infer from Berlant’s argumentations that narratives that do not keep a harrowing event traumatic after their outcome only produce an inconsequential and futile catharsis.

In view of the banality of the incessant and predictable rhythms of some autobiographical recitations that revolve around traumatic occurrences, Berlant advocates a more “emancipatory” use of genres that could evoke “a desire for bigger, insurgent selves in a world whose parameters and value hierarchies are taken for granted” (2001: 47). She grounds the allusion to insurgence on the idea that we force “intelligibility” into our accounts of the self; that is, we create an artificial neatness in the transmission of our biography to others so that our story can be accepted in our community. “We become available as a subject to the extent that we enter into the bargain of intelligibility”, she claims, because only then “the world promises that the subject’s compliance will be valued and reflected in the social” (50). From this it follows that in order for our plight to be recognized and sanctioned by society —and by law, as Berlant insists— it has to be anointed with the quality of intelligibility. In this case, “words will count as knowledge” (51). As a result, life stories, the plot of one’s life, which often involves the communication of trauma, is filled with “space[s] of clarity” where everything is explained away (45). We seem to be drawn to literature, art, history and other disciplines because of their very promise of intelligibility, and this desire to flatten out “whatever feels overwhelming and nonnegotiable about the world ‘out there’” is what defines, according to Berlant, genres that abide by our culture of “intelligibility-as-law” (50). She extends the implications of this conception of narratives of the self to discourses of larger scope, such as history and the law (42, 43, 52).

When Lauren Berlant claims that “a testimonial story [...] forms an archive of the subject’s destiny as meaning, condenses her into a text as a subject that has been subject to the laws of intelligibility” (2001: 50), she is tapping into an insight that Roland Barthes, for example, had worked on when analysing the relationship between history, the invention of plots, and their deployment in novels. Barthes complained that “[t]he Novel is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time. It is society

which imposes the Novel, that is, a complex of signs, as a transcendence and as the History of a duration” (1967: 150).

Barthes lamented the fact that novelists make the random particulars of existence play “the smallest possible part, in favor of elements which connect, clarify, or show the tragedy inherent in human relationships” (1967: 148). According to him, the conventional third-person novel extracts from the world a pure and significant pattern, destroying meaningless duration. Novels often do what history does, they follow a path which binds the writer to society by not breaking the language of society, by not outrunning its grammars of finality, producing an organized form that follows trodden paths of understanding. For Berlant’s part, and although she speaks decades after Barthes’s structuralist context, she also articulates this insight from a strikingly similar angle: for her, narrative is often a space where “institutions meet persons and make them social” (2001: 48), where the subject has to become orderly and abide by the social rules that demand *meaning* in order to fit into a generalized therapy culture. “To be understood and to appear probable, the eyewitness account must rely for support on the community’s shared perception of reality, common sense”, claims theorist of witness literature Horace Engdahl (2002: 8). I would like to clarify that it is not the individual’s acts per se that have to become orderly, but their speech, and this compulsory transformation of the speaker’s personal, inchoate truth into a truth that could be shared by a community that disavows non-intelligibility implies an integration of the arbitrary, chaotic or, in testimonial terms, unspeakable experiences, into less recalcitrant forms of communicating meaning and purpose.

Barthes attacked the notion of intelligibility as an overly comforting narrative resource emanating from history and from the third-person novel because they fabricate an artificial past as if it were “a security system”, the result of a pact made “between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter” (1967: 146). This interest in the social and narrative pressures that demand subjects to “acquiesce before transcendent narrative” (Cover copy 1996) was somewhat overlooked by some critics in the 1980s and 1990s,¹ since the assumption of intelligibility and repeated pattern became for a while the basis of mainstream theories of narrative. Barthes very incisively took into account the warring forces of historicity versus subjectivity present in all narratives, because these two impulses operate in any act of storytelling: the compliance with narrative design versus the resistance to fitting into a pre-scripted teleology. Any story is, after all, an effort to tie things up in order to exorcise them through a plot that can maneuver reality out of its very aimlessness. However, Barthes insisted that “Literature” should become the “receptacle of existence in all its density and no longer of its meaning alone” (1967: 146).

Studies such as those by Dennis A. Foster (1987), Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (1992), Les W. Smith (1996), Judith Butler (1997), Peter Englund (2002), and Dina Al-Kassim (2010), for example, have also paid attention to the fact that writers usually provide a surplus of story and significance to compensate for the world's opacity and randomness and to make narrators masters of their stories. The claims are that there are kinds of discourses that seek completion and closure such as history, law, biography and certain types of omniscient fiction, whereas other genres avoid consummation and coherence. Testimony writing, for example, has often been defined as refusing understanding because it represents the impossibility of communicating extremely violent or "cognitively dissonant" situations (Felman 1992a: 53). Ranting or abject speech too, because they produce stories at a moment of anguished emotional overflow that destroys, through the passionate or the hysterical, disciplined discourse (Al-Kassim 2010: 128). Judith Butler defines these kinds of speech as excitable, because the mental state of the utterer prevents him or her from being accepted as an authoritative speaker (1997: 15).

