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# February is the Cruellest Month: Neoliberalism and the Economy of Mourning in Lisa Moore's *February*

HERB WYILE

IN TAKING STOCK of the present state of literature in Newfoundland and Labrador, a crucial development over the last twenty years is evident — the emergence of a palpably cosmopolitan and globalized sensibility. This is particularly the case in the work of urban writers such as Michael Winter, Jessica Grant, Edward Riche, and Lisa Moore. Not only are the characters in their fiction cosmopolitan globe-trotters who are plugged into an international popular culture, but their work also reflects a preoccupation with the sophisticated technology, mobility, flows of trade, and geopolitical relations that characterize our present globalized milieu. At the same time, there is ambivalence about globalization in their work. That is especially important to underscore because celebratory interpretations of globalization (characterized as a rise in global prosperity brought about by greater mobility and financial and technological innovations) have been increasingly critiqued for effacing — even providing covering fire for — an underlying institutionalization of a neoliberal ideology. As theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu and David Harvey have highlighted, neoliberal thinking — which privileges deregulation, privatization, the easing of financial transactions, diminution of governmental involvement in the economy, and reduction of the public sector — has facilitated and justified a vast, global redistribution of wealth. For Harvey, the triumph of neoliberalism's positing of itself as a kind of world-wide common sense is evident in the treatment of the unprecedented concentration of wealth in "the world's major financial centres" as "a mere and in some instances even unfortunate byproduct of neoliberalization. The very idea that this might be ... the fundamental core of what neoliberalization has been about all along appears unthinkable." (119)

This skepticism about the economic, political, and ideological foundations of globalization is also evident in some contemporary Newfoundland literature, reflecting the degree to which the province, like the rest of Atlantic Canada, has been affected by the global embrace of neoliberal thinking and practices. As Thom Workman notes in *Social Torment: Globalization in Atlantic Canada*:

Provincial governments have enthusiastically embraced every aspect of the neoliberal agenda, and, as in the case of New Brunswick, have sometimes prided themselves for the leading role played within the Canadian federation.... The neoliberal policy framework, including the rising concerns about public debt, the celebration of the free market, extensive restructuring to social assistance, stagnating minimum wages, the downsizing of government, the privatization of public firms, the weakening of labour laws and municipal restructuring, is front and centre in the contemporary policy landscape of the region. (29)

As Margaret Conrad and James K. Hiller suggest in their history of Atlantic Canada, while “reform, retrenchment, and restructuring have been the mantra of the new world order,” it has taken a huge toll on a vulnerable region, and “many Atlantic Canadians regret the abandonment of the noble dream that made human welfare rather than corporate profits the measure of a civil society” (212). This tradeoff is at the heart of Lisa Moore’s latest novel *February* (2009), which tackles one of the most traumatic moments in the modern history of Newfoundland and Labrador, the sinking of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* off the coast of Newfoundland in February of 1982. In *February*, Moore situates a specific and moving portrait of what Sigmund Freud describes as “the work of mourning” in the wake of the disaster within a larger political economy that distinctly shapes the “economics” of loss. Moore’s retrospective engagement with the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* provides a good example not only of the increasingly cosmopolitan sensibility of the literature of Newfoundland and Labrador, but also its incisive understanding of the political and economic tensions of the province’s position in a neoliberal, globalized economic order.

As Sean T. Cadigan suggests in his *Newfoundland & Labrador: A History*, a crucial development in the province over the last three decades has been the rise of neo-nationalism. One of the problems with such neo-nationalism, according to Cadigan, is that it cultivates an impression of autonomy and cohesion that belies the economic and political complexity of internal relations within the province and of its relationship with the larger federation. “The rhetoric of neo-nationalism in Newfoundland,” he argues, “ignores the manner in which neo-nationalist ideals discount the experience of class, gender, ethnic and regional divisions;” various groups, including the working class, “ill fit the idealization of the beleaguered Newfoundland national cause.... These divisions,” he concludes, “render meaningless the concept of a Newfoundland nation” (294). Contributing to the rise of such neo-nationalist sentiment has been the promise of offshore oil and gas development, which offers New-

