The emotional geography of St. John's in Megan Gail Coles' *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club*

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Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to analyze the emotional geography of contemporary St. John's in the debut novel by *Mi'kmaq* descent writer Megan Gail Coles (2019). It focuses on how the characters perceive their city, whether it offers a desired haven to outsiders from other parts of Newfoundland and Labrador due to its economic potential or whether it is a site of violent oppression with no family and friends to offer protection and emotional support. The critical tools employed for the analyses borrow from space and literary studies. In particular, the chapter studies the novel through the lens of emotional geography, poverty narrative, and the Gothic, respectively, and demonstrates the ethical involvement of the writer in the critical investigation of classist, sexist, and racist discourses present in contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador.

Introduction

The debut novel by a Newfoundland poet, playwright and short story writer of *Mi'kmaq* descent Megan Gail Coles is a poignant tale of a motley crew of despondent and deeply wounded young adults whose lives intersect and inadvertently influence one another. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the emotional geography of contemporary St. John's, Newfoundland's capital, which is the setting for Coles's narrative. I wish to focus on how the characters perceive their city, whether it offers a desired haven to outsiders from other parts of Newfoundland and Labrador due to its economic potential or perhaps St. John's is in fact a site of violent oppression with no family and friends to offer protection and emotional support. Through the inclusion of a wide ar-

ray of protagonists, Coles paints a complex picture of social and economic dynamics that operate in today's St. John's, which is conspicuously marked by precarity, deprivation, and vulnerability. The narrative problematizes the ubiquitous power imbalance, foregrounding powerless individuals whose low economic status is rooted in their family background that depended on the province's historical processes or was marked by Indigenous colonization. Coles's narrative is unabated in its critical investigation of classist, sexist, and racist discourses. At the heart of the story there is Olive, a young Indigenous woman with a history of past abuse at foster care, whose plot inescapably highlights the ongoing issues of colonization. It is through the bond between Olive and her friend-cum-half-sister Iris that the author manages to overcome the overwhelming bleakness of the narrative, redirecting the readers' attention towards resilience.

1. Emotional geography: key concepts

Since the chapter aims to present the discussed novel through the prism of emotional geography, I would like to elucidate how I understand this concept. Firstly, emotions offer invaluable information as to our perception and cognition, both on an individual as well as collective level. For as Jones observes:

> Developing the notion of emotional geographies, Anderson and Smith (2001:7) write that "to neglect the emotions is to exclude a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made". Soon after this first, vital, principle comes the realisation that emotions are intensely political, gendered, and spatially articulated in many obvious and less obvious ways. This call to heed emotion can be seen as part of the movement away from the claim that knowledge is, and should be, an abstract, disembodied, purely rational and objective construct (2007: 207).

This validation of emotions as an alternative form of knowledge production is paired with a second observation, namely, that "[s]tories of the self are 'produced' out of the spatialities that *seemingly* only provide the backdrop for those stories or selves" (Pile 2002: 112). That places and spaces are endowed with agency of their own is an axiom in human geography. People shape places

they inhabit but they are simultaneously moulded by their physical, cultural, historical or economic setting. Megan Gail Coles, that is the author in question, seems to be acutely aware of this dynamics. In the dedication to her novel, she states: "I wrote this for myself. And the beautiful vicious island that makes and unmakes us" (Coles 2019). Importantly for this analysis, the book also comes with an actual trigger warning: "This might hurt a little. Be brave" (Coles 2019). Encouraging her readers to bear witness to the cruelty her characters experience, the author endorses "accessing the world as mediated by feeling" (Anderson and Smith 2001: 9) and places empathy at the hub of the reading process. Her plea resonates with Anderson and Smith's call for a sharper "geographic sensibility". In their editorial to *Emotional Geographies*, the aforementioned scholars insist that even though "acknowledging that the disclosure of things subterranean may in some cases carry its own risky politics, it seems important to make a start" to further urge us "to cast off the stance of the silent bystander, especially one whose position erases a key area of human experience – one steeped in those feelings and emotions which make the world as we know and live it" (Anderson and Smith 2001: 9). Yet, bringing feminist perspectives to human geography has also led to other crucial findings, namely:

> [...] taking seriously women's experiences of space and place, and treating the personal as political, feminist geographers were alert not only to the emotions and feelings that women experienced in particular places and spaces, but also to how emotions framed and circumscribed sexed and gendered experiences of place and spaces (Pile 2010: 7).

