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'NAFTA we worship you'

Conservationism and the Critique of Economic Liberalism in Twenty-First Century Canadian Poetry

Zusammenfassung

Literatur kann einerseits politische Veränderungen spiegeln, andererseits aber auch einen subversiven Diskurs darstellen, der im Falle der Umweltpolitik zu einem ‚Fortschritt zurück‘ beitragen kann. Betrachtet man die kanadische Literatur des letzten Jahrzehnts aus einer ökokritischen Perspektive, so fällt eine steigende Zahl von Texten ins Auge, die sich vehement gegen die Auswirkungen des absoluten Diktats der globalen Konsumgesellschaft richten. In der ökokritischen Analyse von Gedichten von Di Brandt, Dionne Brand, Karen Solie, Larissa Lai und Rita Wong, die im Zentrum dieses Artikels steht, werden poetische Strategien verfolgt, die diese Autorinnen einsetzen, um den Schaden zu dokumentieren, der im Namen kapitalistischer Expansionsbestrebungen und konservativer Werte angerichtet wurde und wird. Damit treten diese Texte dem konservativen Regierungen charakterisierenden ökonomischen Liberalismus mit einem liberalen conservationism entgegen, der dann paradoxerweise zum Inbegriff von Progressivität wird. Auf diese Weise offenbaren diese Gedichte auch das reziproke Verhältnis zwischen Literatur und dem politischen Klima, aus dem heraus diese Literatur entsteht.

Abstract

Literature does not only reflect the political climate of a specific period, but can also offer a subversive discourse which, in the case of environmental politics, may lead to an ecological redefinition of progress. Looking at 21st century Canadian literature from an ecocritical perspective, one notices an increasing number of texts which forcefully speak out against the effects of all forms of aggressive globalized consumerism. In my article, I shall focus on poems by Di Brandt (Now You Care, 2003), Dionne Brand (Inventory, 2006), Larissa Lai and Rita Wong (Sybil Unrest, 2008), and Karen Solie (Pigeon, 2009), which address ecological problems against the backdrop of the recent conservative turn in Canadian politics. I shall trace the poetic strategies which these writers employ in order to record the damage done to the earth and its inhabitants in the name of capitalist expansion and political conservatism. Their poems, one could argue, counter the economic liberalism which characterizes conservative policies with a liberal conservationism which paradoxically be-

comes an epitome of progressiveness, thus revealing a reciprocal relationship between literature and the political climate out of which it emerges.

Résumé

Les textes littéraires sont certes susceptibles de refléter les changements politiques, mais ils sont également capables de représenter un discours subversif qui, dans le cas de la politique écologique, peut contribuer à un recul de la conscience écologique. En regardant la littérature canadienne d'une perspective éco-critique, un nombre croissant de textes qui se positionnent vigoureusement contre les effets d'un consumérisme mondial agressif est perceptible. Au centre de l'étude qui suit se trouvent des poèmes éco-critiques de Di Brandt, Dionne Brand, Karen Solie, Larissa Lai et Rita Wong. Dans une lecture éco-critique, nous analyserons les stratégies poétiques employées par les auteures afin de montrer les dégâts causés au nom de l'expansion capitaliste et du conservatisme politique. Nous verrons que les textes s'opposent au libéralisme économique, caractéristique des gouvernements conservateurs, avec un conservatisme libéral qui, paradoxalement, devient l'incarnation de la progressivité. De cette manière, les poèmes démontrent également la relation réciproque entre la littérature et le climat politique duquel celle-ci émerge.

Introduction

"I always thought that 'conserve' was part of the Conservative mantra, but I might be wrong." This is how Bob Mills, a former Conservative and Reform MP, comments on the decision of the Harper government to do away with an advisory panel known as the *National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy*. (*Postmedia News*, June 7, 2012) Even though 'conservative' and 'conservationism' may have the same roots, the latter has usually never been a major issue for conservative governments. On the contrary, as conservative governments support neo-liberal policies of the free market, short-term economic gain is usually prioritized over long-term ecological benefit. After the landslide victory of Canada's Conservative Party in the 2011 election, a *Guardian* article by Heather Mallick (3 May, 2011) expressed the fear that many social and environmental achievements would be undermined in favour of a re-orientation towards United States political doctrine during the Bush era. If US liberalism has figured, for many decades, as a foil to Canada's comparatively considerate policies concerning social welfare and sustainability, it seems that this polarization has become less justified especially since the presidency of Barack Obama. As the results of the last elections in Canada have shown, there can hardly be doubt about the fact that there has been a gradual shift among voters from more liberal to more conservative.