foundland and Labrador the prospect of a rescue from its much-lamented status as a have-not province. As Cadigan suggests, however, the province's drive for autonomy has come at the cost of a greater reliance on external resource companies at the expense of particular groups within the province, particularly working people.<sup>1</sup> He notes, for instance, that in the blush of offshore exploration in the early 1980s, the provincial government "focused almost entirely on which jurisdiction would control the benefits of development, and, like the federal government, it paid little attention to the regulation of offshore workers' safety" (269). In the promotion of the prospect of autonomy, the impression is often given that offshore oil and gas are a kind of natural "windfall," a handy resource there for the picking, eliding not just the cost of exploration and extraction but their dangers as well. Those dangers, though, have been highlighted by significant disasters, including the March 2009 crash of a Cougar Helicopters Sikorsky S-92 ferrying workers to oil rigs off the coast of Newfoundland, killing seventeen (with only one survivor); and, more dramatically, by the capsizing and sinking of the semisubmersible offshore oil rig *Ocean Ranger* in the Hibernia oil field in 1982, killing all eighty-four men on the rig, including fifty-three Newfoundlanders. In his epilogue to *Rig: An Oral History of the Ocean Ranger Disaster*, Mike Heffernan describes how he was prompted to pursue his project because of the repetition, decades later, of a familiar atmosphere of hubris, with Newfoundlanders "still leaving in droves to head out West to the Promised Land, to Alberta, in the hopes of making a life for themselves, while the government puffed its proverbial chest about how oil, about how Hibernia, Hebron and White Rose, was our economic salvation. The old political rhetoric of 'have not will be no more' was chic yet again" (199). Hubris is definitely put into perspective in *February*, a moving account of a woman who loses her husband in the *Ocean Ranger* disaster. At the core of *February* is a kind of double helix of narratives of loss: moving back and forth in time, extending from the couple's courtship and marriage a decade before the disaster to the immediate present, *February* charts the reverberations of the loss of Cal O'Mara in the life of his wife Helen, from her struggles to raise four children to her remarriage as a middle-aged woman, as well as the impact of his death on their son John. The novel is framed by turning points in the lives of Helen and John in late 2008, and from there Moore ventures back into the past, to their lives before, during, and in the wake of the *Ocean Ranger* disaster. In the 2008 frame narrative, Helen is at the cusp of a new relationship with the man who has been renovating her house, while John has been apprised, by cellphone, that a week-long fling in Iceland half a year earlier has resulted in a pregnancy. These moments are the culmination of a decades-long process of trauma, mourning and recovery that Moore explores over the course of *February*, a narrative arc reflected in the trajectory of the section titles of the novel: Early Morning/Renovations/A New Day/Home/A New Year.

In his influential essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud outlines the similar symptoms of mourning and melancholia, characterizing mourning as a destabilizing and alienating fixation on the lost one:

Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world — in so far as it does not recall him — the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him. (244)

*February* pulses with this psychic anomie, as Moore, in her characteristically impressionistic style, depicts Helen as a beleaguered but stoic amputee, preoccupied for two and a half decades with processing the sensations emanating from her phantom limb. When Cal is lost in the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, Helen feels not only robbed but banished, living her life in a state of suspended animation. She is exiled to the outside while pretending, for the sake of stability and appearances, to be on the inside: “Helen wanted the children to think she was on the inside, with them. The outside was an ugly truth she planned to keep to herself” (*February* 13-14). While Helen is inclined to “turn away,” her pressing responsibility to her family keeps her moored, and Moore’s chronicling of her life is a study in this psychic duality. On the one hand, she is distracted and consumed by an obsessive longing for her lost one. Much of the narrative is taken up with Helen’s retrospective reveries about the past, her melancholy inventorying of her life with Cal, over which hovers, implacably, the spectre of his death. He is an absent presence or present absence in her life, as she longs to talk to him and to have him talk to her: “Helen had not believed in an afterlife before Cal died and she still did not think of it. But she listened for Cal after he died. She listened for his tread on the stairs; she listened for his advice. She listened for him pouring cereal out of a box, the clink of his spoon” (291). Helen’s behaviour exemplifies Freud’s characterization of “the work of mourning” as “a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence” (Clewell 44). That obsessive longing, though, is not always wistful and distracted, as is captured in a scene in which Helen attempts to put together a crib for the baby she realizes she is going to have after Cal has been killed. Thwarted and frustrated in her efforts, Helen explodes, “kick[s] the shit out of it” and throws a hammer at the wall: “It was the father’s job to put the crib together, it was Cal’s job, and now she didn’t have a crib” (169).

On the other hand, Helen displays a fierce determination to sustain a façade of normality and order for her family. Haunted by the feeling that “[n]o woman should be left alone to take care of four children” (19) but appalled at the implications of falling apart, Helen exhorts herself to keep it all together: “Pretend it all matters. See this sneaker? It matters. See this violin? See this sale on prime rib?” (67). Her

determination to maintain the appearance of order, though, takes a somewhat authoritarian cast that contrasts with her own daughters' subsequent, more nurturing parenting styles: "Helen had called her own children *little Christers* and told them she would lash their arses or skin their hides if they gave her any sauce, or she'd threaten to horsewhip them" (141). Struggling to contain such centrifugal forces, Helen effectively performs normality and stability, looking "exactly as though she were in the world ... [t]he more time passed, the more convincing Helen became" (21). But even this determined performance is ridden with guilt, as she dreams every night of Cal inviting her to join him, and every night Helen "denies him, she forgets him. Every time she says no to him in a dream she forgets him a little bit more" (69).

