

Brief – Online Journal of Snippets

Special Issue. Canadians and the Environment: Historical, Cultural,
and Literary Perspectives (August 2014)

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Introduction

In the country with – as Margaret Atwood has put it – “such a high ratio of trees, lakes and rocks to people,” the natural environment has always been a powerful force, shaping political, social and individual destinies and has figured prominently in human calculations and imaginations. Ever since the land was settled by the First Nations, Canadian people’s history and politics, economic life, ideology, social practices, national traits, and cultural products have evolved in a dynamic engagement with the country’s landbase, climate, fauna and flora. This engagement, once local in scale and effect, became enormously complicated in the second half of the twentieth century by, on the one hand, the processes and pressures of economic and cultural globalization, and on the other, by the global environmental crisis. Thus, even though by mid-twentieth century Canadians had moved in great numbers to cities and insulated themselves against the Northern cold and prairie dust with advanced technology (creating in the process new kinds of Canadian environments), they continue to negotiate the terms of their future with the land and climate and continue to articulate their ever evolving environmental identity through their political and economic ideologies and practices, as well as through their art.

In this issue of *Brief* five young scholars test various perspectives from which to explore Canadian relationships with the natural environment. Rafał Madeja takes a historical/anthropological approach to comment on one Coastal First Nation’s spiritual heritage as admirably sophisticated in its perception of human place and role in the nonhuman world. Marta Wójcik offers a historical perspective on contemporary controversies surrounding the exploitation of Alberta tar sands by recalling a 1977 verdict by Judge Thomas Berger, surprisingly prescient about the price subarctic Canada will have to pay for mining northern oil deposits. An architect, Krysia Bussièrè tells the story of Fremont, a Northern Quebec mining town, designed and built from scratch in the 1970s with all the environmental limitations in mind, while David Schaffler and Edyta Krajewska assume a literary perspective to signal Canadian authors’ (Ernest Thompson Seton’s, Farley Mowat’s, Margaret Atwood’s) environmental sensibility and engagement

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with environmental concerns.

These five brief outlines of their authors' ecocritical engagement with Canadian history, literature and culture signal the rich potential which Canada has for green academic exploration.

Joanna Durczak

Northern Canadian environment at risk – from Elizabeth Hay’s *Late Nights on Air* to Andrew Nikiforuk’s “Canada’s Highway to Hell”

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In a novel entitled *Late Nights on Air*, Elizabeth Hay recounts the momentous decision taken by judge Thomas Berger in 1977 concerning the construction of the proposed natural gas pipeline from the Arctic Ocean to Alberta and the United States, which would traverse the Yukon and the Mackenzie Valley. Recognizing the area as too vulnerable to environmental damage and acknowledging aboriginal land claims, he recommended a halt to a pipeline across northern Yukon and a ten years’ delay on the one through the Mackenzie Valley. The debate regarding building the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline reopened in 2004 and Canada’s federal cabinet is to make a final decision by the middle of 2014 (Jones). The issue appears even more noteworthy since according to numerous opponents, most notably the Sierra Club, the principal purpose of the pipeline is to propel Alberta's tar sands operations.

Yet, whether the project is finalised or not, Canada seems bent on developing the tar sands business, which worries a journalist and non-fiction writer Andrew Nikiforuk. In an article titled “Canada’s Highway to Hell” he depicts what he calls “the world's last great oil rush.” He notes that the traffic on the eponymous Highway 63 leading to the tar sands has been incredibly hectic and the number of fatal accidents has been on the rise since the project commenced. However, the title refers not only to the highway but also the tar sands themselves. The author claims that the proven oil reserves in Alberta amount to 175 billion barrels, a number rendering Canada the second energy power in the world after Saudi Arabia. Proponents of the development emphasise the unique opportunity to build

Canadian and American energy independence, while Andrew Nikiforuk focuses on its environmental and social impact.

