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"Big About Green"
The Ecopoetry of Earle Birney

In an interview in 1983, Canadian poet Earle Birney reflected on his past interest in Marxist ideologies, his youthful idealism, and his eventual disengagement from socialist activism, concluding: "Now, I'm much more of a cynic. I don't know what the hell can improve the human race. I don't know whether the human race ought to survive. I have a high regard for the world of whales and dolphins. Maybe that's where the real innocent people are. The smart people are under the sea" (qtd. in Edwards 127). While Birney's celebration of marine life was perhaps intended humorously or sardonically, his comment reveals a profound ambivalence about the future and a deep unease with humanity's relationship to nature and the environment. Indeed, a great deal of Birney's poetry is set in the Canadian wilderness and engages with the natural world on a variety of thematic and symbolic levels.

In the context of Canadian literature, Birney's engagement with nature is certainly not unusual. Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley argue that "[v]irtually from the inception of the notion of a Canadian national literature, nature has occupied a central place in critical conversations" (xvii). As countless critics have noted, considering the imposing vastness of the Canadian landscape and its often harsh northern climate, it is not surprising that Canada's literature is suffused with renderings of the natural world (Frye, "Canada" 93-96; Atwood 17-18). However, Birney's ecopoetic explorations of the complex relationship between humanity and nature, and the impact of human industry and the machinations of modernity on the natural world, remain largely unaddressed in existing literary criticism. Birney's poetry presents a relationship between humanity and the natural world that is not only fraught with tension, conflict, and destruction, but which reveals a political

and ecological ethos that anticipates and foreshadows the environmentalist movement of the later twentieth century.[1] While Birney's ecopoetry certainly participates in long-established Canadian literary preoccupations with the natural world, what distinguishes Birney's work is a uniquely anti-capitalist, environmentalist discourse that not only laments the destruction wrought by modern, industrial development, but which actively invites an explicitly leftist, ecocritical reading.

This paper takes into consideration eight of Birney's poems (and their occasionally extensive revisions) that are most emblematic of his ecological ethos. Such ethos, I argue, is related to his well-documented socialism and is manifested in his poetry via recurrent anti-capitalist critiques of industrialism, a preoccupation with the human destruction of the natural world, prevalent motifs of apocalypse, and an anti-colonial focus on the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Furthermore, his extensive revisions of a number of the earliest poems in question often function to highlight his developing environmentalist approach.[2] The eight poems considered here are among Birney's most ecocriticially motivated; that is to say, while much of his poetry engages with the natural world and the landscape metaphorically and symbolically, the following poems mobilize a particular ecological ethics characterized by a political critique of destructive capitalism and colonialism. The sequencing of my analysis is organized by the first publication date of each poem: 1947 in the case of the first versions of "Man is a Snow," "Transcontinental," and "North of Superior"; 1953 for the first of the "Ellesemereland" trilogy and its sequels in 1965 and 1985;[3] and concluding with "The Shapers: Vancouver" in 1970 and "What's So Big About Green?" in 1971.[4] This chronological approach demonstrates Birney's sustained ecocritical preoccupations which culminate in the publication of his most boldly environmentalist collection, *What's So Big About Green?*, in 1971, but endure until almost the very end of his poetic career with the publication of "Ellesmereland III" in 1985.

"Big About Green": An Ecocritical Approach

Bringing ecocriticism to bear on Birney's modernist poetry provides a contemporary re-reading and re-contextualization that unearths the environmental politics at work in his oeuvre. In 1989, Larry McDonald explored the endemic critical silencing of leftist politics in the texts and biographies of some of the most prominent Canadian modernists. In his article on political influence, McDonald argues that "a historical and