The gendered experience, or even more so gendered violence, of St. John's is *de facto* a central event and theme in Coles's novel. The capital city of St John's with the population of 114,000 is home to a fifth of the province's people who either have lived there for generations or come for education or job opportunities. The rest of the province's people are dispersed around the province in smaller communities. Both main heroines of *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club*, that is, Olive and Iris, have come to St John's from the north in search of employment and have both been exposed there to gendered abuse and violence.

2. Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club against the backdrop of the Newfoundland novel

To situate Coles's novel in the latest phase of Newfoundland writing, I would like to briefly delineate how the scope of the province's literature changed throughout the twentieth century. Initially, Newfoundland writers extolled "the proletarian heroism of outport life. The life-and-death struggle of fishermen to wrest a living from the sea was their primary focus" (Fowler 2015: 95). In the 1940s and 50s these heroic tales were superseded by pastoral myth which praised the community life of the old outport. This new myth sustained the vision of the outport as idyllic, romantic and nostalgic, marked by simple and unsophisticated humour and wisdom. The 1970s brought "a problematized version of outport idyll, a song of experience to counter an earlier song of innocence" (Fowler 2015: 95). Impoverished due to cod moratorium, having witnessed a resettlement project, some outport Newfoundlanders have become disillusioned with the province's future and learned how to take advantage of social welfare, as Fowler phrases it, they fell "from a state of impoverished independence into one of soul-sapping dependency" (2015: 95). In its despondency no longer fit for perpetuating Newfoundland identity, an outport lost its momentum and the writers' focus shifted to company towns or farming communities. The 1990s specifically brought a turn towards the urban and the contemporary largely due to the writing of Lisa Moore and Michael Winter. Nonetheless, as Peter Chafe points out, the last three decades have brought many novels, especially historical fictions, "partaking in the (re)production of a defining, romantic, and colonizing nationalist narrative of self-reflection, self-preservation, and self-love" in which human relations are "a metaphor for the relationship between Newfoundland and Newfoundlander as the novelists elevate their characters to mythic investigations of a collective Newfoundland culture and psyche" (2020: 266-7). Yet, simultaneously, the Newfoundland literary scene has witnessed the emergence of "queer narratives that resist this [heteronormative and masculine] desire to control and know a place" (Chafe 2020: 267). These new fictions no longer portray their setting "as a place that is to be claimed and tamed or, failing this, to be feared and 'othered" but rather depict it as indifferent, "not read-

ily providing them with a sense of purpose or identity" (Chafe 2020: 268). Instead, some of them feature a "dark stranger of a landscape" that is "the sort of harsh, sadistic environment that any mad, bad, and dangerous Byronic hero would relish bashing himself against" (Chafe 2020: 271). And so does Coles's novel in which characters are stranded in a sadomasochistic, destructive relationship with St. John's that has brought them to their knees more than once. In her review of the novel, Alexandra Trnka also points to the agency of the place stating that the book offers "a social analysis of Newfoundland, a survey of the varieties of people that the province produces and the unique brand of misogyny and racism that festers as a result of the island's vices, intergenerational addiction and class disparity among others" (2021: 143).

A crucial aspect in the reception of Newfoundland writing by the islanders themselves is the language a particular work employs. Newfoundlanders are merciless towards writers, especially from outside of the province, who claim that their characters speak in the vernacular, whereas *de facto* no Newfoundlander recognizes the dialect as their own. That was specifically the case of Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, which brought Newfoundland to a wider audience yet was critically received by the province's people (Crummey 2019: 29-30). Megan Gail Coles's characters are indeed convincing in their use of Newfoundland English, especially Calv, an uneducated young man whose alternately inverse use of plural and singular verb forms is characteristic of a Newfoundland dialect:

> So he don't know how he's going to manage here today. Roger says they needs to talk about the thing that happened. Some fellers is having a hard time over it. Roger thinks him and Calv got to reassure them before they does something stupid like tell someone who wouldn't there and who wouldn't understand. Like a woman (Coles 2019: 133).

The veracity of her characters' vernacular is undeniably steeped in the author's biography. Born in 1981, Megan Gail Coles belongs to the young (though not the youngest) generation of Newfoundland writers. She is of mixed European and Mi'kmaq descent, a poet, a playwright and the Co-Founder and Artistic Director of Poverty Cove Theatre Company. *Small Game Hunting at the*

Local Coward Gun Club, published in 2019, is her debut novel, which was shortlisted for 2020 Canada Reads competition.