The aim of this article is to illustrate how recent Canadian poetry reflects concern for the environment in the wake of the political shifts that have taken place over the

past decade. In my ecocritical reading of twenty-first century Canadian poems by Karen Solie (*Pigeon*, 2009), Di Brandt (*Now You Care*, 2003), Dionne Brand (*Inventory*, 2006) and Larissa Lai and Rita Wong (*Sybil Unrest*, 2004) I shall in particular focus on the specific devices which these poets employ in order to mediate ecological and political issues in a new, i.e. highly defamiliarized manner. That the five authors dealt with in this article happen to be women is certainly no coincidence. Environmental issues and the critique of an anthropocentric attitude to nature do figure quite prominently in poems by Canadian women writers. This can be illustrated, for example, by publications such as Diana M. A. Relke's *Greenwor(l)ds* (1999) or Di Brandt and Barbara Godard's *Re:Generations* (2005), which both suggest that the urge to articulate resistance and to offer alternative perspectives is particularly strong in the works of Canadian women poets. "Their work," as Relke argues in the introduction to *Greenwor(l)ds*, "not only revises the patriarchal myth of nature as female but also empowers readers to rethink our ecocidal relationship to nonhuman life" (1999, 37). However, to declare ecopoetry a female domain would, in fact, solidify, as I see it, the problematic 'myth of nature as female' and thus again contribute to an essentialist notion of femininity. It is against the backdrop of these considerations that I have refrained from discussing these ecopoems from a distinctly ecofeminist perspective. My major focus in this article is rather to show how these poets develop critical discourses whose aesthetic consciousness distinguishes them significantly from pragmatic, documentary, or activist reports on the same issues. Strikingly, however, it is exactly this literariness, as I will argue, which holds powerful critical potential. With this approach I largely adopt Hubert Zapf's highly convincing appropriation of ecological thinking for literature and literary criticism, which is based on the idea that literature, due to its 'semantic openness and aesthetic complexity', is particularly suited to instigate reflection and change (cf. Zapf 2008, 16).

Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context

From the beginning, and I am thinking here in particular of the *Ecocritical Reader* edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in 1996, ecocriticism seems to have been a US-American domain. Canadian ecocriticism, as Susie O'Brien lamented in the late 1990s, was characterized mostly by its absence (cf. 1998, 1). Some ten years later, Simon Estok still observed a "disproportionate imbalance" (2009, 85) concerning ecocritical approaches to literature between the United States and elsewhere. What could be the reason for this imbalance, and in particular for the general neglect of ecocritical discourse in Canadian literature and criticism? One possible explanation could lie in the fact that, in the wake of American transcendentalism, the United States saw itself as 'nature's nation'. In contrast, as Konrad Gross points out, "the British American colonies [...] were not in need of bolstering their national ego with constructing a distinct relationship to nature and went about their business of consolidating their physical-political existence vis-a-vis the United States" (2011, 221). Even though this attitude may have changed with confederation in 1867, the

animal and nature stories of writers such as Seton and Roberts can still not be seen, according to Gross, as “pleas for the conservation of a nationally significant natural environment” (2011, 222). Another reason for the apparent lack of Canadian ecocriticism could be that literary as well as critical texts dealing with environmental and ecological issues simply appeared under a different label. One of these labels could be that of documentary literature, a genre which has repeatedly been defined as a particularly Canadian form.¹ However, there is yet another track one may follow in order to explain the conspicuous absence of ecoliterature and -criticism in Canada. For once, it may well be that the long-standing dominance of the ‘wilderness’ as a Canadian cultural paradigm and the emphasis on a hostile nature in Canadian literature has hindered awareness of the fragility of nature and the necessity of engaging with ecological themes. Especially with regard to poetry, Northrop Frye’s “‘deep terror’ theory” (Relke 1999, 26) still lingers on despite the numerous voices who have countered and challenged this myth since then.² In addition, Canada’s self-image as a model multicultural nation, contrasting favourably with its southern neighbour in social as well as ecological respects, has encouraged a literary and critical focus on multicultural urban spaces and on questions of cultural identity.

The following lines from Rita Wong and Larissa Lai’s long poem *Sybil Unrest* may well serve as a starting point for a brief reflection on this Canada-USA dichotomy:

swing low sweet patriot
 [...]
 coming for to carry me
 to the land of social insecurity
 missiles miss the point:
 wealthy bombers can rot in hell
 for all the righteous lies they tell
 the camel’s hump declares
 the eye in the needle in the desert storm
 stares in disbelief
 at murderous republican conventions:
 stars and pipes, oil and thieftom
 strangle us on the altar
 as fundamentalists raise their fists, cry
 four more years in self-fulfilling fervor
 faster to armageddon.
 (Lai and Wong 2008, 79 f.)