Perhaps her greatest challenge in pretending to "be inside" is coping with her son, who, while precociously determined to contribute to the stability of the family, also displays unmistakable signs of the trauma of loss and grief. While John dutifully takes on a paper route to contribute to the family income and accompanies Helen to the hospital when she goes into labour, his trauma manifests in visibly eccentric symptoms such as chewing pencils and eating with his mouth open that leave him ostracized at school and struggling to succeed academically. But it also conspicuously takes the form of a fear of water: "after his father died, Johnny was afraid of water. Wouldn't put his face under the shower head if he could avoid it" (142). He is also haunted by the hag, a nightmarish staple of outport culture:

An evil presence, in the form of a cloud, wet and cold. It swirled over his bed, full of weather and stars, and settled on his chest, and as it grew heavier, John felt a paralysis creep through him until he couldn't move. Then the cloud took on the form of a naked old woman who squeezed her hands over his throat. (92)

The tormented John, as a result, is both a concerned source of succor for Helen and a constant headache, his misdemeanours and delinquencies only partly covered up with the conspiratorial aid of his sympathetic sisters.

If John manages to overcome these earlier symptoms to succeed in school and to go on to a successful career in the oilpatch, however, the trauma of the loss of his father is hardly left behind. Indeed, it manifests itself in John's uncharitable, eccentric perspective on his parents' marriage, a reaction to loss that has substantial implications for his own relationships with women. Tracy Whalen argues that "love — especially hard, dangerous love — constitutes the ethical centre of Lisa Moore's fiction" (5), and *February* offers an interesting variation on that preoccupation, as Moore intertwines the concepts of risk as a central factor in a major marine disaster and risk as a central factor in romantic and emotional relationships. Through both John and Helen's perspectives, she portrays Helen and Cal's marriage as an embrace of risk, not just the calculated risk of Cal's taking a job on the *Ocean Ranger* but also the emotional risk of unequivocal mutual commitment. For John in retro-

spect, though, his parents' intense attachment seems reckless and irrational — "Why did you love each other so very much? It destroyed you" (107) — and he frames their commitment to each other in the then-emerging discourse of risk assessment: "His parents had believed what people said about risk back then. They had believed that there was a new science devoted to the assessment of it. Risk could be calculated and quantified. The risk, they had believed, was worth it" (108). In turn, the trauma of the outcome of his parents' marriage fuels his own resistance to emotional commitment and to the prospect of fatherhood: "His parents had been more together than apart. They had grown together; they had been the same. John did not want that for himself" (195). By the time of the novel's frame story, John has had two extended relationships come to a turbulent end over his adamant refusal to entertain the prospect of having children and has resorted to dating much younger girls who are dispositionally disinclined to entertain such notions.

When he receives Jane Downey's call out of the blue while vacationing in Tasmania, John responds to the news of Jane's pregnancy by impulsively and callously asking her if she has considered an abortion, prompting her to hang up. He assesses the situation, indeed, in the language of neoliberal economic globalization — ease of movement, minimizing of complications, contractual over moral obligations: "There'd been a tacit understanding ... that nobody would come out of a seriously fun and even deeply affecting week of fucking and eating and drinking fabulous wine and bombing around glaciers on Ski-Doos ... with anything but fond memories" (33). Helen, however, he realizes, is "going to make him take responsibility" (41) and — with various echoes of her own history, such as being left pregnant at the time of Cal's death — she convinces him to take an interest in the baby. Thus when Jane comes to the realization that she doesn't want to bring the baby up without a father and eventually calls John back, he is both alarmed and relieved. He overcomes his reservations and arranges to meet Jane in Toronto, realizing that there might be more to their connection than a loose and implicit contractual arrangement. Jane subsequently moves to St. John's, where they rent separate apartments, but by the end of the novel Jane has had the baby, they are effectively living together, and John's clear commitment suggests that he has finally worked through his trauma.

For Helen, though, such a recovery entails a more troubling process of replacement. A central contention of "Mourning and Melancholia" is that "mourning impels the ego to give up the object by declaring the object to be dead and offering the ego the inducement of continuing to live." (Freud 244) As is the case with John, Helen's regeneration requires a reconfiguration of her attachment to Cal, a process that is both turbulent and protracted. "For a long time nobody dared" (22) to suggest the possibility of Helen seeing someone else. Then, when she first gives in to her daughter Lulu's entreaties to try online dating, Helen offers to her prospective suitors a humourless, insincere profile of herself and of her expectations and realizes, "If she had been honest she would have asked: Could you be my dead husband for an afternoon. Could you put on his clothes, I still have them. Will you wear the

cologne he wore. Will you smoke Export As, just for an afternoon" (156). In his analysis of mourning, Freud describes the resilience of the attachment of the bereaved to the departed loved one, "even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them," an attachment that can reach the proportions of "a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (244). When her sister's daughter-in-law recommends Barry as a carpenter, Helen defensively intuits her ulterior motive: "Sherry had imagined her to be lonely. Helen was flooded with shame.... She would not be pitied" (59). As Tammy Clewell emphasizes, Freud's model gives to the process of mourning a disturbing finality, depicting it as completed "when the survivor has detached his or her emotional tie to the lost object and reattached the free libido to a new object" (44). Helen's reluctance thus can be attributed to her anxiety that, as Freud's model suggests, "we must sever one attachment to make another possible" (Clewell 47). With Barry's protracted presence while renovating her house, however, Helen rediscovers her dormant desire for physical intimacy and finds the courage to risk offering herself to somebody else, which involves a readjustment of the place of Cal in her life.

