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Introduction: Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada

For Jon Gordon

The future of Canadianist ecocriticism will also be shaped by changes—often unhappy ones, in all probability—to physical environments. In the past decades, environmentally oriented studies of literary works have succeeded in demonstrating the persistence of writers' desire to engage, whether in celebration or lament, the places in which they find themselves. This literary-historical constant, however, is perpetually inflected by environmental change. The anthropogenic causes of massive environmental disruptions, moreover, ensure that ecocriticism will have reason to retain its political significance and to preserve its transgressive edge.

—Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley, *Greening the Maple*

In her introduction to the 2014 special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* on Canadian literary ecologies, Pamela Banting acknowledged that Canada was mired, at that moment, in some pretty environmentally nasty times. The Alberta Tar Sands (and Hibernia Oil Fields off the coast of Newfoundland) were booming, dragging the country ever further into regressive, petro-state economics. Stephen Harper was Prime Minister, actively muzzling

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scientists and dismantling environmental regulations as he worked with multinational corporations to drive two different pipelines for diluted bitumen through unceded Indigenous territories to the West Coast and one to the East Coast, and as he simultaneously lobbied the Obama administration to approve the Keystone XL. Harper's process was relentlessly undemocratic as, for example, he buried important legislative changes in giant omnibus bills where they could not be properly debated in the House of Commons; in 2012 he thus decimated the *Navigable Waters Protection Act* in the midst of the 450-page Bill C-45, removing federal protection from thousands of lakes and streams and egregiously violating Indigenous treaty rights in the process. As Banting wrote at the time, "Canada is being forcibly recolonized from within and without through the combined forces of capitalism, globalization, and the oil and gas industries" (5).

When Justin Trudeau was elected Prime Minister the following year, many people breathed a sigh of relief as he appointed Catherine McKenna as minister of the newly named Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, just as Canada was about to enter into negotiations at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris: here, it seemed, was a government that took climate change seriously, that might not be quite so tied up in the fortunes of the oil industry, and that might restore conditions in which scientists in the public service could speak freely about the environmental effects of things like diluted bitumen pipelines. Moreover, many people were hopeful about the appointment of Jody Wilson-Raybould as Minister of Justice and Attorney General, the first Indigenous person to hold the job in Canadian history. Her appointment followed closely on the release of the executive summary, as well as 94 "calls to action," from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) that had been formed (under Harper) to investigate the genocidal history and ongoing impacts of the Indian Residential School system. Trudeau, claiming in the spirit of reconciliation that it was high time for "a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with First Nations peoples," seemed willing to go beyond apology and into the much more difficult territory of treaty recognition and negotiation, and promised (and subsequently implemented) a national inquiry into the disappearance and murder of over 1,200 Indigenous women. Crushed as so many of us felt from those Harper years, even I allowed myself some hope.

Were we ever wrong. Mr. Trudeau may, arguably, have a more charming public face, but he has not departed from his predecessor's commitment to the expansion of the petro-capitalist state, and his promises to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples—including respecting their right to refuse development on their territories—have turned

out to be pretty hollow the minute the interests of the oil industry are involved. The most recent example is the federal government's purchase of the highly controversial Trans-Mountain pipeline from the Texas-based US multinational Kinder Morgan. The nationalization of this economically risky pipeline will further entrench Canada in a declining oil industry; it will also make it almost impossible for the country to meet its much-lauded COP 21 emissions reduction targets. The twinning of Trans-Mountain also proceeds at the expense of fragile coastal ecosystems in British Columbia that will be negatively impacted by a seven-fold increase in tanker traffic and that will be devastated by a major bitumen spill (at least some federal government scientists are now able to say publicly that they don't know exactly what will happen when spilled bitumen hits the ocean), and at the expense of the rights of the First Nations whose territories include the path of the pipeline and the coastal areas most at risk of spill contamination. About half of the pipeline will run through Secwepemcū'ecw, the unceded territories of the Secwepemc Nation; although four of the individual Secwepemc Nations along the pipeline have officially signed onto the project (which is a complicated story that would take many pages to tell), D.T. Cochrane, an economic researcher with the Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade, argues that the project will face insurmountable economic and political hurdles because of the basic, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples-supported, legal fact of Aboriginal Title. "Widespread support from Indigenous leaders and promises from Secwepemc grassroots people and Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies in British Columbia and across Canada to resist the pipeline expansion, makes the project's 'unquantifiable risk' the death for any potential asset" (qtd. in Brake, n.p.). The Tsleil-Waututh Nation, whose territories include the site of the Burnaby terminal where the bitumen will move from pipeline to tanker, as well as the Secwepemc Nation and several other First Nations, have filed legal challenges to more than half of the pipeline and tanker route. Indeed, it is partly because of these challenges that the Trudeau government bought the pipeline: Kinder Morgan was getting cold feet about the poor risk of the project. As Cochrane explains, "Canada's \$4.5-billion purchase of the project—which by some estimates could cost up to \$15 billion more by completion—is a 'perfect example of the socialization of risk' and means associated risks are now 'borne by the Canadian government and. . .all of the citizens of Canada'" (qtd. in Brake, n.p.).