1 Many writers and critics, among them Dorothy Livesay, Linda Hutcheon and Martin Kuester, consider documentary literature a distinctively Canadian genre (cf. Kuester 2008, 231).

2 Especially Frye’s infamous statement, “I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature” (1965, 830), has had a major impact on the appreciation of Canadian poetry.

Evidently, this parody of the well-known spiritual evokes, in an almost stereotypical manner, the negative images of the United States we most readily associate with the Bush era: economic neo-liberalism, armament, the wars against Iraq, and Bible-Belt fundamentalism. However, could it not be that the cliché, as it so often does, lives on, even though its original 'signified' has long since developed into a different direction? In other words, are the "pipes", the "oil," the "thieftdom," and, in particular, the conservatism and "social insecurity" still the monopoly of the United States? Or does one have to admit that oppositions have blurred and that *Canada* now pursues conservative, nationalist, neo-liberal policies at the sacrifice of social and ecological concerns? After all, the Harper government has not only, as has been mentioned above, dissolved the *National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy*, but has also stepped down from the *Kyoto Protocol*, just to name the two most publicly visible developments. Side by side (and in opposition to) this overall conservative trend, however, one can also see a counter-movement especially in literature, where there has been a growing number of texts which now indeed *do* represent "pleas for the conservation of a [globally] significant natural environment" (Gross 2011, 222). I am not arguing here that 'conservation writing' (cf. Turner and Freedman 2005, 188) in Canada is an entirely new phenomenon. Earlier important figures in the development of an ecological awareness in Canada are for example Archibald Stanfield Belaney ('Grey Owl'), with publications such as *Pilgrims of the Wild* (1934), or, a few decades later, Farley Mowatt, with books such as the well-known *Never Cry Wolf* (1963). Another very strong "impetus for the ecological turn in Canada came from the growing self-assertion of the indigenous people since the 1960s" (Gross 2011, 225). Looking for example at Richard Wagemese's novel *Keeper'n Me* (1995), Thomas King's novel *Green Grass Running Water* (1993), or a number of stories in Lee Maracle's most recent collection of short fiction, *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style* (2010), there can be no doubt about the fact that nature and the preservation of nature *still* figure quite prominently in First Nations writing. However, as for example Turner and Freedman point out, "any sweeping generalization about aboriginal ecological sustainability is mistaken" (Turner and Freedman 2005, 175) and moreover perpetuates romanticized European notions of the 'Noble Savage'. In short, in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium the concern about the exploitation of the natural world figures in both Native *and* non-Native literature. The best-known example for the latter is no doubt Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam-Trilogy* (*Oryx and Crake*, 2004; *The Year of the Flood*, 2009; and *MaddAddam*, 2013), where environmental damage is an essential part of the dystopian vision. In particular, however, it is in the field of poetry, as I see it, that a new form of literary resistance has emerged, as the poetic text with its ultra-complex structure and its high potential for defamiliarization can be most powerfully instrumentalized as an alternative tool to more pragmatic critical discourses.³ It is now necessary for

3 This observation is also confirmed by Susie O'Brien (2007, 184), who explains this generic pref-

ecocriticism to follow, and to recognize that these texts are situated within the context of the new political landscape in Canada, but also beyond it, i.e. in the context of a global ecocritical discourse.

What is the aim of ecocriticism? In her introduction to the *Ecocritical Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, xviii) and provides an extensive catalogue of questions asked by this fairly new discipline. Let me list those which I consider most relevant for my own approach: “How is nature represented in [these texts]?” “Are the values expressed in [these texts] consistent with ecological wisdom?” “How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?” “In what way and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” “What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines?” (Glotfelty 1996, xix) An aspect Susie O’Brien and even more so Simon Estok emphasize is that “from the beginning ecocriticism has fashioned itself as activist,” i.e., it is “conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis” (Estok 2009, 89). Having looked at various ecocritical studies, what surprises me, is that many of them still show a tendency to equate ecopoetry with nature writing, as is the case for example in US-American Scott Bryson’s “Introduction” to the 2002 book *Ecopoetry*, where again the definition of ‘ecopoetry’ is derived from Romantic notions of nature. I agree with Bryson, however, when he notes that, in the face of the growing number of poems taking up ecological and environmental issues, it is surprising that this trend has not issued a stronger critical echo (cf. Bryson 2002, 1). In Canada, as I have already said, ecocriticism is still in an early phase.⁴ In particular, the provocatively critical poems that, as I see it, mark a new development in Canadian literature, have so far received little critical attention – at least not in their function as barometers of change in the political and social climate, or as voices with a specific transformative potential. What I find intriguing about Canadian ecopoetry is not only its vigorous critical opposition to social and political trends, including neo-liberalism and exploitative consumerism, but above all its idiosyncratic juggling of activist and aesthetic components, of the ludic and the serious, of entertainment and didacticism. Thus, in other words, it seems to me necessary to add another essential question to Glotfelty’s catalogue: *Which* devices are employed in literature, in particular poetry (as opposed to the codes used in pragmatic/non-literary discourses) to communicate, in this case, environmental issues? Hubert Zapf, who considers literature as part of cultural ecology, has, more than any other scholar in the field of ecocriticism, pointed to the importance of literary methods and to the dialectic effect of the aesthetic between de-