For Clewell, Freud's view of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" "depended on a rather straightforward process of abandoning emotional ties, repudiating the lost other, and assimilating the loss to a consoling substitute" (47-8). This transactional model reflects how, as Gerhard Joseph argues, "from *The Interpretation of Dreams* onward, Freud tended to define psychic processes as an elaborate economic system — and one particularly capitalist in nature" (128). Joseph goes on to observe, however, that in "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud's attempt "to express the gradual process of object substitution within mourning in economic terms" creates a kind of tension, as Freud seems to be "puzzled by the gap between the experience of intense pain and the positivist language of political economy" (128). Clewell summarizes the shortcomings of such an emphasis by situating Freud's model "within a longstanding epistemological and cultural tradition in which the subject acquires legitimacy at the expense of the other's separateness and well-being, a tradition in which the subject neutralizes the enduring pain of loss by accepting consolation in the form of a substitute for what has been lost" (48). Resisting the narcissistic overtones of such an economy of mourning, she stresses, however, that Freud revisited this earlier model of mourning and melancholia later on in *The Ego and the Id* (1917), depicting the substitution of the lost object as less final and complete. In this revised view of mourning, "working through depends on taking the lost other into the structure of one's own identity, a form of preserving the lost object in and as the self" (61). This distinction can be seen in Helen's accommodation of the loss of Cal: Helen is finally able to set aside her obsession with the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* at the same time as she comes to understand an implicit part of the pact she made with Cal. "If Cal died out there on the rig, Helen would never forget him. That was the promise" (302). In that sense, the final scene of the novel, with Helen and Barry on a beach in Mexico during their honeymoon,



suggests a sense of renewal or resurrection, without an erasure of the past. There, Helen (in the last of a series of traumatic symbolic invocations of the original disaster) anxiously witnesses Barry disappear behind a wave and then reappear: “he dipped under the water again and waded against its pull towards shore and came back up the beach to her” (307). For Clewell, Freud’s revision of his model of mourning “raises the possibility for thinking about mourning as an affirmative and loving internalization of the lost other” (64), a conclusion that *February* very much seems to echo.

If this trajectory of mourning and regeneration still seems to emphasize the importance of moving on after a loss, however, Moore’s presentation of the disaster itself and her portrait of what can be characterized as a broader neoliberal sensibility suggest a much more complicated politics to the novel. This bigger picture is especially important given the magnitude of the disaster in the popular memory and, consequently, Moore’s challenge in writing what can be seen as a kind of elegiac response to it. Responding to Peter Sacks’ discussion of mourning in *The English Elegy*, Clewell expresses reservations about viewing the elegy as a kind of substitution and compensation for the lost loved one: “That the traditional elegy transforms the lost other into the writer’s own aesthetic gain raises certain political and ethical suspicions, at least from a contemporary perspective, about the redemptive function of art and the effacement of the other’s absolute uniqueness it assumes” (50). For Clewell, such an “endorsement of consolatory mourning ... presents a troubling and inadequate model for mourning and memorializing practices that aim primarily to sustain bereaved pain as a means to acknowledge the social politics and personal ethics entailed in loss” (53).

This significant distinction between different elegiac politics, I argue, is reflected in Moore’s location of the “economics” of mourning within the larger political economy shaping both the response to loss and the loss itself. While Moore’s strategy of chronicling the experience of a woman widowed by the disaster puts the calamity itself at a distance, at the same time she nonetheless resists eliding the economic and occupational circumstances of the disaster and, indeed, engages with the wider economic and political climate that has prevailed since it occurred.