methodological bias against the influence of politics on writing may have led us to misread these writers and re-present them . . . in such a way as to repress the political dimension of their writing" (426). Indeed, Birney's most prominent biographer, Elspeth Cameron, appears to downplay his political activism in her summary observation that "[h]e remained a naïve visionary until the end: easily galvanized into action for goals he idealized and just as easily disenchanted by mankind's inefficiencies and fallibilities in realizing them" (xi-xii). Having said that, she does later concede that "[b]ecause of his political engagement, his poems were seldom art for art's sake," further speculating that "he wrote to share his disillusionment, to register his frequently sardonic observations on life and to caution humanity at large against the future consequences of present actions" (556). Contrary to Cameron's tangential approach to Birney's political activism, McDonald presents a detailed account of Birney's involvement with Marxism and Trotskyism throughout the 1930s, which included his soliciting of socialist writing as literary editor of *Canadian Forum*, publishing propagandistic literature, and interviewing Leon Trotsky himself (426-27). While McDonald does not directly introduce these biographical facts into any analysis of Birney's poetry or fiction, he does note that a typical encyclopedic biography of Birney reveals a "[s]ilence on the question of [his] Trotskyist decade [that] is complemented by a summary of his importance that has nothing to say about the radical social critique in his poems" (429). McDonald does not detail Birney's specific "radical social critiques," but does observe that critics have been in the habit of "discounting, dismissing or rescuing . . . poets from the political dimension in their writing" (429).

Frank Davey, however, in 1971 provided a brief sketch of the political rhetoric in Birney's poems, noting the anti-war stance of his first two collections, his focus on social injustice in Latin America in some later work, and his concern with "environmental destruction and pollution" (77). Exploring Birney's poetry through the lens of ecocritical theory here, I build on Davey's brief observations from 1971 and resist the approach that tends to silence leftist politics. My assertion is that Birney was a politically motivated, eco-socialist[5] poet whose work highlights Western industrial capitalism's destructive and disastrous disregard for the natural world, from the colonial to the contemporary era. While his overt political involvement with Marxism and Trotskyism may have been limited to the 1930s, an ecocritical consideration of his poetry from the 1940s to the 1980s suggests that much of Birney's socialist and occasionally propagandistic preoccupations persisted. A great deal of Birney's ecopoetry

antedates and anticipates the environmentalist movement of the mid- to late-twentieth century. While Greg Garrard states that "modern environmentalism begins with . . . [American writer] Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*" in 1962 (1), most of Birney's ecopoetry was composed and revised between 1926 and 1973,[6] with just one final ecopoem published in 1985.

The emergence of ecopoetry within many national contexts correlates with an increased social awareness of "problems such as overpopulation, species extinction, pollution, global warming, and ozone depletion" (Bryson 1). While critics have developed a number of definitions of ecological criticism and ecological poetics (with varying degrees of specificity), for the purposes of examining Birney's work, J. Scott Bryson's multifaceted approach is particularly productive as it allows for a multiplicity of ecocritical lenses to capture the complexity of Birney's environmentalism. Bryson positions ecopoetry as a "subset of nature poetry that, while adhering to certain conventions of romanticism, also advances beyond that tradition and takes on distinctly contemporary problems and issues" (5). He argues that ecopoetry is characterized by three defining features: an "emphasis on maintaining an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interdependent nature of the world . . . [which] leads to a devotion to specific places and to the land itself, along with those creatures that share it with humankind" (5-6); "an imperative towards humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature" (6); and finally, "an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, . . . [which] usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe" (6). While each of Birney's ecopoems do not necessarily engage with all three of Bryson's definitions simultaneously, these characteristics provide a framework of interrelated concerns through which Birney's work can be approached in order to reveal its underlying environmentalist imperative.

Furthermore, Scott Knickerbocker asserts that "conventional ecopoetry . . . relies on the experiential, authorial presence of the poet-prophet figure who . . . wants to affect his audience ethically" (9). In this vein, an ecocritical approach to Birney's poetry also unearths the ethical dimension of his work, and the extent to which Birney mobilized the literary aesthetic of lyric poetry to advance an environmentalist ethic. In fact, Knickerbocker notes that "[e]cological poetry posits a relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Poems best succeed at awakening one to the natural world through the emotive and rhetorical power they have over readers" (3). On a related note, D. M. R. Bentley observes that "it is essential for the practice

of an ecological poetic that it be accompanied by a moral awareness born of sensitivity to the grave danger that post-Renaissance man has come to pose to himself and other living things" (89). As the following analysis of Birney's ecopoetry demonstrates, Birney was a poet keenly attuned to both the moral dimensions of modern, industrial capitalism's impact on the environment and First Nations communities, and the frightening prospect of catastrophic ecological destruction.

1947: Prescient Environmentalism

In critiquing human industry's impact on the environment, three of Birney's poems from 1947, "North of Superior," "Man is a Snow," and "Transcontinental," embody a prescient environmentalism through an apocalyptic engagement with industrialized, capitalist exploitation of the Canadian landscape.