Firstly, Northern Canada's boreal forest "the size of Florida" will become "an industrial zone" filled with toxic waste and greenhouse gases as a result of the project (Nikiforuk). The tar sands contain bitumen, a mixture of oil, sand, clay, and water. Extracting oil from the mix is not only costly and complicated, but it also poses a tremendous threat to the environment. Forests, muskeg and wetlands are devastated in the process, rivers are rerouted, hot water is used to wash each oil barrel and plenty of natural gas is consumed to power the process. The project endangers numerous animal species, including the Athabasca River fish, boreal songbirds and woodland caribou. Furthermore, the destruction of Alberta's environment impinges on the local people. Long gone are the days when those living along the Athabasca could drink water directly from the river and fish in it safely. The project has also transformed a quiet and secluded small town at the end of Highway 63, Fort McMurray, into a boom town. Among the various social consequences of the boom Nikiforuk mentions the increase in prostitution, gambling, crime as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

Thus, Andrew Nikiforuk demonstrates that what judge Thomas Berger cautioned against in the 1970s with regard to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, has already come to pass in Alberta regardless of the fact that the pipeline has not yet been built. He believes it is up to Canadian and American oil consumers, politicians and businesspeople to choose between the well-being of the environment, of which people are an integral part, and the way of life dependent on oil.

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The Day of Doom. Canadian style

Edyta Krajewska

People love to be afraid, and so contemporary literature repeatedly depicts potential armageddons, mirroring the achievements of the scientists unveiling still new dangers lying in wait to decimate the human population on the earth, yet one of the most disturbing scenarios is of the humankind willingly killing itself due to its witlessness. In her recent literary works Margaret Atwood, an ardent advocate of environmental awareness, addresses the issue directly.

Payback (2008) can be read as the non-fiction counterpart of the first volume of the *Maddaddam* trilogy, *Oryx* and *Crake*. It consists of five chapters, with the concept of debt as a thread connecting them. Atwood travels across space and time as well as across literary genres, blending fact and fiction and presenting financial liability as a literary and a historical motif. The literary illustrations she offers vary; from the most obvious, e.g. *The Merchant of Venice*, to quite surprising ones, e.g. *The Wuthering Heights*. The historical episodes the author touches upon demonstrate a surprising discord that the concept of financial obligation comprises, i.e. debt being a torment and a romantic enterprise, thus becoming the source of almost all contemporary problems: everyone loathes debts, yet people keep living beyond their means, thus cumulating their financial commitments in order to pay for what is not their property. The last chapter deals with people's obligations to the planet. The currency are not coins of gold or pounds of flesh but time, forever running out and wasted away when lunatic or irresponsible decisions are taken. To demonstrate the paths humans can pick, Atwood returns to one of her favourite literary characters, Dickensian Ebenezer Scrooge. His contemporary version, Scrooge Nouveau, an egoist recklessly squandering Nature's gifts, is visited by three Earth Spirits that describe how humanity has been indebting itself to Nature. The last Spirit, Earth Day Future, a cockroach, serves as a telling comment on the fate of

the humankind when its invoice from Nature is due.

Maddaddam trilogy, a panorama of one of the humankind's potential futures, includes *Oryx and Crake* (2003), a portrait of a compartmentalized universe: the affluent compounds inhabited by those serving the CorpSeCorps against the pleeblands, portrayed in *The Year of the Flood* (2009), a land for all those who will not follow the rules of corporate life. In order to bring this distorted world back to its right course the most extreme method is employed: BlyssPluss Pill, a perfect cure, eliminating all external causes of death, with a built-in death mechanism. The cleansed world is to be inhabited by man-made people who do not need clothes, eat leaves, and have built-in citrus-oil insect repellent, all meant to let them function in the world without affecting it. In the final part of *Maddaddam* (2013), these creations of human genius, and the survivors of human folly finally meet. At the dawn of its existence, this new domain has to fight for its survival, and its inhabitants, humans and beasts, need to unite against the nefariousness of the pre-apocalyptic world.

Ultimately, the new world comes to existence. Yet, when the novel ends, the key question remains unanswered: Have the humans learnt their lesson in order to function in the new reality? Atwood seems to offer a nod. People's ways on the earth are shifting, and they are on the route of deciding whether they are heading towards balanced progress or havoc and debacle. Atwood's protagonists had to go through an apocalypse in order to wake up to take responsibility for their actions toward the planet, and we, the readers, are given their story in order to make wiser choices, eventually.