The emotional geography of St. John's in Coles's novel eerily reminisces the portrayal of this capital in two other important Newfoundland novels, that is, Lisa Moore's *Alligator* from 2005 and Kathleen Winter's *Annabel* from 2010. Both *Alligator* and *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* employ multifocal narrative structures which allow the authors to portray how the characters' lives intersect and either knowingly or inadvertently influence one another. Through the portrayal of a small cluster of community, both writers comment on social and economic dynamics that govern today's Newfoundland's capital, making precarity, deprivation, and vulnerability its pivots. At the heart of both tales there are noble yet vulnerable characters Frank and Olive, who both become victims of heinous crimes: arson and gang rape, respectively. It is the very experience of sexual assault that links Coles's novel with *Annabel*, the story of a hermaphrodite born in the late 1960s, and raised as a boy named Wayne, who comes to the capital in their early twenties in hope of finding freedom to discover their true gender identity by going off medication. When the secret of Wayne's middlesex reaches the ears of a local thug, he organizes a collective assault on this young person. What is truly terrifying with regard to both accounts of sexual violence is the power of one man in each case to coerce others into violation without actual threats. The malleability of the men who on the spur of the moment become the accomplices of the books' villains constitutes the true horror in both novels. This dread additionally amplifies when we consider it in view of Fowler's observation, namely, that "lawlessness is deeply embedded in the Newfoundland psyche through the mythology of illegal settlement and masterless men. Social controls, not legal controls, prevail" (2015: 108). If social controls are the ultimate form of control, it logically follows that there is no control in either of the novels. St John's becomes a lawless city with sexual perpetrators getting off scot-free. Moore's *Alligator* is a bit more optimistic in that respect for Valentin, who sets Frank on fire, is ultimately caught and sentenced but he is an outsider to Newfoundland and perhaps that may be a significant factor.

The aforementioned character of Olive does not only bare resemblance to Moore's or Kathleen Winter's protagonists but

above all she resembles the character of Annie Runningbird from Coles's own play *Squawk* from 2017. Annie has a long history of foster care homes but is about to be put out of the system as she comes of age. Soon she will be left high and dry with no government support to fall back on and she is having difficulty considering her options. She feels sorely tempted to go back to her grandmother who lives in the north. The play, which was commissioned as part of an artistic project that would raise awareness about the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, shows Annie at risk from all men surrounding her whether they are social workers with the swept-under-carpet history of sexual abuse or they are teen non-Indigenous boys. One cannot shed the impression that the novel's Olive is Annie with a changed name, who did not eventually go up north but stayed put in this indifferent city of St John's. Both women share Indigenous roots, being raised by grandmother, extraction form their Northern community in order to be put in foster care, both have experienced discrimination and poverty and both are at risk due to their precarity and the absence of community that would support them.

3. The emotional geography of St. John's: the characters' perspectives and poverty

From the very onset of the novel, Olive's own feelings of not being at home in St John's are signalled in the conversation with a young man from Nigeria who works at The Hazel restaurant. As an outsider to Newfoundland, Omi has little knowledge about the province's history and its people. Based on Olive's darker than average skin, he assumes she must be an immigrant like him. For the first time in her life she acknowledges it out loud that she is "part Indian" (Coles 2019: 10), the confession which triggers a number of painful memories of school bullying for she had "never been brown enough for brown girls. Or white enough for white girls" (Coles 2019: 12). In response to Omi's question about her relatives, Olive automatically ponders upon the dynamics of her Indigenous community rather than solely family members and ironically reflects that she "is expected to magically untangle a hundred years of snarl for casual conversation" (Coles 2019: 10).

Her feelings of uprootedness are also reflected in her regret at not knowing her ancestors' language:

> Olive even doesn't know her words. No one in her family taught them to her because no one in her family knew them. The act of not knowing was itself a mix of love and fear meant to conceal and protect from child collection back when they called it an orphanage (Coles 2019: 12).

Her Indigenous background, dire poverty and proclivity for party drugs make Olive the most vulnerable character in the novel.