Ecological Ground Zero: "North of Superior"

That "North of Superior" was chosen as the opening poem of Birney's posthumous compilation, *One Muddy Hand*, signals its importance in his oeuvre. The poem first appeared in *Contemporary Verse* in 1947 and, for a poet known for his frequent revising and editing, the poem remains strikingly unchanged from its original version (with the exception of minor edits in punctuation) (*Selected Poems* 112). This lack of editing over the decades subsequent to its original appearance reveals a consistency in Birney's ecological focus. When the poem begins, Canada is an environment free of human industry, toil or history: "Not here the ballad or the human story / the Scylding boaster or the water-troll / not here the mind" (*One Muddy* 23). It is a land occupied by "only the soundless fugues / of stone and leaf and lake" (23). As Garrard maintains, "[t]he idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism" (66). In presenting the landscape as uninhabited and untouched, Birney creates a metaphorical "ground zero" for his ecopoetics, as well as a colonialist erasure of Indigenous peoples.

As the poem unfolds, Birney hints at the presence of Indigenous peoples when he writes of "some lost Algonquin woo[ing] / a dream that came and vanished here" (*One Muddy* 23), but in the very same lines, he simultaneously enacts a problematic erasure; the lone Indigenous figure is both "lost" and "vanished" (23). Furthermore, to reflect that "none alive / or dead has cast Excalibur into / these depths" (23) and "no mute or glorious / Milton finds

Azazel here" (24) is to suggest that the Indigenous people who historically occupied the Northern Ontario landscape brought to it neither society, history, nor culture. As Davey observes, in "North of Superior" Birney "asserts that Canada's landscape is devoid of myth and uninformed by legend, religion, history, or literature" (85). Birney is participating in what has now become a tired trope, that of Indigenous peoples as either "idealized 'noble savages' or as savages pure and simple . . . [who] have historically been reduced to a mere feature in the pastoral landscape or even eliminated from it" (Garrard 61). At best, Indigenous peoples "have been represented as dwelling in harmony with nature, sustaining one of the most widespread and seductive myths of the non-European 'other'. The assumption of indigenous environmental virtue is a foundational belief for . . . many ecocritics" (129). In mobilizing these established tropes of environmentally harmonious indigeneity, Birney seems to be attempting to envision a landscape from a more idyllic, pre-colonial past, where the only European encroachment is in the form of a "mute prospector" who "lopes . . . through the dead / and leprous-fingered birch" (*One Muddy* 23). This prospector is, of course, a portentous sign of the modern, technological invasion that has yet to make its arrival, and it is undoubtedly with some irony that Birney describes the narrator as "the guilty poet flying" across the landscape on a "CPR Train," as that is where the original composition of the poem took place in 1926 (24). However, it is with this vision of an unoccupied landscape with "[t]he swordless rock the heavenless air and land" (24) that one embarks on Birney's ecopoetic journey.

Apocalyptic Critique: "Man is a Snow" and "Transcontinental"

In contrast to the idyll nostalgically (or tragically) recalled in "North of Superior," Birney suggests a much more problematic relationship with the natural world in "Man is a Snow." One of Birney's most cynical poems concerning human nature and our relationship with the environment, "Man is a Snow" was first published in 1947 in *Queen's Quarterly*, substantially revised for inclusion in 1948's *Strait of Anian,* and altered once again for *Collected Poems* in 1966 (Lecker and David 32-33). In its final iteration, the poem articulates an apocalyptic vision of the human impact on the environment, while earlier versions reflected an anti-colonialist perspective. The first 1947 version, for example, critiques the colonialization of Indigenous peoples in Canada in a stanza that was subsequently deleted: "We are more than the Indians, / no greater, and torture / their history and horses / to make

a tourists' rodeo" ("Man" 172). Birney's revisions over almost twenty years function to hone and clarify his ecological focus, while the poem's consistent, unaltered title conflates (European) "man" with the descent of an arctic and deathly cold upon the landscape.