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Wolves and alienation: from Marx to Seton to Mowat

David Schauffler

The social/psychological category of alienation has long since acquired wider application than the state of the worker under industrial capitalism, as described by Marx: “the alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him” (Marx 1964, 108). Two interesting extensions of the same alienated condition that Marx describes are in the direction of western society’s relations, first, towards domestic and wild animals, and second, towards the natural world conceived as a whole. These extensions can be seen in famous “wolf stories” by two Canadian popular naturalists, Ernest Thompson Seton at the end of the 19th century and Farley Mowat in the late 20th.

In Seton’s 1899 story “Lobo, King of the Currumpaw,” the eponymous animal hero is contrasted with the sheep and cattle – ‘alienated workers’ in precise Marxian terms, whose very existence is determined from the outside – on which he and his pack preys. Lobo is pictured almost as an archaic hero, of legendary size and cunning, and a law unto himself: “Wherever he appeared with his trusty band, terror reigned supreme among the cattle, and wrath and despair among their owners” (Seton 1966, 15). The author himself sets out to trap him, but Lobo proves to be a match for him, and the “grim bandit” finally only dies “of a broken heart” when his mate is taken and killed (Seton 1966, 34). Here is a consciously composed tragedy: the noble wolf’s end is tragic and the circumstances are also tragic: man profits from and defends his alienated workers (the cattle) and thus sets out to destroy the free, self-willing, unalienated wildlife that threaten them, but which he admires, seeing in it his own untrammelled nature.

By the time Mowat published *Never Cry Wolf* in 1963, the frontier was long closed and even in the Canadian north, the terms and ideology of industrial capitalism held total sway. The air is not one of conflict and

tragedy but of farcical comedy. Where in Seton's time domestic cattle are threatened by wolves from beyond the realm of profit, by the 1960s even the wild caribou herds have become essentially commodities to be exploited, and are, as Mowat finds, depleted not by scornful, rampaging wolves but by hunters and sportsmen. Mowat's account of the wolf "family" he observes testifies to the complete ascendancy of alienation: now the wolf cannot be admitted to exist as a law unto himself, but is depicted as a dutiful, domestic breadwinner, exhibiting all the bourgeois virtues, including affection, conscientiousness, and monogamy (Mowat 2001, 92-94). It is, of course, by means of this ideological domestication of the wild animal that Mowat means to establish sympathy for it, among a readership which has become entirely estranged from any notion of a form of life outside of that dictated by the structure of modern capitalism. Mowat's wolves are described with the sympathy of perfect condescension, in which "their own deeds become an alien power opposed to them" (Marx and Engels 1989, 53).

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Enacting Nature: Stories and Practices Reflecting Coastal First Nations Deep Connection to the Natural World

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Among Coastal First Nations, their traditional worldview, carefully derived from their symbiotic interaction with nature over millennia, is held up as a paradigm of living in harmony with the environment. That is, the Nuu-chah-nulth philosophy, at the heart of which lies the expression *hishuk-ish t'sawalk*, meaning that “all things are one,” is directly tied up with egalitarian discourse which, by means of passing on the mythical origin stories, encourages indigenous people to situate themselves in an inextricably bounding relationship – based on consent, respect, sustainability, and continuity – with all non-human creatures. In other words, the spiritual connection to nature bestowed upon the indigenous instills them with the obligation to foster the mystical unity of existence, simultaneously, securing the natural harmony (Atleo, “Indigenous Views”).

To delve into the issue of the philosophy of Tsawalk, it is important to explore the mythical design of creation of many species. As Richard Atleo, the first Aboriginal to receive a Doctorate in British Columbia, explains, “the origin of species is in, and from, the first people. Other species [...] are produced from the first people, but they themselves remain essentially like the first people throughout the ages” (Atleo, “Clayoquot Sound” 200). To put it in starker terms, it is the first people who are acknowledged to be the source of all life-forms on earth and, since everyone – referred to as *quus* (a “person” that is not limited to human beings) within the Nuu-chah-nulth tradition – undergoes the ongoing process of divine transformations, in which a spirit does not die but passes into another form of life, both humans and other living creatures are considered to be equal (Atleo, “Clayoquot Sound” 203). Needless to say, the premium is put onto the unity of the

spiritual and physical planes of reality, alongside with the harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

Significantly, the traditional Nuu-chah-nulth teaching may manifest itself in their harmonious co-existence with the land and spiritual ties with non-human creatures. Indeed, on the divine level of reality, the indigenous identify a plethora of spiritual energies existing in the natural world, which arouses mutual respect and recognition (Atleo, “Indigenous Views”). Thus, instead of taking control over the natural system and, consequently, disrupting the web of life, what appears to be at work is one’s responsibility to ensure the natural balance by virtue of taking an evasive approach towards the arousal of disharmony.