Of course, both the pipeline and the purchase have been the subject of considerable protest both in and out of the courts. In addition to ongoing First Nations challenges, for example, the City of Vancouver claims that the Province of British Columbia failed to engage in proper

consultation or conduct a proper environmental assessment before approving the pipeline (as of writing, the BC Supreme Court has rejected this claim, which is not the end of the story). 800 small business leaders have signed a petition encouraging current BC Premier John Horgan to continue the Province's resistance to the pipeline.¹ Perhaps most importantly, the pipeline has galvanized a large grassroots protest on Burnaby Mountain and across the country. Led by First Nations, the protest includes local and regional residents, faith leaders, environmental activists, and citizens of many nations who are not only concerned about the impact of the pipeline itself, and about the government's regressive support of the oil industry in these climate changing times, but also about the anti-democratic, economically reckless tactics that that federal government has deployed to ram the pipeline through at all costs.

Although it happened earlier in the story, one thing that may be of particular relevance to this *ISLE* cluster on "Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada" is the fact that Stephen Collis, a poet and professor of English at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC, was, back in 2014, slapped with a \$5.6M SLAPP (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) lawsuit for a lyrical blog post that he wrote, "The Last Barrel of Oil on Burnaby Mountain," which was linked to a protest against the pipeline's expansion into a Burnaby public park. Lawyers for Kinder Morgan accused Collis of encouraging illegal protest and read the post into the public record at the trial to demonstrate his guilt. The trial transcript, including the excerpted blog post, is now enshrined in Collis' book *Once in Blockadia*, and is well worth the read: according to the KM lawyers, "underneath the poetry is a description of how the barricade was constructed" (9)!

As barricades were assembled from garbage dumped down a hillside from a parking lot in Burnaby Mountain . . . an old rusted oil barrel was uncovered and rolled up the hill. It's a talisman, a symbol of the old world we are trying to resist and change. It is, we hope, the last oil barrel that will have anything to do with this mountain forest. (9)

The SLAPP suit was eventually dropped, but not until after Kinder Morgan had received an injunction against the protestors in order to drill in the contested site. And despite the hope of Collis' conclusion and the continued protests along the pipeline and beyond, at the moment it does not look like it will be the last barrel of oil on Burnaby Mountain.

Collis' lyric is, of course, only one among a proliferation of poems, stories, and other passionate artworks protesting the pipeline, insisting (again, and again) on First Nations sovereignty, mourning the past and future environmental damage caused by the oil industry in what is now Canada, and calling for both personal and political action to combat climate change and resist colonial, petro-state politics and economics. My personal favorite is probably Warren Cariou's forceful "Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto" (2012), which performs a direct visual and textual confrontation with extractive industry in the Alberta Tar Sands, but my shortlist of recent literary works would also include Lisa Moore's heartbreaking novel *February* (2009), which follows the 1982 sinking of the Ocean Ranger oil rig off the coast of Newfoundland; Leslie Battler's brilliant poetic play on extractivist industries and cultures in *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015); and Thomas King's multi-storied novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), concerning a fictional chemical spill in a remote west coast Indigenous community, which manages to be both warmly endearing and intensely angry at the same time. Ecocritics have both followed and led this proliferation; three very different examples of recent Canadian ecocritical/ecopolitical work are Jon Gordon's *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions* (2015),² Smaro Kamboureli and Christl Verduyn's co-edited *Critical Collaborations: Indigeneity, Diaspora, and Ecology in Canadian Literary Studies* (2014), and Liza Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones' co-edited *Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments* (2015).