In Moore's *Alligator*, one of the characters ponders about the relationship between the place and the self: "Everyone becomes who they are in a stark landscape of undiluted solitude and bad weather" (Moore 2005: 147). Even though this observation specifically refers to Madeleine's sojourn in the German Black Forest, that is, Schwarzwald, the reader can easily assume the comment to be pertaining to Newfoundland and its allegedly hardened inhabitants. A typical settler tale of the island's "origins" perpetuates Newfoundland national identity which is "built upon a collective memory of hardship and oppression" (Delisle 2013: 18). But for some this very landscape can turn out to be a debilitating rather than hardening experience as is the case with Olive, whose predecessors have not only been deprived of their language and traditional way of life through colonization but whose lives broken by residential schools system have also affected subsequent generations. Through the characters of Olive and her half-sister Iris with whom she shares a biological white father and the experience of paternal abandonment, the narrative blatantly challenges the glorifying narrative of Newfoundland identity as forged through adversities, which is evident in one of Iris's rants:

> What doesn't kill you makes you stronger is bullshit. Iris is convinced this kind of psychological drivel was spoon-fed to her as a child to make her shitty parents feel less shitty. It did not make her stronger. It made her more likely to develop autoimmune disease and cancer. What doesn't kill you now will kill you later (Coles 2019: 35).

Both Iris and Olive, as well as other people they know, have been affected by the places they have inhabited, yet rather than make

them stronger growing up and living in the province of Newfoundland, including St. John's, have made them vulnerable in a number of ways.

The financial security and the lack of it are central themes in the novel. The characters can be clearly divided into the affluent and have-nots. As the author herself comments, "My book is very much about power imbalance. It is about people who have power and people who do not, and why" (qtd in *CBC Books* 2019). The most powerful of this motley crew is George, a woman bearing a male name, who stands for Newfoundland old money and owns The Hazel restaurant, run by her unfaithful husband John. George travels extensively around the world and wishes St John's was a different city. As one of the characters observes, with every trip she takes she becomes more miserable about living in Newfoundland's capital. Her spouse John, who comes from a deprived economic background, including virtual starvation, has managed to build a successful career as a chef and as long as he stays married to her, he is one of those in power. The third relatively wealthy person is Roger, a childhood friend of Calv, the bona fide villain who believes that the money he made offshore and the truck that he owns make him an important man. Calv, who both resents and feels drawn to his friend Roger, is relatively secure in his finances but is worrying about his girlfriend's expensive taste and worldly interests in things such as yoga retreats, which he is supposed to pay for. His sister Amanda is the only balanced character, with the right moral compass, unclouded judgment and not driven by self-destructive tendencies. She warns Calv of sticking around with Roger, whom she takes to be a menacing influence, about which she is totally right. Coles's depiction of male characters is unsparing for even Damian, a generally empathetic gay server bent on self-annihilation, fails to take a stand against Olive's sexual perpetrators, which places him in the same sack with other morally compromised men. Last but not the least, the character of Iris foregrounds the plight of women from rural Newfoundland who face classist stereotyping and discrimination. Abandoned by her father at an early age and raised single-handedly by her mother in a trailer up North, despite having graduated from an art school, Iris is not only struggling financially to survive in St John's but above all is fighting her own demons that keep undermining her self-worth. Aspiring to make

it as a painter while making a living as a waitress, she gets entangled in a toxic affair with John. For most part of the novel, Iris is too self-absorbed into her own suffering to see the dramatic events afflicting her half-sister.

As Warley observes:

> In the Canadian literary context, poverty narratives are often valued for their depiction of a stoic, survivor protagonist who triumphs over his or her miserable circumstances. [...] Being able to rise up from below is one dominant cultural narrative that shapes the national imaginary (2014: 136).

In this light, Coles's novel challenges the stereotypical poverty narrative for none of her characters is triumphant. St John's does not deliver on its promise of better life because it is fraught with classist prejudice, controlled by people like Major David, the city's mayor, and his affluent friends. Coles's book, which can be classified as an example of townie lit or a Gothic novel can also be seen as an aforementioned poverty narrative and as such it challenges the national literary project which, according to Warley, fails "to remember poor people as living, thinking, speaking, agential subjects" (2014: 138). In 2008, Roxanne Rimstead, who introduced the concept of a poverty narrative to the field of literary studies in her book *Remnants of Nation* (2001: 23), wrote that "we are still avoiding the stories of class, conflict, and poverty that undermine a national discourse based on progress and wealth" (2008: 44). A decade later, Coles refused to perpetuate this omission of the poor and underprivileged inhabiting her home province; instead, she made them the protagonists of her debut novel, which rightly comes with an actual trigger warning for it is as beautifully written as unsettling. It is precisely through the emotional involvement of the reader that Coles's narrative becomes a site of resistance and potential transformation for "it is impossible for the reader to emerge from her world unburdened" (Trnka 2021: 143). The writer's belief in "the force of affect to produce an ethical response" through "the practices of writing and reading literature" (Darias 2019: 448) is substantiated by her admission that her writing "is not an art form intended to entertain" but rather her "form of resistance" (qtd in Bresge 2019). As such, it seems that Megan Gail Coles answers directly Rimstead's call for "oppositional reading practices" that pose questions about the pol-