Moore’s eschewing of a more direct and mimetic representation of the disaster, first of all, seems appropriate in light of the uncertainty surrounding the capsizing of the rig. Moore’s presentation of the disaster reflects the findings of the joint provincial-federal Royal Commission into the disaster, which concluded, as Cadigan summarizes, that:

a critical ballast control room had been located too close to the water in a support column, including a porthole with glass insufficiently thick to withstand severe pounding; the rig also had a ballast control system that was difficult to use in emergency conditions. Worst of all, the workers who operated the *Ocean Ranger* did not fully understand how to operate the ballast controls during an emergency such as the storm that developed that February night. Having to abandon the rig, workers were without

survival suits and found its lifeboats almost impossible to launch in the prevailing sea conditions. (269)

In short, the Commission's findings point to a regime of lax regulatory oversight and inadequate safety provisions (a combination that arguably has been increasingly encouraged by neoliberal proponents of the idea that self-regulation by industry is much more effective and cost-efficient than government oversight). As the commission highlighted, though, communications from the rig on the night of the disaster conveyed little sense of urgency almost up until the moment of evacuation (Royal 89-90), and thus what happened is largely a matter of speculation. "How the crew left the rig is not known" (122), the report concluded, but "[w]hatever the means of evacuation adopted, it is evident that none was practicable or safe under the prevailing wind and sea conditions" (123). Moore's focus on Helen's experience arguably conveys, in part, Moore's recognition of the paradox of comprehending the disaster — the excruciating desire to know, and the impossibility of knowing what it must have been like for the men — and her keeping at a speculative distance the disaster itself. Indeed, perhaps the crucial factor complicating and protracting Helen's mourning is the uncertainty of the circumstances of Cal's death. While Helen knows the rough chain of events and "lives through the disaster every night of her life," what she wants is "to be in Cal's skin when the rig is sinking. She wants to be there with him" (70). Helen, who has followed the proceedings of the Commission, recites the chain of misfortunes that led to the sinking of the rig, "has memorized the ifs and she can rhyme them off like the rosary. If the men had the information they needed, if they lowered the deadlight, if the water hadn't short-circuited the control panel, if Cal had had another shift, if Cal had never gotten the job in the first place, if they hadn't fallen in love. If she hadn't had the children. If" (293-94). However, while "Helen wants to know exactly what happened because she can't stand the idea of not knowing" (294), ultimately she confronts the brute fact of its impossibility — "she is not there, because nobody can be there" (300) — and accepts that Cal is gone and, furthermore, that they had agreed upon that possibility, sharing his "panic of facing death" (301).

Helpful here in articulating the political implications of Moore's representational strategies is a minor altercation in the critical reception of *February*. Responding to Katherine Laidlaw's admiring review in *The National Post*, *Post* columnist Barbara Kay, frankly and conveniently unencumbered by having read the novel, deplored Moore's choice to focus on one of the widows, as well as Moore's revelation that Helen was modeled on Moore herself and her mother and their reaction to the death of Moore's father when she was a teenager. Kay viewed the choice as symptomatic of "the unrelenting self-regard" of a feminist-dominated Canadian literature, "where it's all about nobly suffering women or feminized men: men immobilized in situations of physical, psychological or economic impotence (that is when they're not falling through the ice and nearly drowning), rather

than demonstrating manly courage in risk-taking or heroic mode.” For Kay, *February* was a palpably missed opportunity, as “[s]uch a disaster is a natural fictional platform for an enthralling blockbuster.” Contending that Moore’s approach “deflects attention from the tragedy and its male victims to hover solicitously over a surrogate victim,” Kay stressed that it is disproportionately men who take on dangerous jobs:

and that is because it takes manliness to endure the long-term cruel conditions of jobs like those on an oil rig. But a sympathetic narration focused on the “lonely and terrifying deaths” of strong, psychologically unconflicted men nobly attending to work no woman would do, the appalling cataclysm of the oil rig’s collapse, an exploration of the individual lives that were cut short so horrifically and, of course last and least, the impact of their loss on the survivors: This is a novel I would be interested in reading, but that no feminist writer in good standing in Canada — and those are the only types considered for the Giller Prize — is interested in writing.

Kay’s diatribe is instructive not just because it serves as a reminder of the advisability of reading books before editorializing about them (as Moore’s approach does not altogether exclude those aspects of the calamity that Kay privileges). It also highlights one of the dangers that Moore’s strategy largely avoids — being seen as capitalizing on the suffering of others (to which the “blockbuster” approach arguably would be more susceptible). More importantly, Kay’s desire to celebrate heroic masculinity in the face of “cruel conditions” can be tied to a more troubling and strategic revival of the discourse of rugged individualism in neoliberal ideology. As Workman argues, the increasing promotion of individual self-reliance and resilience — especially when linked to a decrease in funding for social programs — masks an underlying, unforgiving austerity and even a contempt for those working people who have largely been disadvantaged by neoliberal restructuring and globalization:

Politicians admonish the public to ‘live within its means.’ Working people are told to tighten their belts and to be thankful for the jobs they have. There has been a revival of the notion of the rugged individual who must be flexible and able to adapt to the new economy, who must respond to new challenges and who must be open to a ‘hand up’ rather than a ‘hand-out.’ (121)

Kay’s apparent desire for a portrait of brave men heroically going down with the ship, as it were, with its omission of the circumstances that led to it doing so, seems to promote a self-sacrificial sensibility — a willingness to take one for the company team — that is eminently attractive to proponents of neoliberal thinking.