erence by poetry’s “capacity to produce the illusory impression of an unmediated reflection of the world.”

4 It has to be noted though that there have been some ecocritical readings of earlier Canadian poetry, the most noteworthy being the already mentioned *Greenwor(l)ds: Ecocritical Readings of Canadian Women’s Poetry*, published by Diana M. A. Relke in 1999.

figuration and re-figuration of given semantic patterns, between the defamiliarizing of the 'real' and the counter-discursive development of the imaginary. With these intrinsic qualities, as Zapf further notes, literature and, in particular, poetry, can counter the ossification which characterizes cultural self-images as well as cultural conceptions of the world (cf. Zapf 2002, 63 f.).⁵

Karen Solie: *Pigeon*

Despite my emphasis on new developments in Canadian poetry, I do not suggest that it has been completely refashioned over the past ten years. For instance, one still finds a certain documentary impulse which clearly plays an important role in all of the four collections which I shall be dealing with. This documentary mode is, in fact, most conspicuous in Karen Solie's ecopoems, collected in her 2009 volume *Pigeon*, in particular in "Four Factories". This is a series of four poems, each of which is dedicated to an identifiable Alberta 'mega-factory,' as it were: one to a concentration of oil refineries east of Edmonton, referred to as "Refinery Row," one to *Frito-Lay*, a gigantic Potato Chip Factory at the east end of Taber, one to an enormous Cement Plant in Kananaskis Country near Calgary, and the last to *Alberta Beef*, located in Calgary. You can look up all these sites and when you take the effort to look long enough you will find that each of these factories has been embroiled in some minor or major scandal concerning ecological or humanitarian issues. However, the documentary level is soon abandoned when these mega-factory-sites become *symbols* of capitalism and exploitation, making it clear that they could be substituted by almost any other corporation:

At the nominal limits of Edmonton, refineries wreathed
in their emissions, huge and lit up as headquarters
or the lead planet in a system, as the past
with its machinery exposed –
filters, compressors, conveyers, you name it –
basement upon basement upon basement.
Around them gather opportune spinoffs, low-slung
by-product support outfits named in functional
shorthand. *Altec, Softcom, Norcan, Cancore*,
subsidiaries crawling onto the farmland.
Employees are legion, transient,
and union, turning what happened before we existed
into something we can use, a capacity
day and night. As we sleep, they build our future.

5 In Zapf's view "literature functions like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourse" (2006, 49). Zapf, in fact, proposes a triadic model for literature as cultural ecology comprising the following (sub)functions: literature as 'cultural-critical metadiscourse', as 'imaginative counterdiscourse', and as 'reintegrative interdiscourse'" (cf. 2002, 63 and 2006, 49).

Which, as the signs say, belongs to all of us, is now.
(Solie 2009, 19)

In these four poems, Solie creates special effects by means of concentration (brought forth mainly by repetition and asyndetic lists), but also through powerful similes which foreground the threatening immensity of these plants. The increasing accumulation of spin-offs evokes, in Solie's poetic language, the image of a malignant growth which slowly infects the whole body and whose dangerous nature is stressed acoustically by an aggregation of voiceless velar plosives in their names (*Altec*, *Softcom*, *Norcan*, *Cancore*). However, Solie also works with irony, when, in the concluding lines of the poem, she unmasks society's blindness to the commodification not only of the physical environment but also of social values themselves, or when she builds up misleading expectations by using the jargon of the tourist brochure as in the "Frito-Lay" poem: "Worth leaving the highway for. Gorgeous/ at sunset, really outstanding,/ the potato chip factory at the east end/ of Taber, which is a kind of town" (19). Solie's poems oscillate between documentary detail and poetic defamiliarization. The former clearly dominates in the third factory poem, which focuses on the cement plant. Here, Solie not only provides exact geographical data, but also accurate ecological information on the damage: "Pity the diatoms, first to go, trout eggs choked by sediment in gravelly streambeds,/ ducks in chloride runoff" (21). Using scientific terms such as 'diatom' instead of words such as 'algae' or 'plankton' underlines the documentary aspect, while at the same time the collocation "pity the diatom" presents the documentary material in an unusual, 'anti-scientific' perspective, therefore containing specific communicative potential.