Lauren Berlant also focuses on these anxious accounts or narratives involving subjects that are often anonymous and not privileged by the law, particularly women; she calls them "negated" because they are victims of an injustice they cannot voice (2001: 46). Speaking of the testimonial or complaint form in film, she says that "when any woman testifies publicly 'as a woman', she is unknown: her knowledge is marked as that which public norms have never absorbed, even when there's nothing new about the particular news she brings" (47). The experience of subjects historically overidentified with the body is not considered to be impersonal or objective enough, and "dissident knowledge by women" (48) thus becomes irrelevant in a system where negated subjects find it very hard "to find the mode of self-captioning that will be deemed eloquence or personhood within the culture of intelligibility-as-law" (50). For Berlant, liberalism is a culture of the *caption*, that is, a label that derives from the body itself and circulates in certain institutions that verify its capacities.

Horace Engdahl claimed that historical explanations are "kind of anodyne" because the victim's experience is taken to another dimension, different from our own, that of the historical events, where secrets are unravelled, and conflicts neutralized and put behind (2002: 10). In contrast, we may think that testimony, confessional and journal writing, for example, create the ever-present and annul the notion of forward movement and progress by lingering on the unspeakable nature of a secret.² Journals not meant to be made public are a form of adrift utterances too in the sense that the words do not pursue a socializing function, since what may be considered as crucial by society is replaced by the seemingly pointless, trivial or petty (Tacussel 1996: 67).

2. Colonial Intimacies in Two Historical Novels: *River Thieves* and *The Big Why*

The genre of the historical novel is overtly immersed in these antithetical dynamics in which the effort to give pattern or a monumental arc to a significant stretch of time may be thwarted if the writer attends to the particular and muddled experiences of the individuals who lived in it. Thus, in this paper I will explore two historical novels, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* and Michael Winter's *The Big Why*, in light of the binding together of the notions of intelligibility and socialization discussed so far by observing the narrative strategies that their authors use in order to resist the standardization of historical events. These two novels tackle the complexities of applying a historical template to private, inaccessible lives, experiences that would be deemed overly intimate, even shameful, were they to be made public. The raw (and mostly imaginary) testimonials around which the novels rotate, possess a knowledge that "public norms have never absorbed" (Berlant 2001: 47). Their awkward or intractable nature may interfere with the making of collective history in a cultural community, that of the island of Newfoundland in Canada, where the faithful preservation of their history, even in fiction, is paramount.

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River Thieves and *The Big Why* revisit two defining moments in the past of Newfoundland's cultural imaginary: the death of one of the last Beothuk women (the Beothuk were Indigenous People of Newfoundland), and the trial against a controversial American artist, Rockwell Kent, who had moved to Brigus, a Newfoundland outport (a small fishing community), at the beginning of the twentieth century. These novels have a wide epic scope and their subject-matter looms large in Newfoundland: a common sense of guilt because of the unfair treatment exerted on the province's Indigenous communities and a common rejection of outsiders who prey on Newfoundland's allegedly quaint culture. However, their plots in fact revolve around what are apparently secondary plots and characters; step by step the narrative threads are woven by the private and seemingly trivial conversations between masters and servants, employers and employees, spouses and lovers. The logic that glues the events are not the sweeping events of history, that is, the clash between Beothuk and settlers, the dangers of living in the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland or the bizarre acts of a narcissistic newcomer in a traditional outport community, but the petty incidents involved in running a household: the keeping up with meagre budgets and the marginal conversations and secrets whispered in the intimacy of a kitchen or a bedroom. The demands of domesticity and the clandestine liaisons happening off the record replace and act upon the larger pressures of historical circumstance.

In *River Thieves* and *The Big Why*, the communication of the actual facts that

changed the course of history is carried out exclusively outside of public or institutional forums. Terrible truths are generated when human beings come too close to one another, and their transmission in a format close to the chronicle would compromise their very regularization in a face-to-face community such as Newfoundland. Michael Crummey has often claimed that Newfoundland society allows for a kind of society that can still live “intimately”. More specifically, he said that his aim in taking up the Beothuk issue in the novel was to study the kind of intimacy they had with the white settlers; he calls this circumstance an appallingly “bizarre intimacy” (in Wyile 2007: 307). Michael Crummey himself had the chance to meet one of the main characters’ great-grandsons, and while holding his hand he felt this closeness to be a quintessential Newfoundland experience. While it may be convenient to take into account this physical proximity when assessing the writing and reception of historical novels in Newfoundland, as they have often become the target of heated controversy,³ the implications of the concept of intimacy reach further than the particular cultural context of the region. Studies of intimacy have gone beyond the idea of emotional or physical closeness to consider its connection to political governance, especially in connection with colonial and capitalist practices. Social and cultural theorists see intimacy as the site where empires rehearse their colonial economies. Elizabeth Povinelli, in *The Empire of Love* (2006), constructed her analysis by extending the rules implicit in the social organization of intimacy—understood as love or passion and structured around the couple—to the rules that the colonizing governments used to create uncontested power. She argues that the imagery of intimacy emerged from the European Empire as a maneuver of domination and exploitation:

the intimate couple is a key transfer point between, on the one hand, liberal imaginaries of contractual economics, politics and sociality and, on the other, liberal forms of power in the contemporary world. Love, as an intimate event, secures the self-evident good of social institutions, social distributions of life and death, and social responsibilities for these institutions and distributions. If you want to locate the hegemonic home of liberal logics and aspirations, look to love in settler colonies. (Povinelli 2006: 17)