itical, ethical and epistemological implications of literary representations of poverty and the poor:

> We need reading practices that will allow poverty narratives to emerge as sites of radical possibility, where damaged subjectivities may be reconstituted through testimony and speaking out, where resistant poverty narratives may emerge in full relief against the backdrop of a wealthy nation, where alternative values may emerge as people opt out of one national dream based on acquisitiveness and posit another based on community (Rimstead 2001: 22).

In her portrayal of St. John's and its poor, Coles blends two types of poverty narratives, to use the taxonomy proposed by Miller and Volmert, namely the *Unfair System* narrative and the *Humanity* narrative (2021: 12-23). The first variant focuses on the economic and racial inequalities demonstrating their historical development and framing them as the result of collective rather than individual choices. It also manifests "how racial inequalities and systemic discrimination against the Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community contribute to higher rates of poverty among some groups" (Miller and Volmert 2021: 12). In doing so, it positions BIPOC individuals outside "isolating and blameworthy identities scripted for them through meritocracy, liberal democracy, and the American/Canadian Dream of upward mobility" (Rimstead 2001: 19). The second variant, that is the *Humanity* narrative, relies on "providing rounded, diverse, and compassionate portraits of people in poverty" and "counters the ways in which these narratives flatten and belittle people in poverty" (Miller and Volmert 2021: 21). Coles's variegated portrayal of St. John's poor humanizes poverty and breeds empathy for it showcases how easily anyone can fall into destitution.

4. Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club and North Atlantic (Urban) Gothic

The main events of the book take place within one day, ironically, Valentine's Day. The backstories of the characters are provided through flashbacks triggered by the events of that day. Due to the

blizzard the people get stuck in The Hazel restaurant, which results in inadvertent confrontations of various types. The enclosure imposed by the blizzard is needless to say a Gothic element mirroring the entrapment most characters feel either with reference to St John's or their relationships. Analogically to the blizzard, which cannot be either controlled or contained, the social and economic dynamics of the capital seem insurmountable and the only way out is escape, going back north, going home, something Olive and Iris ultimately come to understand:

> [Olive] too wants more than riches to be off this city's winter road and out of harm's way for once. It is written all about her person. They share the sense of passing between them, a true longing to be some elsewhere (Coles 2019: 422).

The author's employment of the Gothic is hardly astounding as it is an affective genre, allowing Coles not only to foreground the emotional realities of her characters but to affect the reader as well. The novel has been viewed as representative of the new wave of Atlantic "female writers who are challenging perceptions of the region and its traditional portrayals in fiction" and who recognize that "Atlantic Canada is haunted by the stories of its past that shape the present day" (Bresge 2019). Alexander MacLeod corroborates this observation stating that "Atlantic Canada has a lot of buried history", which is violent, coded with sexuality, as well as ethnic and gendered conflicts (qtd in Edwards 2021). As these preoccupations are central to *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club*, the novel may be thus sub-categorized as belonging to North Atlantic Gothic, the birth of which is ascribed to the aforementioned novel by Lisa Moore, that is, *Alligator* (*Rigelhof 2005*). Personally, I would narrow this category even further into North Atlantic *Urban* Gothic to bind it more closely with the place that is its source. As the narrative unravels, reaching the climax scene of Olive's rape by Roger and his friends, St. John's sinister side is eventually revealed.

