

Knowledge, Power and Place

Environmental Politics in the Fiction of Matt Cohen and David Adams Richards

David Adams Richards and the late Matt Cohen have produced some of the most environmentally engaged fiction in contemporary Canadian literature. Richards' novels place the poverty of the Miramichi River region of New Brunswick within a socio-ecological context of pulp mills, polluted salmon streams and decimated forest landscapes. *Lives of Short Duration* (1981) presents a bleak portrait of a ravaged and poisoned social and physical environment. *Mercy Among the Children* (2000) pivots on water contamination from forestry pesticide and herbicide use. Ecological change also figures prominently in Cohen's celebrated Salem novels, each set near a fictional place called Salem located north of Kingston, Ontario. In *The Disinherited* (1974), Cohen focuses on marginal landscapes and rural people faced with the decline of family farming in the 1970s. His final novel, *Elizabeth and After* (1999), presents the same place some 20 years later when creeping urban sprawl and rural gentrification have made agriculture a postmodern simulacrum.

I develop an ecocritical analysis of these novels by focusing not on their representations of nature, but on their politics of knowledge. Cohen and Richards attribute responsibility for environmental degradation to particular social actors by showing how knowledge is socially and geographically situated. Both Cohen and Richards construct gaps and discrepancies between different subject positions in order to map power relations of class and region. However, as critics such as Frank Davey, Janice Kulyk Keefer and Philip Milner have noted, Richards' novels often amplify and extend these gaps to include a large discrepancy between the knowledge of the

characters and the reader. Richards' novels are productively read in an eco-critical context that recognizes that epistemological claims are key to the power relations, ecological crises and ethical dilemmas of postmodernity. In depicting the Miramichi as an environmental "sacrifice zone," a region that bears the brunt of the ecological costs of late industrial society, Richards' novels mark the limits of both experiential and empirical knowledge when confronted with the increasingly complex and less visible forms of environmental risk and contamination.

Power, Place, and the Production of Knowledge

Discussion of place, rurality, and region in Canadian literature is haunted by the spectre of "environmental determinism," the idea that giving prominence to the physical environment in a creative text or critical perspective denies human agency and erases socio-political relations.¹ Environmentalism and ecocriticism have similarly been accused of ignoring or subsuming social inequalities and differences in the name of environmental crisis. But environmental sociologists, geographers, and political theorists argue that environmental degradation and risk are inseparable from capitalism and other structural inequalities. For example, geographer Sharon Zukin argues that the landscape of North America in late capitalism is being reshaped into a divide between "landscapes of consumption and devastation" (5). Regional divides, especially, become more pronounced as industrial production shifts to other global locales: some areas, such as West Gull in Cohen's *Elizabeth and After*, are remade into tourist zones; others, such as Richards' Miramichi, become ecological wastelands.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that the global production of ecological problems also levels and reconfigures inequalities. Modern ecological hazards, such as nuclear radiation, synthetic chemicals, and climate change, threaten not only the poor but also the most affluent nations and members of society. In *The Risk Society*, Beck proposes that the distribution of risk has become as important as the distribution of wealth in the industrialized societies of the post-World War II period. The significance of the "risk society" as a concept is that it calls attention to how political antagonism increasingly centres less on access to wealth and modes of industrial production and more on access to information and modes of knowledge production. The spatial, temporal, and perceptual distance between ecological hazards and everyday experience means every individual faces uncertainty about health and security, and every individual is cut off from

knowledge about his or her world and body—indeed, the more one knows, the greater the sense of insecurity and risk.

In part, the importance of risk grows because of the global scale on which contemporary environmental hazards operate. Like the global movements of capital, resources and people that globalization theorists track, the associated ecological hazards exceed the conventional checks and balances of the modern nation-state. But their causes and effects are much harder to map than the flows of capital. They emerge as side effects of the production not only of wealth, but of techno-scientific knowledge, which, in turn, is required to define and identify the hazards that have been produced. Compared to nineteenth-century pollution, where hazards “assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses . . . the risks of civilization today typically *escape perception* and are localized in the sphere of *physical and chemical formulas* (e.g. toxins in foodstuffs or the nuclear threat)” (Beck 21, italics in original). To identify the presence of contaminants requires what Beck describes as “the ‘sensory organs’ of science—*theories, experiments, measuring instruments*” (27, italics in original). And yet, the certainties once offered by scientific knowledge are no longer trusted precisely because modern science is a primary source of these hazards. Moreover, causal links between intentions, actions and effects are notoriously difficult to establish with respect to environmental contamination.