A hierarchy of intimacies created the particular divisions between masters and servants in the colonies, as Ann Laura Stoler also contends when examining the interdependence between sexual management and labor recruitment in imperialistic policies: “tacit knowledge, stray emotions, extravagant details, ‘minor’ events” are the elements that, according to Stoler (2006a: 7), people used to make sense of the living conditions in the colonies. A great deal of attention has been historically paid by governments to the physical comportment and domestic spaces in colonial economies. There was an “obsession of the state and plantation bureaucracy with the intimate coordinates of racial categories—who slept with whom, who could

marry, who could not, whose children were recognized as legitimate”, remarks Stoler in her preface to *Haunted by Empire* (2006b: xii). These close encounters which occur in the kitchen or in the chamber are not just “microcosms of empire but its marrow”, sites where “relations of power were knotted and tightened, loosened and cut, tangled and undone” (Stoler 2006a: 3). Within this map of affections and desires intimately bound with the precepts imposed by colonialized and patriarchal societies, the machinery of the plots of *River Thieves* and *The Big Why* are assembled and made to operate.

In *River Thieves*, the action begins in 1819 when a group of Beothuk camping in Red Indian Lake are approached by an expedition of white officials and settlers that have been following them for months. It is a highly emotional moment in the history of Newfoundland because of important ensuing repercussions. The Beothuk became extinct in the second decade of the nineteenth century and, in order to present this iconic encounter, Crummey selects as a focalizer a half-asleep Beothuk woman who is breast-feeding her baby when everyone else in her group is asleep. She hears a stranger’s voice, gives the alarm, and runs with the others toward the trees. But she cannot keep up, stops, and turns to face the white man who is chasing her. Then she opens her cassock and reveals her breasts. The white man takes off his coat and throws his gun to the side. But she knows that all is lost to her —her husband, her son, their place— when the white man presses her face into his coat and she hears muffled gunshots.

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This woman is taken to live in her captor’s household and called Mary: “We had to call her something”, John Peyton explains. “We couldn’t make head nor tail of whatever she called herself” (Crummey 2001: 292). In the scuffle between the white armed men and the Beothuk, two Beothuk men were killed, one of them her husband. She was also separated from her baby, who died shortly after the confrontation.⁴ The novel’s brief dramatization of this moment of colonial contact has been carried out by means of an image of the intimate visual and physical encounter between a woman and a man. As the woman is a nursing mother, she believes she will be saved by a gesture of exposure that may overcome cultural and language barriers.

After this prelude, we move back in time to 1810, when John Peyton is woken up in his house by the yells uttered by his father in a nightmare; now the chaptered narrative of Part I begins, when a third-person narrator tells us about the daily routines in the lives of John Senior, his son John Peyton, and Cassie Jure, the housemaid, who get up from bed in the same house to a new day with plans for work. From this time onwards, the novel will only effectively move forward by concealed or exposed acts of intimacy. The attempt to bring justice to the two murdered Beothuk men is the historical axis of the novel, but the veracity of the

future trial will be frustrated by an unrelated intimate plot occurring in the world of the white settlers and officers.

Curiously enough, *The Big Why* leads us to the proper narrative through a similar path. Before the novel starts, the writer highlights the contrasts between public record and private experience. This time, the clash of views is produced by the juxtaposition of an extract from a newspaper (a genre associated with the public domain), and a personal letter in which Rockwell Kent shared a private thought with a friend. The conspicuity of Rockwell Kent in the American public life of his period is evidenced in the journalistic statement used as the first preface to the novel, “[t]hat day will mark a precedent/ which brings no news of Rockwell Kent —The New Yorker, 1937”. This quote is followed, on another page, by the aforementioned letter, whose layout is reproduced here:

BEGINNING
THE NAKED MAN OF BRIGUS

A man goes to sea here as one would depart from
the earth for the moon or Jupiter. They are map-
makers. The largeness of the Newfoundlander's
field of labour is so apparent —I've become
more intimate with our little round earth since
I've been here than in all my life before.

—Rockwell Kent
letter to Charles Daniel, 3 June 1914.

The initial remark on the repercussions of Rockwell Kent's rebellious public persona on the press becomes perhaps less relevant in view of the disclosure of Kent's confidentiality, as his intimation on the incommensurability of the Newfoundland geography comes together with a profound sense of intimacy with the earth.

After these paratexts, *The Big Why* properly starts with Kent trying to trace the reasons that took him to Newfoundland. However, he mainly concentrates on his wife's face, her one facial gesture, her intimate thoughts: “What are you thinking about. About the children. About you. If you are faithful. Her firmness a blend of grace and warding off heartbreak” (Winter 2004: 3). He remembers the morning before he had to travel for a life in Newfoundland: “We were folding my shirts. Kathleen was pairing up socks. How many socks did I need. What kind of weather will you endure. Wool, she said, is better than cotton. [...] She said, It is a terrible thing not to know how to love” (5). The general pattern of the novel is advanced in these introductory pages: there is a blending of conversations Rockwell Kent had with historical figures of his time with descriptions of his routine domestic

chores. The artist's metaphysical longings and the requirements of home management are not separate matters. The domestic preparations for his journey overlap with the transcendent conversation he is having with his wife about directing one's destiny and achieving authentic art and love. In these moments previous to Kent's departure, we read: "Kathleen: This is what I believe: when you make love, you are funnelling the world through the beloved. You make love to the world through the one body. And making art is the same" (5). Rockwell Kent cannot actually speak about art without binding it to a language of sexuality and marital conduct. Sexuality, domestic chores and monogamy are the physical material—the semantic funnel—through which he conducts his thoughts about unfeigned art and life.

