The Hauntings of Canada in Michael Crummey’s Sweetland

Abstract

In Michael Crummey’s novel Sweetland (2014), which belongs to the genre of Canadian Gothic, ghosts function as warnings and reminders on a broader cultural and national level. The article analyzes different kinds of hauntings in the novel to show how they emphasize the notions of belonging to a local community and specific location, to alert to the disappearance of the traditional ways of life and the importance of cultural memory for the survival of a comprehensive and diversified Canadian identity. The hauntings include: 'typical' ghosts haunting individual characters; workings of capital and national consolidation, which are shown haunting the local community (serving as a synecdoche of the Newfoundland region); hauntings of disappeared local communities in the impersonal national construct of Canadian culture (cultural mosaic); hauntings which emphasize notions of belonging to and emplacement into Canada’s Atlantic region; the haunting of the unrecordable quality of lived experience in such a community; and the inevitability of the book to be a record of absence as well as warning of that absence. The article discusses and postulates hauntings as a strategy of resistance against historical amnesia, but also as testaments to belonging.
Michael Crummey’s 2014 novel Sweetland is a recent iteration. The relationship between humans and place is complex: on an island, with compressed space and a very real boundary that is the ocean, emotional attachments to one’s place are often heightened and distilled. What happens when a person is displaced from his or her island; when bonds of attachment are severed and one’s mirrored double is destroyed? Sustained primarily by its fishery, Newfoundland was known as Britain’s oldest colony until it became a province of Canada in 1949. Newfoundland and Labrador follows the general rule of islands being peripheral...
to their mainlands (i.e., Canada), but, in the case of NL, mainland Labrador is considered to be peripheral to the island, with St. John's the centre of power.