For the purpose of safeguarding the harmonious nature of reality and enhancing the indigenous culture associated with it, Coastal First Nations – bearing in mind that human spirituality serves as an irreplaceable element of the natural harmony and applying the Tsawalk philosophy to their lives – are compelled to tell numerous origin stories to younger generations and practice a variety of traditional ceremonies. In turn, these ceremonial practices are aimed at controlling a reality characterized by polarization and filled with “a continual presence of conflict” (Atleo, “Indigenous Views”), while keeping its spiritual and physical forces – such as good and evil – within their safe boundaries (Atleo, “Indigenous Views”).

All in all, the philosophical paradigm of *hishuk-ish t’sawalk* evidently puts emphasis on the unity of creation and therefore fosters mutual respect for the earth and its living creatures. In an effort to ensure this natural harmony, Coastal First Nations have invented a plethora of practices harmonizing the polarized reality. Thus, insofar as the Aboriginal community symbiotically co-exists with other life forms and avoids spiritual estrangement from the land, the natural balance will be perpetuated.

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Ethereal Permanence: A Study of Settlement in the Canadian North

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Fermont, Québec is an iron mining town of 2874 people. In 1974, a panel of architects, planners and engineers designed a 1.3 kilometre long community complex which acts as a windscreen to protect the town from the Northeasterly wind and record temperatures. Detached housing is protected within its wingspan and residents use the complex to cross through town during the subarctic Canadian winter.

Fermont sits at the elbow of Lac Daviault and is among hills rich with high-grade iron. Fermont's plan was intended to unite the community and combat the harsh climate. Today, two distinct populations live within the town: those who regularly live and work in Fermont, and the “fly-in/ fly-outs” who work for two weeks at a time. Because the mining company provided most of the infrastructure, residents often cannot stay in town once they retire. Fermont is fairly young, so there has only recently been an emerging elderly population, as well as a younger generation of those who were born in the town. Thus, Fermont is in the middle of an important stage in its development and the study of the town in light of broader patterns of human settlement (and particularly of Canadian early settlement) is of importance.

The iron embedded in Mont Wright has driven the town's creation and sustained its existence. Social dynamics of the town are, therefore, intricately woven within its geography, for it is in its remote location that residents have found a pride of place. A sense of community has formed within the walls of the hill-emulating windscreen structure, *le Mur Écran*, and in the detached houses which are protected within its wingspan. This housing typology is uncommon in mining towns and typically unsuitable for sub-arctic climates, but providing these was instrumental in securing half of the town's initial population. The windscreen structure was designed to

remedy the disparity between Fermont's geography and the residents' desire to live in a town that was like the "South."

Review of anthropological and urban planning literature supports the connection between location and identity in revealing a set of characteristics common to company and mining towns. These factors speak to a resilience, unity and loyalty in the inhabitants. Residents derive a sense of identity from "surviving" a taxing profession and harsh environment. The remote setting also establishes an identity amongst towns of comparable size and geography. These towns often share similar industries and major geographic forms but tend to be located far from one another (in the case of Fermont's two closest neighbours, Labrador City and Wabush, this relationship requires crossing provincial boundaries).

Unique to a mining town is its ability to tremendously alter its own geography – a geography on which residents depend for the duration of their stay. Social and geographic transience are deeply rooted in the mindset of residents and play a significant role in the establishment of identity within the community. Perhaps most surprising, however, is the eventual desire for signs of permanence, as recently manifested in the planning of a cemetery. Study of a town such as Fermont, QC begs an exploration of connections between identity, transience and geological destiny through the study of geographic, urban and sociological form in early Canadian settlement.