3. Negation of the Testimony Bearer: The Erasure of Vulnerable Witnesses

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There is the life that is acted out, and then there is the secret life. But I do not advocate a merger between the secret life and the willed one. I do not believe bad men should confess to their badness and find ways to reroute badness into socially constructive ways. Let the badness be bottled up. Let it remain unexplored [...] What

is wrong in living the double life? Why praise the open one? Why risk feelings? Why risk the embarrassment that may come from revealing them? (Winter 2004: 372)

As the artist had claimed earlier on in the novel, he is a man of appetites that cannot “refrain from the most intimate act a man and a woman can do” (57). His pressing private compulsions replace a public view of reality that would consider his views insane. Indeed, his lust for women will compromise his determination to become a genuine artist and a real Newfoundlander.

Likewise, the narrative in *River Thieves* depends on the relationship between the courses of desire in a love triangle of powerful English white settlers at a time when they are aggressively imposing their proprietorial attitude on the island. John Senior’s house becomes a site where the carnal entanglements hide and complicate colonial policies on land and First Peoples. This house also becomes an opaque space where the mismanagement of intimacy will coerce silence; the home encompasses the unspeakable darkness generated by two men and a woman who are trying to adjust to the idea of a colonial family as closely as possible. They are John Senior and his son John Peyton —masters and landowners of a big portion of land around the River of Exploits— and their assistant, Cassie Jure. They know what their roles should be but their inability to perform them fills their everyday life with regret and confusion.

According to Povinelli, the core issue at the center of modern capitalism in empires and colonies is the foundation of the self through questions such as: “With whom do I wish to share, not merely the materials and rights that I have accumulated as I have passed through the world, but the narratives of who I think I am, what I discover I am, that I am desiring to be?” (2006: 183). Cassie Jure left her mother and father behind in St. John’s (Newfoundland) before becoming the housekeeper in John Senior’s house. John Senior brought Cassie over to Newfoundland’s northeast shore in the hope that in time she would become his son’s wife. She is an educated woman and she teaches John Peyton the English classics. But while John Senior expects his son to marry her one day, John Peyton thinks that Cassie is his father’s lover. Still, for John Senior the question at stake about Cassie continues to be: is she my wife or my daughter? (330). This uncertainty as to who should play certain expected roles embitters the father-son relationship. And Cassie’s independence of mind and her emotional detachment adds to the two men’s frustration. She tries to play out the idea of England in an isolated and harsh place with a fragile social cohesion; her idealized reading of life through the English classics is set in contrast with the racial, familial, and gender breaches that colonial exploitation produces.

The fact that relatively early on in the novel Cassie turns to an Indian healer for an abortion reflects the saliency of these concerns with the functioning of the colony.⁵

As Ann Stoler insisted, “who slept with whom, who lived with whom, and who acknowledged doing so; who was recognized as one’s child and by whom one was nursed, reared, and educated; who was one’s spiritual light and by whom one was abandoned” was the backbone of a European society reproduced literally in the colonies (2006a: 3). The Indian healer that helps Cassie is married to an Irishman—a poor white—whom John Senior had saved from starvation in the Irish district in London. This hierarchical kinship of power and duty will forever secure the secrecy of the Beothuk murders because the man who engendered the child was one of the representatives of the English crown in the colony.

The novel includes all the ranks in the social structure of the colony. In hierarchical order: English representatives of the crown (Governor John Duckworth), English officers (Lieutenant David Buchan), rich English merchants (John Senior and his son John Peyton), poor whites (trappers and fishermen who become privates for the expeditions), household servants (Cassie), and Indians (outside of the colonizers’ circle). The upper ranks formed the solid structure of the colony; they ruled economy, sex, and ethics. Social taxonomies arranged the intimate spaces in which people lived: the colony inherited the empire’s structures. And their cracks opened narrow passages, illicit contacts which could never spill over the barrier of the intimate and come into the open. The secret of Cassie’s unborn child is, against all prediction, inextricably related to the fate of the Beothuk, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. Michael Crummey deliberately made two unrelated facts interdependent: Cassie’s unplanned lover and the truth about the killing of the Beothuk men. The future of John Senior’s property depended on his son’s marriage to Cassie but, in the end, it comes to depend more on Cassie’s silence; if her knowledge of the events became known, John Senior and his men could be charged with murder.

Throughout the novel, John Peyton feels disgusted with his father’s violence against the Indians and he wishes to make up for this lack of scruples by helping Lieutenant Buchan to find them against his father’s will. But once his father’s position becomes endangered because of his involvement in the murder of the two Beothuk men, he will cover it up in order to secure their continuity in the land. John Peyton steals the evidence of the crime, David Buchan’s private journal, and in doing so he betrays all his previous values. Father, son, and servant eventually act only for the sake of family interests; their conspiratorial effacement of factual truths is necessary to secure control over the land and also their authority over the laborers who depend on them.