While rape is a fairly common Gothic trope, especially in the male Gothic text where "violence, especially sexual violence, is dealt with openly and often in lingering and lascivious detail" (Punter and Byron 2004: 278), Coles's depiction of Olive's violation is overtly self-reflective about the "ethics of reading and watching representations of rape", unequivocally positioning the

reader as a "witness to a terrible crime" rather than engaging them "in shameful voyeuristic activity" (Horeck 2004: vi)[1]. It is not a plot device that enables the perpetrator's moral growth or character development but constitutes scathing criticism of contemporary rape culture that intentionally endeavours to blur the boundaries of consent and coercion, and which is also superbly addressed through Iris's abusive relation with John. As Trnka aptly notices:

> Coles delves into the minds of perpetrators and the desperate and harmful beliefs they harbour in order to justify their behaviour and consider themselves good, moral people, justifications that range from "he had not forced her, she had kissed him back" (333) to "asking people if they thought you could rape a hooker" (290). By writing these situations side by side, Coles creates a stunningly nuanced and realistic depiction of rape culture's far reach and crushing repercussions (2021: 141-2).

Roger's flat denial of their "rough" actions being an actual rape is supported by his claim that "sex can be rough sometimes, loads of women wanted to be slapped and bitten [...] Some of them even liked a little bit of friendly strangulation or being called bad names" (Coles 2019: 290). Yet, the sexual assault on Olive is not merely a result of pure misogyny of her violators for, as Horeck observes, "the raped woman is not only a sexual other. She is also often marked out as other by dint of her ethnic and class positioning" (2004: 7). It is hardly coincidental that Olive is Indigenous rather her Indigeneity makes her a particularly vulnerable target of sexual violence reminding the reader about the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Audra Simpson couches the logic behind these disappearances, murders and violence in the following terms:

> Indian women 'disappear' because they have been deemed killable, rapeable, expendable. Their bodies have historically been rendered less valuable because of what they are taken to represent: land, reproduction, Indigenous kinship and governance, an alternative to heteropatriarchal and Victorian rules of descent (2016: 147).

[1] For an insightful discussion of the representations of rape in popular culture see Borowska-Szerszun 2019.

Roger rapes Olive because he views her as "'unrapeable' (or highly rapeable) because she and land are matter to be extracted from, used, sullied, taken from, over and over again" (Simpson 2016: 146). As a man employed in extraction industries offshore, he partakes in the violation of the land and its resources for big market players that are neither concerned with environmental damage nor the well-being of local communities. As De Vos and Willman alarm, the resource extraction sites "with their notorious 'man camps' have become sites of renewed frontier violence with extremely high rates of violence – both sexual and otherwise – against Indigenous women" (2021: 106). The ubiquity of rape culture that surrounds these "man camps" is masterly captured in *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, a 2022 graphic novel by Kate Beaton, based on her own work experiences and including the accounts of sexual abuse by her male colleagues. The almost casual nature of Olive's and Katie's rapes, for as Roger explains to Calv, "You knows you can't discuss that kind of shit in advance, that got to unfold naturally or it starts to feel weird and sinister" (Coles 2019: 290), are de bona fide source of Gothic in these narratives. Olive's internal monologue following the rape, blatantly merging with Coles's own authorial voice, is a heartbreaking self-defence against potential accusations of encouraging her violators and bringing it upon herself. The emotional load of this tirade is all the more distressing when juxtaposed with Healicon's observation that rape survivors "position themselves in relation to rape myths and victim blaming ideology, to both question the severity and reality of their experiences, and to assess how they are presenting themselves to others" while "[t]he fear of not being believed, of being cast a liar, is significant enough to silence women who have experienced rape" (2016: 41). This is exactly Olive's case, who out of fear of being cast a liar (her female Indigenous voice against a group of white heteropatriarchal men) chooses silence, the kind of which paradoxically reverberates long after the novel comes to an end.

Conclusion

While it is true that "[w]riting alone cannot solve the inequalities engendered by economic systems" (Fuller 2004: 29) and "it does little to redress the social injustices" (Warley 2014: 150), Coles's

debut novel is, nonetheless, a vibrant voice urging for a necessary change. Narrated in an affective mode, *Small Game Hunting at the Local Coward Gun Club* is unlikely to leave any reader indifferent to the suffering of Coles's characters whose lives are imbued with poverty and discrimination of various kinds. Through the use of Gothic and poverty narrative, the author manages to create a very bleak study of the social and economic dynamics that operate in today's St. John's. The novel's ending can hardly be labelled a happy one but it does reverberate with the notion of survival against the odds, locating, however, the power to change one's plight not in hard labour but in bonding with others. Placing empathy at the heart of her book and treating her writing career as a form of resistance, Megan Gail Coles is a prime example of Tremblay's observation that "it will be the artists, not the politicians, who create the world that citizens desire" (2016: 671).

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