Therefore, the distance at which the event is held in *February*, rather than the lamentable failing that Kay makes it out to be, instead can be seen as a sign of Moore’s reluctance to impose a spurious certainty on what remains in many ways a substantially enigmatic event. By exploring the disaster as it registers on the lives of

the family of one of the men, Moore is able to preserve a sense of distance necessitated by the relatively enigmatic circumstances of the disaster itself, particularly the evacuation, given that there were no survivors to describe what happened. At the same time, Helen's obsession with the fate of her husband offers the opportunity to meditate on, rather than erase, the experience of the men. For instance, even though Helen subsequently questions its veracity, her imagining of the aborted rescue attempt, in which the men on board the supply ship *Seaforth Highlander* risked their lives under appalling conditions to try to reach survivors in a lifeboat, is particularly poignant. It evokes the drama, the courage, the compassion and the peril of the moment: "These men were in the water and the men on the *Seaforth Highlander* had to untie themselves so they could reach farther, and they were in danger of going in themselves, and they threw the ropes, but the men from the lifeboat could not raise their arms. Life preservers floated within reach, but those men could not reach" (297).

Furthermore, unlike Kay, Moore is more than attendant to the role of the companies in the sinking of the rig (the company operating the rig, ODECO Canada, was working under contract for Mobil Oil Canada). Through Helen she highlights the companies' culpability not only for the disaster but also for its handling of it after the fact. Summarizing oral testimony about conditions on the rig, Douglas House describes "a picture of offshore working conditions in which productivity was always given priority over safety: accidents were frequent, safety concerns ... were given low priority, men suffering from minor injuries were expected to carry on working, and those that complained were severely dealt with by senior rig personnel" (49).<sup>3</sup> Moore's novel, in its preoccupation with the emotional reverberations of loss, does not efface this crucial element of the political economy of the disaster. Instead, the corporate hubris and failure of safety regulations that contributed to the disaster, as well as the imagined distress of the men tossed into the frigid ocean, is woven into the narrative along with Helen's agonizing over her capability to raise a family single-handed and her memories of life with Cal before the disaster.

An important part of the disaster, for instance, is that there had been a recent precedent, prompting concern about the safety of the rig. A week beforehand the rig had developed a list, a perceptible tilt (Royal 50), and at least some witnesses reported a disorganized attempt to muster the lifeboats (See Heffernan 19-20). In *February*, Helen reflects that "[t]hey all knew they weren't safe. Those men knew. And they had decided not to tell anyone" (97). Moore's portrait of this precedent underscores the disciplinary effect of an atmosphere of neoliberal austerity in which:

[w]orking people can become trapped in a sort of existential bind where they feel frustrated and bitterly disappointed with their jobs on one hand, yet relieved that they even have a job on the other. In this culture of austerity working people are wary, cautious and less disposed to pressing hard for better working conditions. (Workman 50)

Helen recalls such a mindset among the crew of the rig: “There are men who would kill to have this job: that was the wisdom they worked under. And: the helicopter was terror. But it was impossible to imagine the whole rig capsizing” (97). Indeed, even though Helen and Cal had planned to buy a store with gas pumps, “they didn’t speak of those plans. Because if they talked about Cal giving up the rig, they were admitting the risk. And it was something they had agreed never to admit” (98-99). At the end of the novel, Moore offers, through Helen, a clear indictment of the company: “The Royal Commission said that there was a fatal chain of events that could have been avoided but for the inadequate training of personnel, lack of manuals and technical information. And that is the true story. It is the company’s fault” (301). Struggling to digest the horror of the fate of the men, Helen underlines the hubris of the company that exposed them to such a fate: “The idea of men drowning in that cold darkness was staggering and nightmarish, and the company had said the bloody thing would never sink no matter what” (271).

The company’s reaction to the disaster comes under even more scathing scrutiny, reflecting how, as House argues, “the aftermath of the tragedy [was] co-opted by the official class” (273). ODECO, observes House, “maintained a stony and unsympathetic silence. Mobil, which could hardly avoid the public eye, recovered from its initial shock to take on the guise of the concerned, sympathetic corporate citizen,” while “industry and government officials were scrambling to avoid any appearance of having been culpable for the disaster” (275). In *February*, Helen’s musings on the company’s immediate response to the disaster highlight the corporate calculation involved: “the families heard on the radio that their loved ones were dead. And they didn’t believe it because surely the company would have called” (270). Incredulous that the company failed to do so, Helen is inclined to believe that “they all wanted to *manage the situation*” (268). Evoking the emergence of a corporate culture of professionalized public relations and damage control, Helen speculates, “They may not have known about spin back then, ... but they were thinking spin” (269). “On her better days” (269-70), though, Helen does consider the possibility that those who worked for the company were simply overcome themselves.

Furthermore, Helen’s perilous position after the loss of her husband — an unemployed single parent with three children and another on the way — is compounded by the company’s slow response to the issue of restitution for the families. Moore also points to how the settlement itself was extremely painful emotionally, as well as socially divisive:

People always want to know how much the families got, and Helen is in this camp: none of your goddamn business.