Significantly, the two most far-reaching acts included in the novel remain hidden in David Buchan’s journal: the Beothuk woman’s testimony to the murders and Cassie’s pregnancy by David Buchan, the latter event revealed by Cassie’s own

hand through a sentence she writes in Buchan's diary. The journal exposes an act of intimacy and it is the site where John Senior and John Peyton discover Cassie's secret affair with Buchan. In contrast to the public testimony of the court deposition, this diary attests to the only truth in the novel, a truth for which there will be no social witnessing. As such, the discourse of the intimate becomes a moving target in *River Thieves*; it is a tool that has characters wanting to know more about others, but this game of getting closer and farther from truth undermines their moral standards and exposes the impracticality of their alleged social roles.

What has been communicated in secrecy remains inaccessible and will forever haunt the characters. "[W]hat has been witnessed cannot be made whole and integrated into authoritative telling", as in the crises of witnessing that Shoshana Felman described: "the scene of witnessing has lost the amplifying resonance of its communality [...]. It is no longer a collective, but a solitary scene. It does not carry the historical weight, the self-evident significance of a group limit-experience, but embodies, rather, the *in-significance*, the ineffectuality [...] of a non-encounter between two solitudes" (1992b: 171, emphasis in original). Buchan, a married man, will not reveal the truth about the killings of the Beothuk for fear of the shame that would come from the journal's public exposure. Cassie is involved in the same adulterous relationship, which her masters abhor; her disloyalty to them endangers her relative authority in the house, a pressing concern that makes the injustice committed against the Beothuk recede.

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Consequently, the reader becomes the only witness to a series of evil deeds, the ending of the novel being an explosion of personal outrage and suffering as a result. John Senior's previous murder of a weak and old Beothuk man only surfaces at the end, a sudden confession that takes place while Cassie is washing the dishes in the kitchen. He was not being judged for that murder or any other that he had committed in the past, only for the ones perpetrated during the official incursions into Beothuk territory. Cassie is witness to this account, as she was of the testimony of the captured Indian woman, Mary March, when she managed to tell Buchan about her separation from her baby and about the two men being murdered in the clash described at the outset of the novel. After John Senior's confession, Cassie, in turn, tells him that her father had sexually abused her, finally giving the true version of a story she had so far kept to herself (Crummey 2001: 398-399).

The racial and social hierarchy remains the same after the terrible violations committed against humanity. Whites rob the Beothuk of their hunting and fishing grounds and, in return, the Beothuk rob and spoil the white men's property. Rich and poor whites (including ex-convicts) have full citizenship and unashamedly kill Indians in revenge for their thefts. Although the white men in the fateful expedition

are obsessed with remaining outside of the ties of accountability, they also need to vent their trauma, which they do by giving shape to their actions as episodes in a tale of shared guilt and relief. Their manly tales of superiority articulate the deeds as less vicious than they really are by redefining their purpose as the elimination of a threat (the Indians). Thanks to this narrative of self-defense, the male characters in the story manage to evade the ethical consequences of their violent overreaction against the Beothuk. In reference to Barthes's complaint, we could say that they have transformed the recalcitrant into the purposeful.

When the same recollections of their brutality cross the threshold of the home, the truth about what happened is told differently; it is whispered fragmentedly in domestic conversations that chaotically zig-zag across the novel. In the presence of a woman, there is a different awareness of vulnerability: "It is a sad truth about the world [...] that only a sense of mutual vulnerability promised any shelter at all" (Crummey 2001: 280), says Cassie at one point. Although this thought slips into her mind in connection with her sexual affair with the English officer, it underlines the general message of the novel, where a sense of shared weakness legitimizes the secrecy about the settlers' ruthlessness.

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Parallel to this structure of violence and ethical justification —the legacy of the colonial idea that the world was given to the white man— ambiguity undermines the foundations of the white families who make a living in these harsh circumstances. Tellingly, Cassie represents the perils of the collapse of roles for women in the nineteenth century, of the breakability of borders in definitions of daughter, lover, wife, teacher, housekeeper, servant, slave. The family she comes from is haunted by the phantom of incest and brutality and the family that later hosts her in Newfoundland equally mishandles intimate acts, which provokes larger personal and community disasters. Cassie's past represents the muffled silence between consent and rape; through her, Crummey invokes the blur between care and coercion in domestic life.

Cassie's role, however, goes beyond her compulsory submissiveness, as she is the only person who tries to understand Mary and thus undo her status as a negated subject in order to give the Beothuk woman some agency. As Berlant claims, "denegation is the best we can imagine for the social transformation of subordinated lives" (2001: 45). This Beothuk woman represents the ultimate negated subject in the novel. Her real name and her suffering have literally been tucked away in the folds of a narrative that mostly focuses on the tribulations of the settlers. She only reappears halfway through the novel, after she is taken to John Senior's household where she is considered a disgusting presence and looked on as a servant. Her smell, her clothes, her bothersome habits, her very body, contribute to making her unintelligible and, therefore, undesirable and subordinate. Her plight cannot be

considered as such by the others; her rage, as Berlant holds, “has no sanctioned place in the social” (2001: 51). The unintelligibility of her body is also a matter of concern for Cassie who, despite her uneasiness (Crummey 2001: 290-291), teaches Mary some English in order to “unsilence” her knowledge and make her less “unknown” (Berlant 2001: 47).