Another striking ecological text in Solie's collection is the three stanza poem "Tractor." The Buhler Versatile 2360 (the full brand name is repeated four times in the poem), is first introduced as a majestic, godlike creature which looks "igneous" and "sublime," which "appears risen full-blown from our deeper needs," "manifests fate" and helps us in times of doubt when "we cast our eyes/ upon the Buhler Versatile 2360/ and are comforted" (27 f.). Even in its destructive force the tractor seems awe-inspiring, evoking the image of William Blake's "Tyger:" the gigantic machine "forged/ like a pearl around the grit of centuries," with it "the ancient sea bed will be fractured to 1000 feet" (27), it will make the "earth shake [...]" and "the air concussive, cardiac."⁶ Reflecting, on the one hand, mankind's still unbroken belief in technology, the poem on the other hand sets about to deflate this image and unmasks it as a deception. Solie does so by matter-of-fact information as to the tractor's cost, its technical details, references to the parent corporation in Houston and above all the concluding implication of the tractor's possible breakdown: "And when it breaks

6 Note that again Solie relies on plosives for an additional foregrounding of the tractor's destructive force.

down, or thinks/ itself in gear and won't, for our own good, start,/ it takes a guy from the city at 60 bucks an hour/ plus travel, to fix it" (28).

Di Brandt: *Now You Care*

In her 2003 collection *Now You Care*, Di Brandt also experiments with new devices to draw attention to the damage of the environment. Let us look more closely at the first poem in the series "Zone: 'le Détroit'":

Breathing yellow air
 here, at the heart of the dream
 of the new world,
 the bones of old horses and dead Indians
 and lush virgin land, dripping with fruit
 and the promise of wheat,
 overlaid with grass and steel
 and the dream of speed:
 all these our bodies
 crushed to appease
 the 400 & 1 gods
 of the Superhighway,
 NAFTA, we worship you,
 hallowed be your name,
 here, where we are scattered
 like dust or rain in ditches,
 the ghosts of passenger pigeons
 clouding the silver towered sky,
 the future clogged in the arteries
 of the potholed city,
Tecumseh, come back to us
from your green grave,
 sing us your song of bravery
 on the lit bridge over the black river,
 splayed with grief over the loss
 of its ancient rainbow coloured
 fish swollen joy.
 Who shall be fisher king
 over this poisoned country,
 whose borders have become
 a mockery,
 blowing the world to bits
 with cars and cars and trucks and electricity and cars,
 who will cover our splintered

bones with earth and blood,
 who will sing us back [...]
 (Brandt 2003, 13)

Who indeed may be able to sing us back but the poet, sing us back “towards an ecological sensitivity that all the earth’s species, including humanity, require for survival” (Wylynyko 1998, 8). In the ecological waste land of the twenty-first century, poets seem to have adopted anew the role of prophet or Sybil, as the title of Larissa Lai and Rita Wong’s poem *Sybil Unrest* suggests, prophets whose voices are not restricted by national borders, which, as the speaker in Brandt’s poem says “have become a mockery” anyway in the face of polluted environments.

Di Brandt’s five poems of “Zone: ‘le Détroit’” are dedicated to the Vancouver artist Stan Douglas and have been inspired by an exhibition of his photographs in the National Gallery of Canada in 2000. They document the urban decay in the Detroit/Windsor area and show Douglas’ fascination with failed utopias. As in Douglas’ work, the focus of Brandt’s five ecopoems is on notions of a lost paradise – the apocalyptic scenarios which Brandt devises are countered by reminiscences of “lush virgin land, dripping with fruit/ and the promise of wheat,” and of “this glorious tree splendor” (17), of Tecumseh and Canada’s native history, and of the Fisher King (15), the latter, of course, calling up the idea of a waste land not only in physical, but also in spiritual terms. The poems also have a distinct documentary dimension – we exactly know where we are geographically when the poet refers to the 401 super-highway between Detroit and Windsor or to the tunnel underneath the Detroit River which connects the two cities. Still, Brandt’s aim is not to give a factual report of the ecological state of this area. Rather, she employs a set of poetic devices to give her message a unique appeal.