People who want to know about the settlement seem to think a life has a figure attached to it. A leg is worth what? An arm? A torso? What if you lose the whole husband? What kind of money do you get for that? They think a husband amounts to a sum. A dead husband does not add up to an amount, Helen is tempted to tell these people. (20)

Here Moore may well be echoing one of the pieces in Heffernan's oral history, in which Cle Newhook, Executive Administrator of the *Ocean Ranger* Families Foundation, describes the corrosive effect of the settlement on peoples' reaction to the disaster: "The public simply weren't able to come to terms with the fact that the wives and the parents and the children were kind of paid off by the companies." By way of illustration, Newhook describes being in a bank lineup, "and one of the *Ocean Ranger* widows, as they were collectively known, was in front of me. Then, from somewhere behind me, I heard, 'Look at that one. She got all her money on the back of her dead husband'." (Heffernan 182)

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey contends that "[i]t has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally as well as transnationally" (119). This linguistic dimension of neoliberalism can be seen in a key passage in *February* as Helen meditates on a symposium held by the oil companies on risk assessment after the disaster, highlighting the companies' coercive definition of risk:

The oil companies were all about acceptable levels of risk and they always had been. They spoke of possible faults in the system and how to avoid them. Here, here. They advised strongly against intuition when assessing risk. If you were scared shitless, they said, that was only intuition, and you should ignore it. They asked the public to consider the overall good to be achieved when we do take risks. They spoke in that back-assed way and what they meant was: If you don't do the job, we'll give it to someone who will.

They meant: There's money to be made.

They meant: We will develop the economy.

They meant there isn't any risk, so shut the fuck up about it. Except they didn't say *fuck*, they said: Consider the overall public good. (118)

What Moore effectively highlights here is a crucial aspect of neoliberalism: its strategic concealment of the redistribution of risk. "Neo-liberal discourse," as Stephen McBride argues, "stresses efficiency, flexibility, and freedom, while the reality for all too many people has been insecurity and stress. Public provision of goods and services has diminished and individual assumption of risk, in the context of dependence on the vagaries of the market, has increased" (207-8). At the same time, though, even as Moore explores the culpability of the companies both before and after the disaster, ultimately Helen concedes the importance of the unprecedented and unpredictable role of the natural elements: "there is also the obdurate wall of water, and because of it Helen will finally give up her careful recital of the fatal chain of events" (301).

Moore's concentration on Helen's experience of the disaster and its aftermath, then, amounts to more than resisting a potentially spurious omniscient depiction of

an event about which much is not known. While she distances the disaster by instead representing Helen's struggle to imagine it and cope with it, she also arguably brings it closer by situating it within a web of social, economic, and emotional relationships, thus preventing its isolation as an anomalous calamity. In his introduction to *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, Christian Riegel observes, "Mourning is an inherently complex and necessary activity that has the aim of providing consolation in the face of pain. The psychic nature of mourning is complemented by its socio-historical context, for grief is framed, ordered, and filtered by the historical, social and cultural setting of the mourning subject" (xx). This sense of context is crucial to *February*, as Moore examines how Helen's immediate sense of personal, romantic and familial loss is complicated by the social, political and economic context in which it occurs. The "work of mourning" is compounded not only by uncertainty about the circumstances of that loss, but also by the agonizing question of culpability and by the companies' expedient, calculated approach to the disaster after the fact.

The companies' dubious, self-serving presence in the process of mourning, though, is part of a broader *zeitgeist* that Moore is out to diagnose in *February*, a quality it shares with other contemporary Newfoundland novels such as Riche's *The Nine Planets* (2004) and Winter's *The Architects Are Here* (2007). Courtesy of the very contemporary setting of the novel's late 2008 frame narrative, *February* has a conspicuously cosmopolitan and globalized sensibility, an orientation that has distinguished much of the present wave of urban Newfoundland writers from their predecessors. Helen's daughter Lulu, for instance, is a high-end, slightly New Age, cosmetic technician; her grandson Timmy's playmate Patience is a Sudanese refugee whose father was killed by the Janjaweed; and Jane Downey is an American doctoral student who has written a highly acclaimed Master's thesis on the urban homeless. Such cosmopolitanism, indeed, has been a consistent feature of Moore's fiction; she contends in an interview that her characters are highly mobile because mobility, for many Newfoundlanders, "is really what it means to be a Newfoundlander" ("Canvas" 113). In *February*, though, what sticks out from this cosmopolitan fabric — particularly through the movements of John, a globe-trotting oilpatch consultant and engineer — is the prevalence of a characteristically neoliberal individualist mentality and a corporate management style stressing efficiency, austerity, and profitability. John, for instance, is interviewed for a position with Shoreline Group, a company that "worked to eliminate redundant safety procedures. They offered a cost-benefit analysis of the safety procedures in place and drafted modification plans ... that impacted directly on waste and redundancy, and the general good for communities at large, and profit margins, and there were stakeholders to consider" (139). Describing the company, Moore foregrounds the euphemistic damage control that neoliberal restructuring and austerity has necessitated: "They specialized in all the touchy-feely stuff from the 1980s: lateral thinking, creativity in the work-place, psychological support during downsizing