In the presence of David Buchan, Mary draws a picture of herself with a baby and also sketches a rudimentary map that shows her wish to be taken back to her place (Crummey 2001: 270). That Mary had a baby was news to Cassie and Buchan. They also learn that all the men on the expedition are lying when they infer from Mary’s broken words that her husband and her brother had been murdered in the altercation. This problematic knowledge associated with a person irrelevant to society is the dissident knowledge Berlant described in her article, a kind of witnessing not produced by “the legitimate person” but by “the systematically negated subject”, information that represents the “failed testimony of the dominated” (2001: 49, 51).

If the Indian woman, in her status of potential witness, was a danger to the men who shot the two Beothuk, we may wonder why they took her with them. While discussing what to do with her once the Beothuk men had been killed, Peyton says “[w]ell given the circumstances, I’m not sure it’s wise to have her learning how to talk regardless”, and his father retorts: “There’s not a soul going to listen to a Red Indian over the word of eight of us [...]. Am I right?” (Crummey 2001: 245). The very idea that the Indian woman could be considered a coherent and intelligible person with a right to be heard seems preposterous to them.

Added to the negation of this woman as a bearer of trauma—and of evidence—the erasure of the existence of children also affects Cassie. She writes in David Buchan’s diary “There was a child. Before I ended it, David. I was pregnant” and she never spoke about it to others (Crummey 2001: 365). Only the journal can open up spaces where the unsayable is registered, as it allows “adrift utterances” that do not enter into the social sphere (see Tacussel 1996: 67). Mary’s child was also written out of all accounts of the episode, but re-inscribed in Buchan’s journal. However, before this journal could become a public document and thus a legally incriminating text, it is snatched from Buchan and he will have to cover up for the settlers not to tarnish his reputation. These witnessing acts will not eventually become collective, but solitary and impermanent (Berlant 2001: 48; Felman 1992b: 171).

These situations contain the structures of feeling and force that critics such as Elizabeth Povinelli and Ann Stoler recurrently find to be true evidence of the past: “[T]hose tense and tender ties played out in beds, kitchens, nurseries, and schoolrooms” which were “secured and subverted by too much knowledge and

not enough, by newly acquired tastes, cadences of speech and movement within and outside what people at particular times considered private or called ‘home’” (Stoler 2006a: 3). *River Thieves* enacts this play of cadences because its rhythm gives expression to a number of physical and emotional ambushes and retreats. The novel traces the lack of balance between confession and muteness that keeps unsettling the plot at every turn.

4. Rockwell Kent: The Desire for the Newfoundland Experience

The Big Why enters the same dynamics of desire, love, and marriage at similar junctions, revolving, as it does, on the ups and downs of one of Rockwell Kent’s marriages. The couple is also seen in this novel as the site where entrepreneurial individuals regulate rights and secure appropriation of resources: “I will make love to my wife and paint hard and build a garden. This here land is my outpost, and from here I’ll make a name. We’ll visit New York as a treat, and blend into Newfoundland life. I’d be a people’s painter. Yes, I wanted to raise a brood of Newfoundlanders and honour my wife” (Winter 2004: 16). Here Rockwell Kent is endorsing the liberal discourses of love that Povinelli and Stoler address, a discourse that imagines love to possess magic properties and ethical import but in fact is an economic plan for expansion because it stitches “the rhythms of politics and the market to the rhythms of the intimate subject; and conserve[s] the civilizational distinction between metropole and colony” (Povinelli 2006: 190).

The artist’s relationship with the Newfoundlanders he meets is seen as a form of artistic and touristic appropriation, Newfoundland being America’s newest folklorized playground. He chooses Brigus as his quarters because it is purer, less contaminated culturally than New York or St. John’s. Brigus has iconic power because it was the hometown of Arctic explorer Bob Bartlett, whom Kent admired and whose sense of purpose he tries to emulate. Rockwell Kent thinks he can fabricate his own identity anew by absorbing the essence of that special community. One of his first mornings there, when he wakes up in the freezing house he hired in Brigus, he says: “If you must have it all culminate. If you insist. It came down to a small chunk of time that broke me. It pried apart my backbone and left me beached. It shucked me. I will tell you of a desire to live with a rural people, to love them and be loved” (Winter 2004: 46). In this novel, the question at stake is who is entitled to possess and render Newfoundland in appealing images for others to consume. What Rockwell Kent primarily encounters is, however, the weight of the unspoken social and economic rules in the region, a place with an indenture system still in force at the beginning of the twentieth century, which left limited access to

resources and cash for most people. Kent's money puts him in an advantageous position over his neighbors; nevertheless, he idealistically seeks to forge his destiny outside social pressure, in a romanticized place where poverty is picturesque. He desires landscape to be the only reality.