First, there is Brandt’s drawing on history and myth, which are included in the poems in a way which creates an intense contrast with the here and now of their specific location. Second, the poet uses linguistic formulas, for instance those of prayer, and fills them with new content: “NAFTA, we worship you,/ hallowed be your name.” The irony and extreme concentration created by this technique prove to be particularly effective in unmasking the new gods of modern society. Thirdly, Brandt works with colloquial diction in order to create disconcerting contrasts, as for example in the following lines from poem number three:

So here I am, sniffing around
 the railroad tracks
 in my usual quest for a bit of wildness,
 weeds, something untinkered with,
 goldenrod, purple aster, burdocks,
 defiant against creosote,
 my prairie blood surging

in recognition and fellow feeling,
 and o god, missing my dog,
 and hey, what do you know,
 there's treasure here
 among these forgotten weeds,
 so this is where they hang out,
 all those women's breasts
 cut off to keep your lawns green
 and dandelion free,
 here they are, dancing
 their breastly ghost dance
 [...] (16)

Contrasting images of pristine wilderness and of herbicide-induced disease in a provocatively cool manner, Brandt sketches a grotesquely distorted world which, however, is still recognizable as our own. Her radical juxtaposition forces us to see the link between the poisoning of the environment and the destruction of our own bodies. This is even more obvious in the concluding part of the same poem, which further develops the topic of breast cancer as caused by environmental factors:

[...]
 so what am I supposed to do,
 pretend I haven't seen them,
 or like I don't care
 about all these missing breasts,
 how they just vanish
 from our aching chests
 and no one says a word,
 and we just strap on new ones
 and the dandelions keep dying,
 and the grass on our lawns
 gets greener and greener
 and greener (16)

Here, anaphora and the sequence of coordinate clauses render a refusal to acknowledge causal connections, depicting the self-deception that has become part of the modern way of life. Brandt's poems are particularly poignant when, through the apocalyptic tableau, there seeps a glimmer of paradise:

[...] and who cares if it's
 too hot for November,
 isn't it gorgeous, darling,

and even here, in this
 most polluted spit of land
 in Canada, with its heart
 attack and cancer rates,
 the trees can still knock
 you out with their loveliness
 [...] (17)

While Karen Solie's and Di Brandt's ecopoems are firmly anchored within a specific Canadian context, Dionne Brand's *Inventory*, as well as Larissa Lai and Rita Wong's *Sybil Unrest*, not only take a more global view but also aim at a more radical exposure of the connection between social, political, post-colonial, feminist and ecological issues. In this, these poets follow the idea of an 'Ethics of Flourishing' (cf. Cuomo 1998), which claims that "advocating for the intrinsic value of nature must be intertwined (though not equated) with arguing for the intrinsic value of the lives of women, people of colour, and the poor" (Lousley 2012, 300). As they both use the form of the long poem, their texts appear, as Martin Kuester argues with regard to *Sybil Unrest*, "as a continuation of the Canadian long poem tradition from an aggressively feminist standpoint and a politically committed point of view that is critical of imperialistic and neocolonial forms of globalization" (2008, 236).

Dionne Brand: *Inventory*

In her poem *Inventory* (2006) Dionne Brand presents the reader with a disconcerting compilation of the atrocities and disasters of the twenty-first century. By using the form of an inventory, Brand, as Cheryl Lousley aptly observes, "mimics *and* exposes the depersonalizing strategies of violence and commodification" (2012, 304). The list is compiled by a poet-speaker who is glued to her television screen and feels compelled to record everything, not only what is shown, but also what is hidden and distorted by "pervasive media technologies" (Brydon 2007, 991). While Diana Brydon argues that the persona's reading of the news "enacts a model for our reading of her [i.e. Brand's] work" (995), I'd rather suggest that it enacts a model for our own response to global crises and their medial representation. The purpose of this list (and of Brand's poem) is by no means to provide yet another series of newswashes about the disasters of the past years, even though the tone of realistic documentary may suggest this at first. Rather, it is an outcry against an increasing apathy which has resulted from incessant exposure to the media:

If they're numb over there, and all around her,
 she'll gather the nerve endings
 spilled on the streets, she'll count them like rice grains

she'll keep them for when they're needed. (Brand 2006, 30)

The image of the nerve endings which the protagonist picks up and counts like grains of rice renders concrete her meticulously recorded care for the plights of humanity and the planet in general. The “spilled” nerve endings concretize the discarded feelings of those who have become “perversely accustomed” (29) to the daily atrocities happening all over the world. Brand, however, does not leave it at that, but further intensifies the rendering concrete of emotional faculties (“nerve endings”) by drawing on rice grains as a vehicle and thereby evoking associations of staple food of millions of people.