Where humanity is conjured, it is figured as a destructive force, not only sending "timber swooning to death / in the shock of the saw's bright whine," but planting soldiers' corpses beneath "a nursery of crosses abroad" (*One Muddy* 54). Birney's invocation of the war dead through the ironic image of a "nursery of crosses" invites a dualistic interpretation of the "nursery" as either garden or infant's room. In both cases, though, what is normally a space for growth and promise is now a site of mourning and loss. As the poem unfolds, Birney's invocation of war takes its place alongside a broader condemnation of human folly, whose selfishness is to blame for "the harvest mildewed in doubt / and the starved in the hour of our hoarding" (55). These two lines once again hint at Birney's socialist ecology, where "scarcity is not simply an objective fact about the natural world, but a function of the will and means of capital" (Garrard 31). Indeed, humanity's capacity for selfishness and destruction goes beyond the pollution of the environment, but comes full circle to a wanton self-annihilation: "not the rivers we foul but our blood / o cold and more devious rushing" (*One Muddy* 55).

The third stanza, from which the title is taken, begins as follows: "Man is a snow[7] that cracks / the trees' red resinous arches / and winters the cabined heart" (55). The red resin of the second line is suggestive once again of blood, war, and violence, and the enclosed heart connotes a disconnection from emotion and compassion. There is no hope in the end, simply more violence as "the chilled nail shrinks in the wall / and pistols the brittle air" (55), and a suggestion of apocalypse concludes the poem, with "frost like ferns of the world that is lost / unfurl[ing] on the darkening window" (55). Of the prevalence of apocalyptic imagery in environmentalist literature, Lawrence Buell has suggested that

> [a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. Of no other dimension of contemporary environmentalism . . . can it be so unequivocally said that the role of the imagination is central to the project; for the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis. (285)

The "ferns of the world that is lost" in the penultimate line of Birney's "Man is a Snow" suggests a mourning for the verdant green of a younger

planet, and the "frost . . . unfurl[ing] on the darkening window" takes on the haunted spectre of a once-living thing. Birney seems to suggest that the possibility of redemption or return is entirely lost in the encroaching darkness. It is interesting to note the poem's original opening lines in this particular context, which were deleted in a 1966 revision: "I tell you the wilderness we fell / is nothing to the one we breed" ("Man" 172). The anarchy and destruction borne of human settlement and industrial development thus dwarf the wild chaos of the natural world. Birney mobilizes images of war, violence, and apocalypse to cultivate his ecological critique of humanity's fraught relationship with the environment.

Like "Man is a Snow," "Transcontinental" underwent significant revisions over the twenty years following its first publication. Laurence Steven analyzed Birney's extensive revisions of both poems in a 1981 article, suggesting that in each case, the changes in syntax, diction, and structure reveal a tendency "toward broadening the perspective, [and] toward expanding the poetic canvas to include more of the possibilities of life" (Steven n. pag.). While Steven's thesis is not focused on the ecocritical per se, he does observe that "Transcontinental," in its various iterations, is preoccupied with what he terms "man's rape of nature" (n. pag.). Among the most significant of the poem's revisions—including its title, which was originally "New Brunswick"—is its widened imagistic lens that opens to take in the entire North American continent rather than just the East Coast (Steven n. pag.). Steven notes the shift in "poetic stance from 'your' and 'you' to 'our' and 'us'" in subsequent revisions, a change in perspective that acknowledges the speaker's own complicity in the environmental destruction that is chronicled in the poem (n. pag.). Both the original and the final versions, however, employ the motif of a transcontinental railcar "[c]rawling across this sometime garden" with its occupants in "trainbeds like clever nits / in a plush caterpillar" (*One Muddy* 48). The poem figures the landscape as a female Mother Earth, and implores the reader to "behold this great green girl grown sick / with man sick with the likes of us . . ." (48). It acknowledges the impact that modernity and human industry have had on the landscape, and the toll they are taking on the earth's fragile ecosystem.