Kent's belief in the existence of a quaint place, "a bizarre alternative to Western routine" (Marcus and Myers 1995: 19), deconstructs itself most apparently in the simplicity and straightforwardness of his statements. His taking advantage of Newfoundland culture is made explicit several times: "I just wanted to live here, I wanted its customs to inform my work and make it unique. I wanted to make my name in Brigus. I was using the culture. I was exploiting it" (Winter 2004: 7). Winter, the author, is making his character a victim of the cliché of Newfoundland as a therapeutic land for the urbanite. More than that, Rockwell Kent himself becomes a victim of romantic discourses of the self as an autonomous entity in pursuit of a destiny: "I'd realized that my own ambition, let's call it Rockwell Land, was tied up not with a place but more with the idea of who I was" (60). The lesson in self-knowledge we are supposed to gain at the end of a journey—which is usually translated into narrative form as the elevated objectivity that hindsight allows—is parodied. In fact, Kent has not been able to separate the trivial from the decisive. Indeed, Michael Winter does not make Rockwell Kent discuss his notions of art as disentangled from those "tense and tender ties played out in bed", the site where Ann Stoler found the true documents of history (2006a: 3). "Intimacy created meaning", Kent says when describing a sexual encounter (Winter 2004: 54). In truth, as will be clarified in what follows, who slept with whom and whose children are recognized by whom is what conducts Kent's narrative; this hypnotic labyrinth of passion overrides his alleged metaphysical and artistic preoccupations. As in *River Thieves*, biography becomes the battleground of the warring discourses of history and intimacy.

Kent gets into trouble before going to Newfoundland because in New York he sleeps with a previous lover, Jenny Starling, before actually having his family embarked for Newfoundland. Jenny will eventually give birth to their child, whom he does not get to know. Sometime later, in even more awkward circumstances, Kent takes a girl servant, Emily Edwards, as his lover when his pregnant wife is away. She is the girlfriend of Tom Dobie, a young man who introduced Kent to Newfoundland and helps him with the house rehabilitation. We will learn later that Tom Dobie will accept the fact of Emily's pregnancy and marry her. Parallel to the emotional crises that shake the world of *River Thieves*, Kent's entanglements are anchored in the habits of sexual access imposed by colonial and patriarchal societies, endlessly projecting into the gender arena unequal power relationships between superior and subordinate, master and servant. As a result, Kent's marriage will

break down and also his attempt at creating a paradise out of Newfoundland. *The Big Why* will come to an end when the state authorities throw the interrogation systems of the law on him after he becomes suspected of being a spy for the Germans. His innocence, his right to be part of the island, is tainted by the shame he brings on his circle of relations.

In *River Thieves*, intimate outrage risks coming into the open when the English crown wishes to find out the truth about the murders of the two Beothuk through a trial. In the same way, although in a less dramatic situation, intimate matters run the risk of becoming public knowledge in *The Big Why* when Kent is officially accused of treason. Self-obedience to oneself may not be the truest form of freedom, Povinelli points out (2006: 184). Rockwell Kent represents a failed utopian artistic and economic enterprise, as well as the insolvency of the narrative of the self based on the idea that the solution to unhappiness is geographical (Kennedy 2007: 140). The question of self-possession is *the big why*, a question explorer Robert Bartlett asks Kent: “The question, Rockwell, is did you get to be who you are. And if not, then why. That, my friend, is the big why” (Winter 2004: 372). Significantly, the novel ends with some advice given to Kent by his soulmate and mentor Gerald Thayer on the question of privacy: “Gerald: When youre [sic] unhappy, you don’t have a sense of privacy. You tell everyone you meet how you feel and what you think. When youre [sic] in that place, you must achieve a poise between revelation and secrecy” (373). What one says about oneself and what one conceals is finally seen to be the core of the story and key to understanding Rockwell Kent’s imaginative life. “In-significance” has claimed the narrative because it has decentered the consistency of all the rest (Felman 1992b: 171).

Michael Winter explicitly admitted that he wanted to explore the other side of the published memoir in *The Big Why*: “the idea that a private journal contrasts in tone and intimacy from a published memoir is a point that Ronald Rompkey makes in his books on Eliot Curwen and Wilfred Grenfell”, he writes in the Acknowledgments of the novel (2004: 375). Winter desired to get at the unpublished core of Kent’s personality, at the unshared or, unsayable, history. Still, although in this novel we observe how characters are defeated by desires that complicate their stance as public personae before the law (Berlant 2001: 55), the storyline is conducted by a non-negated subject, a first-person narrator whose speech “has already attained clarity” and is an eloquent, legitimate subject marked by celebrity rather than anonymity (43). Indeed, Rockwell Kent’s account of his life is the proof that he can translate and circulate himself around; he can *caption* himself while he tries to “become orderly” and he makes the world the audience of his vital transformation. Whereas in *River Thieves* the domestic is hushed up before it can become properly

historical, Rockwell Kent's purpose runs in the contrary direction, however often he claims in the novel that the private should never be articulated in broad daylight: "[a] wedding is public, a marriage private. This book, consider it my marriage to the world. All I have written before this, a wedding" (Winter 2004: 333). Indeed, he makes himself a celebrity wherever he goes by turning his domesticity into a printed chronicle.

However, and in spite of his desire to see himself on a page "as more coherent than [he] ever felt", he somehow embodies the essence of the "bigger, insurgent" self that Berlant called for (2001: 47). Rockwell Kent's failed struggle toward integrity—and intelligibility—and his very stubbornness to spread a "dissident knowledge" in places where he will not be understood, end up isolating him (48). Sadly, his fantasy of the man made by a geography makes him blind towards the radical discontinuity between himself and the social (48).