Beck shows how environmental conditions raise a new set of questions about knowledge production that we can bring to an analysis of how literary texts engage with power and representation. Ecocritical analysis should attend not only to representations of nature or environment, but, more fundamentally, to how characters, narrators, and readers are positioned as knowing or not knowing the environments they inhabit and produce. The relationship of literary form to the production of knowledge about material conditions has, of course, been central to Marxist literary criticism. Although Marxist critics have often neglected the ecological dimension of materialism, the Marxist strategy of reading literary form in relation to subject positions and knowledge registers can be useful for ecocritical analysis. Georg Lukács’ account of realism is taken as a starting point for understanding how novels might function to construct knowledge about socio-ecological relations. Lukács’ attention to historical perspective is usefully supplemented by the importance of spatial relations for Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson, because in the environmental novels of

Cohen and Richards causal relations across space and time are used to provide—and distort—perspective on environmental conditions.

Cohen's approach to environmental conditions remains firmly grounded within a realist frame, whereby the broad parameters of time, space and ecology within which the plot unfolds are known, or can be presumed to be known. In other words, ecological relations can still be mastered by empirical knowledge, or known from the omniscient subject positions of the author and reader. Richards' novels, by contrast, push into absurdity, tragedy, and the gothic to challenge the complacent middle-class, urban reader who still has faith that ecological conditions have not yet surpassed knowledge and control—that late industrial society has not yet entered ecological crisis. Despite David Creelman's insistence that "Richards repeatedly uses realism to examine the social disruptions and the economic hardships that have plagued the Miramichi region" (24), I suggest, along with Justin Edwards, that a realist reading may miss the significance of Richards' dark vision, fragmented narratives, and moral tone. Richards' novels re-frame ecological crisis as a moral crisis by casting doubt on the belief that there is some subject position that could render the complex socio-ecological relations in which we are embedded either historical or intelligible.

History, Space, and Realism

Georg Lukács argues that realist fiction provides readers with the historical perspective that can make sense of structural relationships. When a connection is drawn between large-scale, external forces and the particular experiences of everyday life, a novel creates "the feeling first that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual" (*Historical* 23). In modernist fiction, by contrast, historical perspective is absent because all is subjective: "the inner world of the subject is transformed into a sinister, inexplicable flux and acquires—paradoxically, as it may seem—a static character" (*Realism* 39).² For Lukács, subjective life must be juxtaposed with objective or material conditions to show individuals to be embedded in historically specific socio-economic relations. This claim to objectivity is precisely what renders realism politically suspect today: its seemingly transparent narrative perspective functions as an ideological cover.

Harry Shaw argues that while Lukács' account of realism presumes a knowable world, it does not take that world to be transparently represented. While some aspects of the world are immediately available to the reader, the

limited perspective of the character who is immersed in daily life shows that the world is not easily understood. Shaw argues that realist fiction centrally grapples with the *difficulty* of developing accurate and usable knowledge about the world: “What is being insisted on . . . is that certain aspects of external reality matter, or can be made to matter as part of a larger web of relations, if only we’ll pierce beyond the veil of the familiar—not that they are self-evidently and unproblematically present for our inspection” (51-52). In juxtaposing the partial and incomplete knowledge of the characters and the total perspective of the narrator, realist fiction stages, or performs for the reader, the gap between experience and knowledge. Revealing such gaps may be useful for environmental politics, and yet not sufficient, given Beck’s argument that it is not only the gap between experience and knowledge that broadens in the risk society, but also that, along with the increasing epistemological skepticism of postmodernity, all knowledge claims become simultaneously more important and less reliable.

However, Lukács’ discussion of history in realist novels focuses primarily on its social dimension. The material relationship between the individual and the physical environment is of no significance in his analysis, nor does nature appear as an agent of history. Raymond Williams brings environmental considerations into Marxist criticism by making land use regimes central to his analysis of shifts in literary form and language. For some ecocritics, Williams is part of the anti-nature turn in literary criticism because of his critique of rural nostalgia.³ Williams incisively demonstrates how Renaissance and later English country house poems construct a harmonious vision of nature by excising people, labour, and property relations. But Williams presents this critique of the naturalization of property relations to advocate for livable communities, and, in the final pages of *The Country and the City*, he emphasizes the need for critics to appreciate “the complexities of the living natural environment” (361). Williams’ historicizing method does not appropriate the natural into the social, i.e. see the landscape merely as a social construction, but rather challenges the traditions in both conservative and Marxist thought that adopted an ahistorical notion of pastoral as a stable literary mode extending back through the generations. Williams argues that to read diverse literary texts from different times and places as a common form reifies diverse settlement patterns and an integrated economy into a static division between city and country.