Birney describes the female earth in diseased, human terms, with "[t]oes mottled long ago by soak of seaports / ankles rashed with stubble / belly papulous with stumps" (48). It is an ailing earth, besieged by "maggoting miners / [who] still bore her bones to feed our crawling host," and with "the scum of tugs upon her lakeblue eyes" (48). Meanwhile, the human occupants of

the train seem unaware of the ecological devastation and are instead distracted by their "dazzle of magazines," even as Birney implores them to "consider the scars across [the earth's] breasts / . . . / in the doze between our magazines" (48). While Frye noted that "[n]ature is consistently sinister and menacing in Canadian poetry" ("Canada" 96), in Birney's "Transcontinental," it is humanity that presents the true menace, with nature positioned as the victim of our various assaults. As Atwood remarks in her analysis of "Transcontinental," "it is increasingly obvious to some writers that man is now more destructive towards [n]ature than [n]ature can be towards man" (28-29). And indeed, Birney explicitly laments the impact of human industry on Mother Earth: "For certainly she is ill her skin / is creased with our coming and going / and we trail in her face the dark breath of her dooming" (*One Muddy* 48). The exhaust from the train engine is an ominous portent of death, and Birney's invocation of various forms of industry and economic development, from the "maggoting miners" to "the scum of tugs" along the ports (48), presents a critique of the modern industrial machine that powers capitalist growth.

It is impossible not to consider Birney's leftist politics in this context, and not to interpret his environmentalist position as eco-socialist, an approach which posits, as Garrard explains, that it is the economic system of capitalism that is to blame for environmental degradation and resource scarcity (31). Certainly, Birney is critical of the capitalist industries that are "clogging logs within [the earth's] blood" in search of profit and expansion (*One Muddy* 48). And while he does not provide an explicit, particular socialist solution to the current environmental decay he witnesses as a result of capitalist endeavor, the final stanza *does* suggest that delivering a solution lies within our capacity:

> She is too big and strong perhaps to die
> of this disease but she grows quickly old
> this lady old with us—
> nor have we any antibodies for her aid
> except our own. (48)

Birney's revisions are of interest here, as they reveal a marked movement towards the possibility of a more hopeful future. In the original 1947 and 1948 versions, the poem concludes on a decidedly more cynical note:

> I think she is too big and strong to die
> of this disease, but she grows quickly old,
> this lady, old with you,
> nor have you any medicine to aid
> except the speck of lime you will bequeath her. (*Strait of Anian* 6)

In its original conception, the poem's conclusion offers no possibility to counteract the ecological destruction set in motion; the only contribution an individual can make is through the biochemistry of their eventually rotting corpse. Steven suggests this pessimistic perspective is one of many flaws present in the poem's earlier iterations, as it reveals an "attitude to man [that] is simply one of sarcasm and disgust," a poetic stance that leaves the poem's reader with "no avenue through which to change the situation" (n. pag.).

Birney's edits, however, undertaken for the poem's inclusion in his 1966 *Selected Poems*, provide a glimmer of hope for the possibility of change, provided we are willing to recognize it and act upon it. While Birney does not specify precisely which "antibodies" of "our own" we should employ as a means to remedy the earth's degradation, he certainly appears to have decided that humanity has more to offer than our corpses; he suggests that the problem of environmental destruction is in our hands to fix. As Atwood suggests, "Birney's conclusion is not that the Divine Mother will forgive, but that man will have to clean up the mess he has made" (29).

The Ellesmereland Trilogy: 1952-1985

Birney's "Ellesmereland" trilogy was composed over a period of thirty-three years from 1952 to 1985. Consisting of a single stanza each, the lyrics recount the history of a remote northern outpost (the title seems a likely abbreviation for Ellesmere Island, located in current-day Nunavut). In many ways, the "Ellesmereland" trilogy encapsulates Birney's ecological preoccupations, from visions of an idealized, untouched, pre-colonial landscape to a contemporary world polluted with human waste and haunted by the spectre of nuclear self-destruction.

The original "Ellesmereland I" began as the third section of a longer poem published in *Canadian Forum* in 1953, with the subtitle "Thought for the Atomic Age" (Birney, "Notes" 233), indicating its original connection to popular politico-cultural anxieties of the 1950s around the prospect of nuclear war (and its attendant environmental destruction). It was first published as its own poem under the final title "Ellesmereland" in *Ice Cod Bell or Stone* in 1962 with minor revisions, mostly related to punctuation (22). Considering its initial subtitle, however, and its thematic concern with the apocalyptic potential of self-annihilation, it is significant that "Ellesmereland" presents an idealized vision of an untouched and uninhabited landscape: "[n]o man is settled on that coast" and the "cod swim fat beneath the ice" (22). The poem is analogous to "North of Superior" in its mythology of an idyllic

past, a pure, unsettled Canadian landscape rich with natural bounty. While "[e]xplorers say that harebells rise / from the cracks of Ellesmereland," for the poem's present, "[t]he harebells are alone / Nor is there talk of making man / from ice cod bell or stone" (22). The flora and fauna are the island's only inhabitants, though the mention of the "Explorers" in the opening line indicate that the territory has already been 'discovered.'