Canadian ecocriticism is not unique with regard to its commitment to eco-political work. But there remains a geographical, historical, colonial, economic, political, and literary specificity worth at least mentioning: environmental literatures and politics take particular, interrelated shapes here. The first thing to note is that we have a lot to say. As Soper and Bradley note in their introduction to the first-ever published collection of Canadian ecocriticism, *Greening the Maple* (2013), "in Canadian literature and literary criticism, theoretical reflection upon the natural world and upon the role of language and literature in describing, imagining, and constituting nature has a lengthy past" (xii): there is an extraordinary depth and variety to environmental literatures in Canada that is impossible to summarize in a few choice themes, trends, or questions (although some have tried). The second thing to note is that this diversity is itself politically complicated. On the one hand, as Soper and Bradley note, the extensive corpus of "Canadian" ecoliterary work stems from the fact that storied and poetic engagements with the natural world in the vast territory north (mostly) of the 49th parallel have been foundational to public, political conversation about the place since well before there was anything like a Canada, let alone a Canadian literature. These tremendously diverse engagements (in many languages) range from Indigenous oral traditions from many

nations, to the journals of French explorers and clergy, to Africadian spirituals, to the works of colonial writers such as Duncan Campbell Scott whose poetry was foundational to Confederation literature at the same time as his politics were foundational to the creation and expansion of the Indian Residential School system (the two were not coincidentally related). On the other hand, prevailing twentieth-century discourses—generally white, Anglo, masculine, central Canadian, and referring back to Scott's nature poems rather than to Black Nova Scotian lyrics—of a singular "Canadian" nature mentality or canon (sometimes opposed to a singular "American" one in order to underscore our national differences) have more recently given way to a range of very vocal oppositions and alternative formations, in which conceptions of and relationships to nature are bound up in very politicized ideas of region, identity, confederation, colonization, livelihood, and opposition. For example, where, starting in the 1970s, Northrop Frye's idea of the "garrison mentality" held considerable sway as a general statement about a supposedly "Canadian" antagonism to a hostile "wilderness," a host of subsequent writers and literary critics—including but not only ecocritics—have pointed out that this rather phantasmic idea of foundational nature antagonism emerges from a very problematic view of Canadian history, of geography and region, of labour, of language, of environmental experience and desire, of economic and political power, of gender, of race, and especially of colonization.

It would, thus, not be possible to list all of the different ways in which Canadian literatures and criticisms reflect, address, and intervene in eco-political conditions and struggles. In this context, this special "Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada" cluster of *ISLE* does not claim to "represent" Canadian literatures, ecocriticism, or environmental politics in any meaningful way: to do so would necessitate the inclusion, in a much more intensive and foundational way, of the work of Indigenous and Francophone scholars (who have many issues with "Canadian"), scholars working in Black and Asian communities and literatures, and scholars writing from, and about, a wider diversity of geographical regions of this vast and culturally, economically, and environmentally fraught place. Like many depictions, unfortunately, this collection over-represents—if not exclusively—settler perspectives from Ontario and, to a lesser extent, BC. Nonetheless, this collection continues to challenge, and to move the ecocritical conversation beyond, calcified settler-colonial narratives of Canada as a wilderness (to be either fought or embraced), of Canada as a primarily rural and resource-producing nation ("hewers of wood and drawers of water"), and even of Canada as a rather eco-friendly, liberal sort of place in which progressive politics and policies prevail over the dark forces of capitalism and social conservatism. Not so much.

With the aim of unsettling old narratives and posing renewed political questions about environmental literatures in Canada, the cluster begins with a triptych of reflections that speak directly to Indigenous and settler-colonial perspectives on story, ecology, practice, politics, and ecocriticism. As Gregory Younging reminds us, Indigenous literature is not a subcategory of Canadian literature; it is “an extension of Traditional Knowledge systems, Indigenous histories, histories of colonization, and contemporary realities” (15). With this distinction in mind, the three works in the triptych address Indigenous and settler-colonial perspectives as they *specify, politicize, and disrupt* “Canadian” Literature. In “We Have Been Undressing Too Long: An Indigenous Ecology,” Armand Garnet Ruffo writes, weaving in many traditional voices and perspectives, about the importance of stories to (and as) Indigenous ecologies. As a way of “putting clothes back on,” of remembering layers of ecological meaning, orientation, and imagination in a world in which colonial dispossession has stripped landscapes of their traditional stories (and vice versa), the act of attentive listening to traditional stories is a vital practice to return “all that we perceive to be ‘out there’ in the world to our innermost being [and to] recognize our interconnectedness with all that surrounds us”: the land speaks, through story, in traditional ways and through particular protocols that require careful and thoughtful observance. Ruffo also explains that ecological storytelling is for him, as part of his Anishnaabe tradition, an *ongoing* practice of “dressing himself in the world”; he thus shares with the reader a beautiful, “unflattened” version of an Ojibwe creation story, “The Water Lily Woman,” as an invitation to this very present practice. Also weaving story with decolonizing practice, in “Listening to the Streams Underneath and Overhead: Dispatches from a Water Journey,” Rita Wong writes about a voyage along and into waters both physical and political. Beginning in Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish territories (a.k.a. Vancouver, BC), and ending with the work of Keepers of the Water to protect the Arctic Ocean watershed, Wong’s journey includes stories of waters awaiting daylight underneath city streets, stories of waters in need of catching and holding and celebrating in the (recently named) St. George Rainway, stories of tracking the waters of the (also recently named) Fraser River up through multiple layers of inhabitation and dispossession, and stories about the mixing of water with oil in petro-capitalist landscapes, including the forging of water-protecting alliances among First Nations, environmentalists, and others opposed to destructive practices of extraction in the Tar Sands and in the territories of the Fort Nelson First Nation. Echoing Wong’s insistence on the importance of *meaningful* acknowledgement as a starting-point for respectful settler-colonial