Williams offers two ways that we might modify Lukács’ analysis for an ecocritical reading of realist fiction. First, if the importance of concrete

historical context in realist fiction lies in how it makes sense of the overwhelming, trivial details of everyday life, then it may also serve to make sense of the environmental conditions of characters' lives. But to reveal the historical forces of environmental change, the landscape and not just the people must be portrayed as part of history. Without such historical perspective, the physical environment will appear to have always been as it is, rather than subject to change by natural and human forces. Second, we must recognize how spatial relations contribute to the construction and distortion of perspective. Williams proposes that it is the appearance of a spatial separation between city and country, coupled with their economic integration (e.g. on the level of goods, ownership, and travel), that has made the pastoral form appear so immutable, thereby contributing to the mystification of changing social and economic conditions. Space is also key to his analysis of class relations in realism. In dispelling the essentialist notion of the rural "knowable community," Williams notes how:

Neighbours for Jane Austen are not the people actually living nearby; they are the people living a little less nearby who, in social recognition, can be visited. What she sees across the land is a network of propertied houses and families, and through the holes of this tightly drawn mesh most actual people are simply not seen. (203)

Williams juxtaposes two spatial scales to show Austen's "known world" is not geographically determined but socially circumscribed.

In sum, Williams' cultural materialist method functions along *two* axes of analysis: history (the changing over time of economic relations, landscapes, and literary forms) and geography (spatial relations at a particular moment in time, e.g. between city and country, colony and metropolis, land owner and labourer). The importance of space for understanding the power relations of capitalism is given even greater emphasis by Fredric Jameson. In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson suggests that realist fiction is no longer able to provide historical perspective in the modern era; in *Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson argues that perspective is undermined because "depth is replaced by surface" (12):

this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. (44)

An "alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment" emerges as categories of space replace categories of time in the organization

of capitalism and culture (44). Jameson therefore argues that aesthetic practices oriented toward historical perspective are less useful in postmodernity than an aesthetics of “cognitive mapping” (51), a new “realism” (in the epistemological sense) that traces spatial relationships (49).

Environmental History and *The Disinherited*

Matt Cohen’s novel *The Disinherited* illustrates how Lukács’ account of historical perspective in realism is useful for environmental politics when extended to include environmental history. As its title indicates, *The Disinherited* makes history a central concern. The novel situates the sell-or-stay decision faced by a post-war farm family within the historical context of patriarchy, colonialism, geology, and ecology. Inheritance, as the historical and ideological tie between the individual, the family, and the land, is the foundation for European male property rights and the exploitation of nature. In the novel, the legitimacy of this claim to the land is called into question, in part, by the legacy of environmental degradation initiated with colonial settlement. This legacy is brought into perspective by the use of multiple time scales. The history of the land is not only told from the subject position of the farmers, but also from the marks natural forces have etched onto rock:

the earth had scraped and scarred its own skin with ice . . . made long twisted scars in the bedrock and stripped it of its covering of soil so that in places now, even millions of years later, the rock showed, or worse, was only a few inches beneath the surface waiting to greet the person who was stupid enough to try and plough it or shape it to his needs. (77)

Nature is depicted as an agent of history, making changes to the land long before the appearance of human beings. Nature thereby establishes the material conditions with which human life in this place must contend: the thin, poor soil of the Canadian Shield.

The contrast between the enduring time frame of natural history and human folly can be read as a deterministic commentary on the hubris of people who fail to acknowledge the force of the material world. But the millennial time scale also enables the role of human action in shaping the land to become apparent:

Richard had a sudden desire to let himself be taken over completely by the land . . . as if in one moment of doubt all the energy that keeps him able to impose the farm on the land might be dissipated . . . as if the farm was only a thin transparency laid over it like a decal that would be blown off easily by the wind and time so that the bodies and the hours and the effort that were buried in the immense fertility

of this field would finally be nothing but a brief digression in its existence as a forest and a swamp. (99)

Cohen's emphasis on the "bodies," "hours," and "effort" of work show how the farm, though not the land, is a product of human labour. The farm can disappear because human labour is just one of the forces at work: "the swamp which he had spent a month surrounding with ditches so it would drain would reassert itself and then, in its own time, fill in and become part of a meadow which would be no pasture but ground fit only for juniper seed and sumac trees" (99). The farm appears as a human artefact because history extends beyond it.