"Ellesmereland" becomes "Ellesemereland I" and part of a sequence upon the publication of its counterpart, "Ellesmereland II," in Birney's 1966 *Selected Poems*. In the sequel (which remains unaltered through its various publications), Birney revisits the same landscape thirteen years later—though perhaps dozens more years have elapsed in the imaginative space between the poems—and "now in Ellesmereland there sits / a town of twenty men" (*One Muddy* 72). The futility of their presence is rendered in the fifth line: "These warders watch the sky watch them," and the imminent environmental destruction is foreshadowed in the next line, as "the stricken hills eye both" men and sky with suspicion (72). The presence of a colonial authority figure and the suggestion of further expansion conclude the poem: "A Mountie visits twice a year / and there is talk of growth" (72).

By 1985, when Birney returns to the same landscape in "Ellesmereland III," a seismic cultural and developmental shift has taken place:

> At last in Ellesmereland's hotels
> for a hundred fifty each per night
> we tourists shit down plastic wells
> and watch tv by satellite (*One Muddy* 165)

The presence of hotels indicates the island is developed enough to have a tourism industry, and these tourists, rather than engaging with the natural world around them on the island, pollute the environment with their plastic and their bodily waste, mindlessly ingesting pop culture from the south via television. The presence of Indigenous people is finally noted in this poem, though the lines "[t]he 'land beyond the human eye' / the Inuit call it still . . ." are replete with a sense of mourning and futility (165). "Ellesmereland III" invokes what Frye describes as an "obliterated environment," wherein the imagination must "contend with a global civilization of jet planes, international hotels, and disappearing landmarks" (*Bush* iii). It is not surprising that "Ellesmereland III," which was written towards the end of the Cold War, presents war and nuclear destruction imminently at hand, as "[u]nder the blinding midnight sky / subs and missiles wait our will" (*One Muddy* 165). "Ellesmereland III" is a vision of a world that is not only polluted with waste and refuse, but at the

very precipice of self-annihilation. As a conclusion to the poem sequence, "Ellesmereland III" appears to thematically return full circle to Birney's original conception of "Ellesmereland" more than thirty years prior under its original subtitle, "Thought for the Atomic Age." The "Ellesmereland" trilogy thus presents an encapsulation of Birney's environmentalist politics, which knits together a preoccupation with the continuity of Canada's Indigenous communities, the consequences of unchecked industrial capitalist expansion, and the prospect of nuclear self-annihilation.

Thought for the Environmentalist Age: "The Shapers: Vancouver" and "What's So Big About Green?"

By the 1970s, the modern environmentalist movement had largely begun to take political shape, from the publication of the controversial bestseller *The Population Bomb* by Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich in 1968 (Suzuki 115) to the OPEC oil crisis (140). In response to OPEC, the Canadian government established a committee, led by celebrated scientist Ursula Franklin, to determine how best to manage the nation's resources and which recommended that the country move to more environmentally sustainable energy consumption models (141). It appears the broader environmentalist movement had finally caught up to Birney. His prescient ecological sensibility culminated in the publication of *what's so BIG ABOUT GREEN?* in 1973, but was also foreshadowed in "The Shapers: Vancouver" in 1971. Perhaps in tune with these broader cultural and political trends, Birney's ecopoetry from the 1970s takes a more openly political, polemical turn.

"The Shapers: Vancouver" first appeared in the British journal *Scrip* in 1970-1971 (Lecker and David 42) and remains unchanged (with the exception of the removal and then reinstatement of capitalization of the title) through its various reprints in *what's so BIG ABOUT GREEN?* in 1973 and *Collected Poems* in 1975. The poem opens with the wide scope of geological time, "a hundred million years / for mountains to heave / suffer valleys / the incubus of ice / grow soil-skin" (*One Muddy* 89). The "soil-skin" of the landscape suggests that the mountains themselves are living, organic beings. Birney also idealizes Indigenous peoples' relationship with nature once again when describing "the first builders [who] contrived their truce / with sea and hill" through the use of "saw of flame / vice of thong / jade axe" (89). The "truce" Indigenous peoples arrive at with their landscape using decidedly more gentle tools is in marked contrast to the violent battle that the European settlers and modernity wage in North America:

> in the screaming chainsaws
> we hushed the old dreamers
> in the hullabaloo of bulldozers
> dynamite dynamo crane dredge combustion
> buried them deeper than all compution (90)

In one stanza Birney succinctly captures what Atwood describes as man's "war against [n]ature," which, as she explains, "[i]f he won he would be rewarded: he could conquer and enslave [n]ature, and, in practical terms, exploit her resources" (28). But Birney is acutely aware of the cost of this exploitation and the wasteful dead end to which it leads: "walking alone now / in the grandiloquent glitter / we are lost for a way / for a line / bent for the mere eye's pleasure / a form beyond need" (*One Muddy* 90). He acknowledges that modern man has reached an ecological crossroads and he seeks a way forward: "is there a rhythm drumming from vision? / shall we tower into art or ashes?" (90). Davey has noted this binary of destruction and redemption in Birney's work, observing that Birney often represents "man" as "a destroyer, fouling both nature's rivers and his own blood, destroying animal life" (70) and yet tempered by "the hope that someday he will mobilize his powers to save himself" (66). Ultimately, as in "Transcontinental," Birney acknowledges the possibility for environmental redemption, as "it is our dreams will decide / & we are their Shapers" (*One Muddy* 90).

"What's So Big About Green?" is Birney's most openly political ecopoem, directly referencing the environmentalist "green movement" in its ironic, rhetorically questioned title. It is the title poem of his 1973 collection (which also included a reprinting of "The Shapers: Vancouver") though its first drafts date back to 1949, and it was first published as "The Lake" in *Blew Ointment* in 1971 and subsequently reprinted in *Canadian Forum* in 1973 under its present title (Lecker and David 43). Birney made substantial revisions in 1973 before including the poem in *what's so BIG ABOUT GREEN?*, changes which eliminated much of the poem's original wordiness and rendered his environmentalist vision more tightly focused and ironic. Notwithstanding its long compositional timeframe, the final version of the poem seems to fit Davey's interpretation of Birney's later poetry, in which "[t]here is a movement away from the particular and toward the overview, away from presenting personal thought as phenomenon and toward presenting it as fact, a movement away from the indirection of visual art and toward propaganda" (51).

Birney employs a sweeping historical canvass in "What's So Big About Green?", traveling not merely back to the beginnings of Canada's history,

but to the beginnings of human life on the planet, when "Something went haywire / about a hundred centuries ago / without Us there to stop it" (*One Muddy* 59). The biblically capitalized "Us" is utilized ironically, as the poem reveals that it is actually the advent of modern, Western man that wreaks havoc on the planet. Birney idealizes a pre-colonial, pre-European contact world:

> Before Us that was
> –a few millennia of truce
> between leaf, elk & wolf
> waterflies, fish & the osprey
> a saw-off between berries & birds
> & those First Men
> the Chehaylis
> inching up the outlet stream
> to follow sperming salmon (60)

The proliferation of animal life, the fecundity of "sperming salmon," and "those First Men" living in harmony with nature come to an end with the arrival of the European colonizers: "[t]hey all went when We came / just a couple of centuries ago / –the whites the End Men" (60). The European "End Men" undertake a rapid colonization and destruction:

> In ten years they'd cut down the pines
> shot off the game & the Indians
> caught everything wearing fur
> & moved on from the silence they made (60)

Birney gestures to the decimation of Indigenous populations with the line "shot off the game & the Indians," while also engaging colonialist discourse that frequently conjured Indigenous peoples in animalistic terms. The subsequent line "caught everything wearing fur" can then be read with a dual meaning—it can be either the End Men driving animals to extinction in service of the fur trade or (and) the remaining Indigenous peoples trying to survive.