Brand’s foremost aim in this poem is to break through the routine which marks many people’s daily and indiscriminate consumption of the news of the world, of reality TV and other ‘shows.’ She does so by using original imagery, by juxtaposing themes and motifs in unusual ways, by mingling addresser and addressee and by anthropomorphizing the environment in a disquieting manner, as for instance in the following lines:

machine and body, shield and tissue,
the highway worked itself into her shoulders
and neck, now she was trembling, tasting
all the materials the city stuffs in its belly

now she was concrete and car, asphalt and oil,
head whirring like an engine,
becoming what they were all becoming (45f.)

Here, one finds a conflation of the city with the female character who keeps appearing throughout the poem and who may or may not be identified with the speaker. The imagery used in this passage strongly suggests an analogy between the wounded city and the victimized woman. At the same time, lines such as “all the materials the city stuffs in her belly” reiterate the theme of the whole poem – i.e. society’s apathetic overconsumption of televised infotainment. However, the line eludes precise interpretation as, grammatically speaking, the city could also be the victimizer, a role it occupies for instance at the beginning of the poem, when the collective lyric persona experiences urban space as “big raw city flailing us” (4). In the poem, positions constantly shift, blurring not least the dichotomies of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ and of ‘them’ and ‘us’ (cf. Brydon, 998). One technique, which is used to create this effect, is the amalgamating of addresser and addressee through the collective ‘we,’ which sometimes refers to a specific community and sometimes also includes the reader. In general, Brand’s fluctuating use of pronouns, meandering from ‘we’ to ‘she’ to ‘I’ and to ‘they,’ not only foregrounds an interchangeability of poet and reader, of speaker and addressee, but also strongly highlights the question of complicity:

[...] and the forests we destroyed,
 as far as
 the Amazonas' forehead, the Congo's gut,
 the trees we peeled of rough butter,
 full knowing, there's something wrong
 with this (7)

Regarding the complex dependencies of the global market, as the poem seems to suggest, no one can be claimed innocent any more.⁷ Once again, Brand uses personification in order to subvert an attitude which regards the environment as a commodity, a technique which extends to the imagination of "the planet itself as a fleshy, human-like body [...] clipped bare and naked through deforestation" (Lousley 2010, 303) – cf. the "shorn planet" (85), "the planet's withered lungs" (41). In the context of an ecocritical reading of Brand's poem, another technique needs to be mentioned, too. Turning against an unconditional privileging of 'civilization' and 'progress' over the natural environment, Brand largely excludes names for humans, while on the other hand celebrating the diversity of nature by naming, for instance, a plethora of birds: "though the birds of the world know this,/ the banded pitta, the mangrove pitta, the bulbul,/ the iora, the red-naped and scarlet-rumped/ trogon, the fire-tufted barbet, flame back, philentoma,/ the rufous-throated wren babbler, I tell them" (85).

No matter how diversified nature may be, however, Brand's poem implies that it can no longer function as the refuge it was in Romantic poetry: "Let us not invoke the natural world,/ it's ravaged like any battlefield, like any tourist/ island,⁸ like any ocean we care to name/ like oxygen" (42). What remains as a glimmer of hope in Brand's poetic lament is that "she" (the poet? the lyric persona? any addressee daily bombarded with shocking news?) "refuses" to accept this, even though "everyone grows perversely accustomed" (29).

Larissa Lai and Rita Wong: *Sybil Unrest*

Of the four texts discussed in this article, *Sybil Unrest* is by far the most entertaining, bursting with comic effects and postmodern playfulness while at the same time being radically committed to social, political and ecological issues. *Sybil Unrest*, as

7 Lousley, for example, illustrates this almost inevitable complicity on the example of the cell phone: "Instead of enabling communication between distant places, the cell phone materially links strangers who yet remain strangers to one another" (2010: 303). See Brand 2006: 41: "there are cellphones calling no one,/ no messages burn on the planet's withered lungs."

8 Note that Brand also works with unusual line breaks to create double meaning – in this passage for example the actual syntactic unit, i.e. the 'island,' is substituted by its defining attribute ('tourist') and, at least for a brief moment, becomes the vehicle in the simile which provocatively compares the ravaged natural world not only with a 'battlefield,' but also with a 'tourist island,' and – via the enjambement – also with a 'tourist' and an 'island.'