Within the time period of the novel's events, Richard Thomas is the prime, though not sole, agent of environmental change on the farm. As property-owner and family patriarch, Richard enjoys the powers of a god: "Richard decided which animals would live and which would be slaughtered, which would be bred and which would be sold, which would be allowed indoors and which would have to fend for themselves, expendable and ignored, too unimportant to be worth the effort of killing" (74). The narrative places moral responsibility on Richard Thomas' land-use practices by locating the historical forces contributing to environmental change in a domain that can be known and mastered by the individual. The life-and-death decisions Richard makes and his doubts about the legacy of settlement imply that he is the one with the power to shape the landscape. As Richard lies dying in the hospital, he recalls with ambivalence the transfer of land and authority from father to son, and the ecological ethic expressed in the passed-down journals of a settlement-era poet who "begs" the original Richard Thomas—his grandfather—"to discard his plough" (60). Whereas the time scales of geology and ecology make the environmental changes wrought by farming visible on the land, the localized frame makes Richard, his father, and his grandfather responsible.

Socio-economic trends function in *The Disinherited* to underscore the significance of personal responsibility and historical perspective. Richard Thomas' two sons, Brian and Erik, represent the boosterism or fatalism that come from a fixation on external forces, reducing the future of the family farm to two reactionary options: adopting new technology or selling out and moving to the city. A real-estate developer offers to buy their lakefront land for cottages but Brian throws the man off the property, believing the answer lies in greater investment and mechanization: "Brian would fall back on the old standard, the idea of getting the machinery for corn and building a silo.

'It's the coming thing,' Brian would say over and over, the exact words the milk inspector had used" (165). By emphasizing Brian's mindless repetition of the futuristic phrase, Cohen shows how Brian clings to the illusion of agency and rationality when in fact he acts on blind faith. The technological solution is accepted as progress on the authority of the outside "expert." Erik's response is equally ahistorical, presenting the decline of the family farm as an economic and technological inevitability: "In a few years only rich city people will be able to afford to live on this kind of farm. All the food will be grown on huge farms run by businessmen. Or made in factories" (41). The underlying passivity of both positions stands in stark contrast with the agency assumed by Richard as family patriarch. In taking responsibility for their actions, the sons ultimately come of age: the adopted Brian assumes control over the farm; Erik frees himself from the patriarchal legacy of ownership and control. The primary sphere of action remains the farm; and the central issue is the relationship between each man, the family, and the land.

Geopolitical Space: *Elizabeth and After*

The shift from historical perspective to cognitive mapping outlined by Jameson is apparent in the contrast between Cohen's depiction of socio-economic forces in *The Disinherited* and his portrayal of their culminating effects in *Elizabeth and After*. In *Elizabeth*, the physical environment is not primarily shaped by individuals in one place, but by economic relations across space. The novel illustrates the transition described by Marxist geographers whereby "[p]laces are local condensations and distillations of tremulous global processes that travel through them . . . In the world of high modernity it has become virtually impossible to make sense of what happens in a place without looking beyond the local horizon" (Gregory 122). In a reconstruction of the socio-economic factors undermining the family farm, Cohen emphasizes the absurdity of focusing on the farmer as change agent:

When the milk marketing board had told the McKelveys they'd have to renovate their operation or give up their licence, William sold his quota to go into cheese instead. When shortly after the local cheese factory was put out of business by the American conglomerate that had bought all of the township's factories only to close them down, he went into beef. (301)

William McKelvey's commodity dance is taken to extremes to underscore the limits of a belief in local autonomy. Each change is dictated from the outside: the farmer is positioned as a passive dupe who can only respond to the decisions made by others.