The poem arrives at a present-day modernity where "kids buzz the lakelength / in an hour of speed (on Speed)" and need not "worry about hitting fisherman" as the only living things left in the water are "algae & whatever bugs / live on in oil & shit" (62). Birney suggests that "[w]hat's happened here on earth / is only science fiction / a nightmare soonest over" (63), echoing the sentiments he expressed in his 1983 interview with Peter Edwards, wherein he mused on the future of "the human race" and whether or not we "ought to survive" at all (qtd. in Edwards 127). Once again, the trope of apocalypse is employed, yet unlike its biblical antecedent, it is at the hands of "Us," the "End Men":

It's We who've done it
done it all in four generations
made organic death at last
an irreversible reaction . . .
What's more We did it without help . . .
—just Ourselves
and
Our kids (63-64)

Birney's reference to "four generations" roughly encompasses the advent of industrial capitalism to the post-industrial present, signalling once again the eco-socialist, anti-capitalist critique that has recurred throughout his ecopoems. Alongside "Ellesmereland III," "What's So Big About Green?" articulates the environmentalist anxiety that pervades much of the cultural discourse of the late twentieth century and persists into the present. Birney's apocalyptic visions of a world on the brink of self-destruction can be read as a cynical, disillusioned condemnation of human folly and greed, or as an impassioned plea for ecological self-awareness before it is too late to mitigate or reverse the frightening damage done to the environment in the pursuit of power and wealth.

Conclusion

Birney's continuous revisions, often ten or twenty years after a poem's original composition, reveal a sustained ecocritical preoccupation that becomes more prominent and pointed in later versions of much of his early poetry. Rather than abandoning his ecopoems, Birney often contemplated and reworked them, honing and clarifying his eco-socialist focus. Common themes and motifs emerge of humanity and the environment in a state of conflict, even as the poems oscillate between despair over the ecological destruction of the modern era and hope for the possibility of reconciliation with nature and an end to the trajectory of environmental collapse. As Davey observes, "Birney's subjects have been Canada's land, her people, and her history" (53). And as Birney's ecopoetry reveals, these three subjects are not mutually exclusive, but rather, intimately interrelated. In many ways, Birney's ecological poetics anticipates the environmentalist movement of the later twentieth century; perhaps his ecopoetry received so little critical attention when it was first published simply because so much of it was ahead of its time. The ecopoems form an important and early chapter of Canadian ecocritical literature. And as the title of Birney's posthumously published 2006 collection, *One Muddy Hand,* suggests, Birney is a poet with an intimate connection to the earth,

writing with one hand imaginatively buried in its soil. He unearths an inevitably fraught relationship with nature that is characterized by often paradoxical senses of wonder, vulnerability, violence, and aggression. Notwithstanding some of his more cynical lyrics, much of Birney's ecopoetry suggests that the capacity for new directions and new relationships with the environment lies squarely within the scope of human agency and possibility. As Birney himself wrote in 1972: "Though we now seem to be creatures destined to destroy ourselves within a generation, we humans have within us still the power to rescue ourselves and all life" (*Cow Jumped* 13).

NOTES

1 On a biographical level, Don McKay has suggested that Birney's visceral experiences working and hiking in the Canadian wilderness as a young man facilitated a unique degree of intimacy with nature and the environment (44).

2 For ease of reference, my analysis will be primarily based on the final versions of the poems that appeared in *One Muddy Hand* unless otherwise indicated.

3 "Ellesemereland III" from 1985 is the one exception to the chronology, though it makes sense to explore the "Ellesmereland" trilogy as a single entity.

4 Birney's "David" is perhaps notably absent. This exclusion is purposeful, as I would argue that Birney's employment of nature in his most famous narrative poem is symbolic and metaphorical, rather than activating an ecological or environmentalist ethos.

5 The *OED* defines "eco-socialism" as "socialism concerned specifically with ecological issues, based on the belief that capitalism is harmful to both society and the environment" (n. pag.). Greg Garrard describes eco-socialism and eco-Marxism as "hav[ing] their origins in nineteenth-century radical thought: the anarchism of Mikhail Bakunin . . . and Pyotr Kropotkin . . . [and] the communism of Karl Marx . . . and Friedrich Engels" (31). An eco-socialist approach posits that it is the economic system of capitalism that is to blame for environmental degradation and resource scarcity, and that it is necessary to "change the political structure of society so that production to meet real needs replaces production for the accumulation of wealth" (Garrard 31).

6 While the earliest date of publication of the poems under consideration is 1947, Solecki's 2006 collection, *One Muddy Hand,* indicates the compositional dates of "North of Superior" as "1926/1946" (24).

7 In the 1947 and 1948 versions of the poem, the phrase "Man is a snow" is repeated twice, emphasizing the motif.

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