Sonett L'Abbet puts it, is a "trenchantly funny repartee on maintaining a resistant spirit in an environment of aggressive globalized consumerism" (2011, 169). Larissa Lai and Rita Wong's bivocal poem draws not only on the Japanese tradition of the *renga*, a type of collaboratively produced poem, but also, as has been mentioned before, on the Canadian tradition of the 'long poem.' "Taking up the long poem form," as Larissa Lai admits in an interview, "was an accident in one sense, but in another, it absolutely corresponded to the long poem tradition of addressing both daily life and the larger social life in a serial kind of way" (Krüger 2011: 100).

What interests me the most in this context is the text's potential for creating 'unrest' through new verbal devices, thus making us 'care.' Even though it may seem like a contradiction to claim that it is above all the poetic function, rather than the referential function, which makes these texts so revolutionary in a political and ecological sense, this is very much what happens in *Sybil Unrest*:

selling paradise
 by the dashboard's might
 hollywood glosses: let them drink coca-cola
 while tanks rack up mileage
 collapse the water table
 crumble crumble oil and bumble
 liars churn and exxon valdez tumbles
 roadkill carcasses pile higher, mired, find
 reboot won't do
 as tons of sewage carry pesticides,
 estrogen, prozac, pcbs into
 the kitchen stinks
 (Lai and Wong, 2008, 82)

The ludic element is not restricted to the text, but spills over to the recipient, who is called upon to create and re-create meaning from the poem's polysemic elements. The effect of the reader's active involvement in a complex interplay of word formation, sound effects, verbal associations, intertextual allusions and the shuffling of syntactic units, is one of revelation and shock as the poem uncovers and turns inside out what is normally hidden under the cover of a smooth verbal rhetoric. In the passage I have just quoted, a suicidal obsession with automobiles is emphasized through an infernal scenario, like the seething cauldron of the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. At the same time, one finds references to actual environmental catastrophes such as the Exxon Valdez Disaster of 1989. In this connection, the glib transformation of kitchen sinks to "kitchen stinks" carries with it an olfactory reminder of the omnipresent pollution.

A similar effect is created in the following lines:

The bleak small inherit the dearth
 None left
 Butt the roaches
 Global swarming encroaches (9)

Punning on the bible ("blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth", Matthew 5:5), and perhaps on a bottom-line of environmental destruction that may be reached by global warming, the poem here evokes a world that may become uninhabitable except for low but very adaptable species. As a whole, Lai and Wong's text is extremely multi-layered and often ambiguous, confronting the reader with complex and fluid semantic structures that render the multiplicity and changeability of the modern world, which may be threatening considering environmental effects on human life.

Conclusion

In 2007 the *University of Toronto Quarterly* devoted a special issue to the "Ethical Turn in Canadian Literature and Criticism." The development identified by the essays may be seen as a counter movement to social and political developments in Canada in the direction of conservatism and a stronger focus on national concerns, a growing retreat of the state from social security and welfare, and a far-reaching subscription to the laws of economic liberalism sacrificing ecological considerations. Looking at twenty-first-century Canadian literature from an ecocritical perspective, one finds an increasing number of texts which speak out against the negative effects that come with the dictates of the free market, in particular the exploitation of natural resources, including the populace themselves. In my ecocritical reading of Karen Solie's "Four Factories," Di Brandt's "Zone 'le Détroit,'" Dionne Brand's *Inventory*, and Larissa Lai and Rita Wong's *Sybil Unrest*, I have traced the poetic strategies which these writers employ in order to create awareness of the ecological damage done in the name of neo-liberalism and an aggressive consumerism. Exercising the traditional role of art as a site of resistance and subversion, their texts reveal a reciprocal relationship between literature and the political climate out of which it emerges, countering the economic liberalism which characterizes conservative policies with a liberal conservationism which becomes the *true* epitome of progress. Moreover, the growing importance of ecological themes in Canadian Literature represents a paradigm shift with regard to the portrayal of nature in that literature: traditionally a threatening, hostile force encroaching on man, it is now nature which is struggling for survival under the onslaught of human civilization. The array of poetic devices which is used in the poems helps to open clogged channels of perception, preventing us from staving off the impact of the flood of information on environmental problems which reaches us daily. We owe it to contemporary poets' indefatigable striving for new forms of expression and de-

familiarization that ecopoetry and ecocriticism have indeed become a medium for the effective articulation of ecological concerns.

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