or natural disaster, pink slips, sweater-vests and distressed denim, a bold new self-generating speak that boiled over and reduced to a single, perfect word: *efficiency*” (130). John clearly internalizes this ideology, as he later tactlessly opines at a family gathering that “[i]t’s not good for the industry, the culture that has developed around safety. They’re like a crowd of old women,” only to be pointedly reminded by Helen, “Safety is a good thing” (178). Later, Moore parodies the seductive and manipulative emptiness of corporate marketing, as John listens to a woman at a business lunch in New York “presenting an advertising campaign to promote offshore drilling development on a global scale” (222-23):

We’re planning a series of ads from all over the world, specifically indigenous, acutely indigenous, showing high-powered cocktail parties on rooftops, beach parties. We’re looking at Bondi Beach, and subtitles, just very, very international, speaking to that thing, that ethnic thing, that thing, connectedness.... The thingies, the derricks or whatever, the rigs on the ocean fade to silhouette, music of course. Something Wagnerian. (224)

The austerity, exploitation, and profit-consciousness underlying such glossy rhetoric, however, are not restricted to the oil industry. For instance, Jane hopes that her father’s response to the news that she is pregnant will be to offer her refuge. Instead, he upbraids her for her selfishness, pointing to the impact of the global financial crash that frames the contemporary action of the novel: “She could not expect others to assume the cost of her carelessness. It was that kind of thinking that had the whole world in the mess they were finding themselves in right now. Had she thought of the state of his portfolio, he wondered” (89). Here Moore points to the social toll of a philosophy of neoliberal individualist accumulation that, taken to its extreme, is at the root of the very crisis Jane’s father bemoans, even while using it to justify his defensive austerity. Although Jane is far from poor, she has given up a substantial doctoral scholarship and is on her own, effectively becoming homeless herself. In that sense, her father’s dismissal can be seen as a reflection of how, as Workman observes, “neoliberalism cultivates a severely judgmental outlook on people struggling with poverty ... it attacks income supports and then attacks people who lack sufficient income” (104). If, as Whalen contends, “Moore’s work ... is a literary model for becoming more compassionate, empathetic people” (17), a crucial aspect of *February* is the way in which it conspicuously takes on an ideological framework that cultivates just the opposite.

Moore’s tentativeness in approaching such a significant and traumatic moment in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador as the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* — her focus on a mourning subject grappling with the consequences — perhaps reflects her awareness of the intense emotional investment of the people of the province in the disaster. A consistent theme in memories of the disaster is how, in such an intimate, literally insular environment, practically everyone in the province



was touched directly or indirectly by it. Rather than a misplaced priority or a self-indulgent sign of disrespect, Moore's strategy of concentrating on the experience of the bereaved and treating the circumstances of the disaster somewhat obliquely is, I would argue, both respectful and politically sophisticated. Moore's novel avoids what might be seen as opportunistic polemicizing about the disaster, as well as a presumptuous, compensatory elegizing of the dead. It also, and more importantly, situates that seemingly singular event in the broader culture of corporate austerity, lack of regulation, and manipulation of the public, highlighting the exploitation of economic desperation, the compromising of safety by cost calculation, and the dissipation of responsibility through euphemistic response and the strategic complexity of corporate authority. In the process, the novel resists the isolation of the capsizing and sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* as an anomalous disaster and situates it within a broader political economy of risk. *February* does present the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* as a moment when things went terribly wrong, but it does so while keeping in sight how the circumstances that contributed to the disaster and informed its aftermath were not atypical but derived from a mentality that has come to be definitive of our era, assumed as a kind of common-sense, no-alternatives ideology. Writing about the promise of offshore development shortly after the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, J.D. House pointed to how "[m]uch has been said and written ... about controlling oil development in the interests of the people" and then added, pointedly, "But who are 'the people'?" (288). In a similar spirit, almost a quarter-century later, Moore's *February* suggests that, while resource mega-projects offer the tantalizing allure of provincial self-sufficiency, the costs of achieving the Promised Land are, just like the benefits, inequitably apportioned.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Cadigan 272-73.

<sup>2</sup>In "An Aesthetics of Intensity," Tracy Whalen rightly underlines the affinities that Moore's style has to hyperrealism (2).

<sup>3</sup>It should be added, though, that oral testimony from the disaster is far from unanimous on the issues of working conditions and safety on the rig, as both Heffernan's *Rig* and House's oral history *But Who Cares Now? The Tragedy of the Ocean Ranger* reflect.

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