listening, storytelling, and action in Indigenous/settler-colonial contact-zones, Richard Pickard writes, in "Acknowledgement, Disruption, and Settler-Colonial Ecocriticism," that acknowledgement is not at all a simple matter, and that institutional routines of territorial thanks must give way to a more profound and disruptive acknowledgement of the colonizing relations that have brought these institutions into being. Tracing a particular story of violent dispossession in what is now BC alongside his own and his family's complex stories of occupations, Pickard asks critical questions about what ecocritical practice can (and must) do in these ongoing colonial times and places. Settler-colonial ecocritics must, he writes, "enact a mode of *settler-colonial* ecocriticism that takes seriously the implications of these roots, this history, the present, and the future," including challenging fundamentally colonial categories such as "wilderness," including listening carefully to Indigenous writers' plural conceptions of place, and especially including (re)reading settler-colonial texts for the constitutive traces of relations with First Nations.

Beginning with diverse understandings of the role(s) of environmental literatures and ecocritisms in ecological politics, the subsequent six essays consider a range of ecologies and literary relationships in ways that are very different from those rooted in Frye's garrison tradition, and that instead refract very cosmopolitan—and also very local—ecopolitical insights through specific texts and concerns that arise from inevitably plural Canadian experiences. In "Timely Ecocriticism: Reading Time Critically in the Environmental Humanities," Paul Huebener considers that "ecocritical time studies" hold the potential to bring literary insights to bear on pressing political questions of ecological sustainability, both within and outside Canada; the complex temporal politics of things like pipelines (including the regulatory processes that surround them) reveal that it is not adequate to simply "criticize the social processes of acceleration and to advocate for 'slowness,'" as if the latter were some, more "natural," timescale. As ecosystems include multiple, overlapping temporalities (from fossilization to mayfly lifespans to the multiplicities of trees), in intersection with a range of more anthropogenic temporalities, a "timely" ecocriticism can attend to the ways in which literary texts (such as Margaret Atwood's poem "Bear Lament") highlight the knots of temporal complexity that characterize the present, political-ecological moment. Jenny Kerber's "Romantic Ramblings, Revisited: Eco-logics of Mobility in Sina Queyras' *Expressway*," is similarly concerned with the ecological politics of time, in this case focused on Queyras' poetic problematization of the nostalgic notion of a capital-N nature against the accelerating ravages of modernity. As Kerber demonstrates, Queyras' attention to the "mixed legacies" of Romanticism in her poetry—its

complex entanglements with time, space, movement, and the natural world, especially as articulated in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*—provides an important “response to the daily pressures of accelerated life and information overload, but . . . without reinforcing an idea of nature as timeless escape.” By looking to both the past and the hyper-mobile future, Kerber argues, Queyras reminds us that it while it may be “too late to be simple,” it is not too late to publicly imagine new forms, and speeds, of futurity.

In “‘Earth, You Almost Enough’: The Poetry and Poetics of Dennis Lee,” Mark Dickinson notes that Lee has long since been concerned with the ways in which settler Canadians are not “sustained by the deeper rhythms emanating from the land itself [and have] no traditions or protocols to connect to those rhythms, and thus exist in a state of profound spiritual deprivation.” In both his serious, adult poetry, such as *Civil Elegies* (grounded intellectually in Heideggerian philosophy and geographically just outside Toronto’s current City Hall), and in his beloved children’s works such as *Alligator Pie*, Lee is searching for a way of making a meaningful “home” when he, like most settler Canadians, has “been educated to think of [the place, and the people] as nothing more than natural resources”; in his poetry, Lee attempts to touch a language and rhythm of a “deeper music,” the excavation of which, for settlers, is an inevitably painful and scouring process, and also a deeply spiritual journey. In “Matters of Poetics and Resiliency in Daphne Marlatt’s *Steveston*,” Lisa Szabo-Jones traces Marlatt’s similarly painful path through layers of precarious “homing,” but—resting on feminist materialist rather than Heideggerian ecologies (and on the movements of the Fraser River Delta rather than the geological underpinnings of Nathan Phillips Square)—speaks of a very different poetic dynamic, and also different patterning of colonial history. *Steveston*’s violent story—and also its poetry—proceeds through mingling, shattering, accretion, breakdown, and resilience: it is, perhaps, sedimentary rather than metamorphic. Marlatt’s “material poetics” also includes both human and more-than human displacements, migrations, the ebbs and flows of resilience: Coast Salish peoples, Japanese-Canadians, salmon, as well as economic and linguistic “returns.” In this rhythm, as Szabo-Jones concludes, “Marlatt leaves readers with the sense . . . that this town, this river, these people, these wharves, these canneries, and ‘pilings’ . . . are a single, constant shifting currency that emerges from matter that in turn creates matter and so on.”