5. Conclusion: Intimacy Puncturing Historical Truth

In *River Thieves* and *The Big Why* intimate unacknowledged dialogue is established as the very basis of dramatic change in scandalous plots that do not cross the threshold into public institutions and the law. However, their myriad narratives are imbricated within the bureaucratic patterns of inquiry and transmission of historical truth and make them fail. Secrets, but also apparently insignificant or residual events, frustrate the idea of history as a detached discourse, bound, as it is, by the embarrassing doings of its performers.

Intimacy diminishes the significance of established historical plots; it reveals that the structure of any human conflict is dependent on so many emotional little cogs that it cannot be synthesized without losing its essence. It creates a rhythm more than a time or a place, near to speech and far from the "useful recollection" through which society consumes meaning (Barthes 1967: 145). Intimacy is made up of situations that are outside of time in spite of the continuum of life. Characters are trapped by the physicality of a situation in which the underlying motives are not yet definable. No totalizable account is produced, but a withdrawal from ideological struggles, an experience in suspension, as testimony critics and writers describe the experience (Engdahl 2002: 8). Unlike history, which demands a progressive mode of observation of experience, intimacy is defined precisely by its randomness and presentness; it does not only cover intra- or micro-history, but also the inessential, the meaningless duration that was so important to Barthes (1967: 145). Intimate acts threaten intelligibility and "leave residues", as the historian Dominick LaCapra has put it, since these disturbing elements are the "remainders that set limits to a history of meaning in

that they cannot be fully mastered or integrated meaningfully into a historicized narrative or interpretive account” (2007: 161). Intimacy creates the moment when there is no scenic pact with an audience and therefore it cannot be passed on to others as a legacy. It prevents the past from being memorialized, it challenges the orderly formal qualities that standardize trauma and give it a sense of direction.

This predicament is in keeping with Lauren Berlant’s concern with “negated subjects” (2001: 50): regarded as unreliable in a male-dominated white society, their hushed testimonies may be uncomfortably crude but also the unnamed driving force of historical and political decisions. These two novels contain pivotal characters who are negated because they have failed to make their traumas and ordeals common narrative currency: women, servants, Indigenous persons. They are sexualized and racialized subjects that have been priorly negated by society because of their lack of status and their lack of linguistic competence, and this insufficiency causes them to lose reliability as informed, intelligible subjects. They are the kind of failed individuals “whose very intimacies betray them” (Berlant 2001: 55), failing, thus, to conform to a shared ideal of personhood and truth. They do not belong to the public fantasy of the good or relevant subject, and are limited to producing “beauty in contrast to understanding” (55). For this reason, their subjectivities cannot be collectivized and their acts of reproach against the law become impossible or incomprehensible (Al-Kassim 2010: 121-122), as on the one hand is the case of the Beothuk woman and that of Cassie in *River Thieves*, and on the other of Rockwell Kent’s wife and the servants in *The Big Why*. Their speech acts do not have enough force to be regarded as “the knowledge of record” (Berlant 2001: 42; see also Butler 1997: 13).

Any information coming from negated subjects is blocked. Their acts and words will never transcend a circle of complicity and proximity. What their words will disclose becomes speakable only once, at a moment of emotional outlet soon erased by time. Fortunately, when transferred to the realm of fiction, their confessions can be taken into consideration and scrutinized, at least in some novels haunted by guilt, such as *River Thieves*. On another front, *The Big Why* embodies the failed pact of meaning between the egotist and his vicinity. Lauren Berlant said that to allow oneself to be transformed by the trauma of someone else’s story is an “incredibly intimate dare” and it requires “a listener intimacy” (2001: 44). In *River Thieves* and *The Big Why* this transformation has been facilitated by the representation of moments of high historical reference through acts of domesticity that require the necessary unguarded confidentiality to throw the transcendent narrative of history into disarray.

Notes

1. See, for example, Jameson (1981), Brooks (1985), Ricoeur (1986), Bruner (1990), Röhrich (1990), Lloyd (1993), or Brockmeier (2000).

2. For Les W. Smith, confession, as a narrative mode, reflects a basic dissatisfaction with history. It is provoked by the need for a liberation from the succession of personal events that, taken together, constitute history. It shows the attempt to create a pure account of one's life that is only appeased by a recitation of a narrative "held in common with others" (1996: 32). If this is not the case, the experience becomes endlessly maddening.

3. Novels such as *The Shipping News* (1993) by Annie Proulx or *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) by Wayne Johnston, for example, have received numerous attacks on the part of Newfoundland readers because of their inaccurate descriptions of local people and places. Michael Crummey himself said once that "he had tried to escape the tyranny of the fact. People take history very seriously

in Newfoundland and if you are going to get things wrong, people are going to get you" ("Interview" 2009).

4. Two women were the only visible figures of the remaining Beothuk: Demasduit (Mary March) and her niece Shawnadithit (Nancy April); both of them were captured in the woods and taken to live with the white settlers. They became ill and died before being returned to their people. Demasduit, whose real name we never get to know in *River Thieves*, died in 1820. Shawnadithit died in 1829. There is a well-known portrait of Demasduit and also some drawings by Shawnadithit. They haunt Newfoundland's historical memory and often feature in literature and popular stories.

5. The words "Red Indian" and "Indian" are used throughout the novel by the white settlers when referring to the Beothuk. I will sometimes use the term "Indian" when reproducing or describing parts of the novel to show the settlers' point of view on the Indigenous People of Newfoundland.

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