In “Wildness and Windsor: Di Brandt’s ‘Zone:<le Détroit>,’ Environmental Praxis, and Urban Nature,” Matthew Zantigh focuses on Windsor, Ontario: a place that is strongly tied to global flows of industry and heavy pollution through automobility, and also a

place in which, as Brandt writes, “the trees can still knock/you out with their loveliness” (4.19–21, 23–24). Although a specific part of Canadian political ecologies, Windsor is “a synecdoche for global cities, offering a method of mourning the loss and degradation of urban space but also praising the life that continues to exist in the cracks, crevices, and parks of our cities.” As Zantingh argues, Brandt’s poem “Zone:<le Détroit>” uses the city’s automobility to move between local, regional, and global meanings, highlighting both Windsor’s locality and its entanglement in global industrial and urban politics, including multiple forms of corporeal violence; at the same time as it sings “a lament for the destruction of the urbanization process” writ large, “it is also a celebration of the fragments of the natural world within it” in arrestingly particular detail. Cheryl Lousley, in contrast, turns our attention away from local/global urban synecdoche to the level of the nation-state. In “Spectral Environmentalisms: National Politics and Gothic Ecologies in *Silent Spring*, *Surfacing*, and *Salt Fish Girl*,” she writes that “the nation-state, in many places, is still the primary actor that determines . . . the fate of waterways and forests, the quality of air, the treatment of domesticated animals, the distribution of energy infrastructure, and the toxicity of materials” even as ecocritics—and Indigenous scholars—have soundly challenged the destructive artificiality of this imagined body politic. By engaging with the Canadian gothic tradition, Lousley provides an account of a nation-state that is, in *Silent Spring* (Carson) and *Surfacing* (Atwood) haunted by internal decays and disavowals despite its bourgeois pretensions to maturity and, in the more recent *Salt Fish Girl* (Lai), completely crumbled to ruin, a death-world, including a clone rather than a bourgeois individual as the locus of political life. This move does not suggest an abandonment of politics, or of public collectivity; rather, in the ruins of the nation-state, collectivity is “a more challenging task, requiring the cultivation of varying forms of environmental knowledge and spaces of political action.”

To close the cluster, in her reflective essay “Now That We Care,” Di Brandt picks up threads begun in the preceding works and brings them back, as it were, to earth. As an alternative to a version of environmental politics based primarily on alarm and confrontation—although both remain, unfortunately, necessary on Burnaby Mountain and in too many other places to count—Brandt writes that “what I think is needed now . . . is something deeper, something more radically transformative on spiritual and imaginative levels, to move us through the despair often driving these strategies, to hope.” As all of the essays in this cluster have suggested, in some way, environmental politics in what is now Canada *needs* literature, needs story, needs poetry, needs

listening, needs re-reading, in order to ground and propel this kind of radical transformation of spirit and imagination. It is thus only appropriate that the cluster ends with a poem of hope written for an Indigenous-led campaign to preserve a portion of boreal forest, and an interspecies coda written about a place that is scarred by a legacy of dispossession and incarceration, but in which the Spring is not yet silent. “Wheep? Wheep? Wheep?” Brandt’s bird poses, perhaps, a political question: what will we do now?

NOTES

1. Between the provincial approval of the Trans Mountain Pipeline and its purchase by the federal government, British Columbia experienced a regime change: the provincial government that approved the pipeline was succeeded by one that is active in resisting it. This resistance—alongside the aggressive pro-pipeline stance of the Alberta provincial government—has highlighted ongoing inter-provincial tensions as well as tensions between provincial and federal levels of government.

2. Tragically, Jon, who was a valued member of the Canadian ecocritical community, passed away in September 2016. He was 36. This special cluster is dedicated to his memory.

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