The reference to an “American conglomerate” reinforces the sense of William’s powerlessness because decision-making power has shifted outside the country and into private hands—an even greater physical and civic distance between the individual and the forces of change than the government-created marketing board. A similar point is made with the identification of a “Toronto consortium” as the town’s “biggest landlord and biggest employer” (63). The physical distance between landlord and tenant and between employer and employee makes it more difficult for tenants and employees to confront the people making decisions about their rents, living arrangements, jobs, and paycheques. The spatial detachment also makes the agents of historical change conveniently invisible and unidentifiable as human individuals—and allows the physical consequences of their decisions to remain out of their sight. A case in point is the local elder business magnate, now a Liberal senator, who sits on the “board of directors of a company that had just landed a lucrative contract selling attack helicopters to South Africa” (165). The repeated identification of historical actors and historical effects by their physical locations demonstrates, first, the nameless, abstract nature of economic forces and, second, how spatial relations buttress power differentials, with a consequent lessening of moral responsibility.

In contrast to the geological and generational perspective of the land in *The Disinherited*, Elizabeth presents a surface-level view of the land as property and image. The spatial disconnection between the places where decisions are made and the places affected by those decisions results in the homogenization of the landscape. Real-estate developers and wealthy urbanites transform bankrupt farms into country homes with “large carefully tended lawns that looked like advertisements for riding mowers” (47). Physically transformed by commodity exchange, the landscape loses its historical and geographical specificity:

What rock? Didn’t Luke Richardson, the real-estate millionaire who owned a condominium in Florida, for God’s sake, know every square inch for fifty miles around? Hadn’t he offered to buy this place a dozen times? “Name your price,” he would say, as though challenging Arnie to recognize that in the modern world, the world of strip plazas and convenience stores, the world he effortlessly turned to profit and an endless stream of new black Cadillacs, there was nothing that couldn’t be given a number. (248)

The picturesque rock where Arnie imagines building his retirement dream home is invisible to Luke because commodity exchange does not require the historical depth that knowledge of place brings. People, things, and places are interchangeable in Luke’s world, acquired and disposed of as desired.

The farms' working pasts are recalled only ironically, in the name of "The Movie Barn," the video store where property-less Carl McKelvey, son of William, finds minimum-wage shift work. The gentrified landscape presents a sanitized rusticity that buries power relations under a veil of false historical continuity: "the tended streets with the expensive homes . . . had amber-lit brass coach lamps showing the way for horses that would never come" (8). The lamps allude to a life of simple means and human distances, but are materially constructed and maintained through the exploitation of natural resources and manual labour displaced to other areas. Carl, for example, goes west to BC to find primary-sector work in forestry, "piling underbrush and generally making things look pretty after the big chainsaws and tree cutters had done their damage" (48). Carl's cosmetic job shows how the destruction of ecological systems proceeds without notice or complaint when the image is taken as reality. Similarly, the lamps' faux heritage design demonstrates how history collapses into nostalgia when the local is cast as a reprieve from the global.

The emphasis on land as image in *Elizabeth* shows the historical knowledge that Richard has of his farm in *The Disinherited* provides insufficient context for understanding the operations of global capital accumulation and exchange. By foregrounding socio-economic and spatial relations, the narrative implies that the continuity of natural history is no longer key to understanding the agents driving history. But the autonomy and agency of nature, appreciated on a local scale, is not relinquished. The novel reveals an ironic gap between what are shown to be *images* of rural landscapes and what remain *actual places*, such as Arnie's field, William's farm, and British Columbia forests. The novel therefore reaffirms the value of a local and historical perspective of nature with which the image can be juxtaposed and found wanting. Moreover, in a form of cognitive mapping, the novel links distant places so that power relations and lines of responsibility can appear—to the reader, though not to the characters. Despite the powerlessness and limited knowledge of its characters, *Elizabeth* affirms the possibility of the realist novel to make sense of socio-ecological change because, for the reader, causal links are made between decision-makers, average lives, and changes in the physical environment.

Hopeless Environments: *Lives of Short Duration*

Generally described as "bleak," "grim," and "dark," David Adams Richards' fiction shows more ambivalence about the possibility of making sense and

enacting change.⁴ The lives of many of Richards' early characters appear hopeless because the narrative perspective does not seem to provide any historical framework for the overwhelming immediacy of day-to-day survival in a debilitating social and physical environment. By contrast with *The Disinherited's* emphasis on history and *Elizabeth's* depiction of spatial relations, *Lives of Short Duration* achieves a disorienting sense of meaninglessness by failing to construct spatial links or temporal continuity. A seemingly random barrage of environmental details confronts the morally debased members of the Terri family who live by their wits as bootleggers, drug peddlers, and petty entrepreneurs. George Terri's alcoholic haze runs one observation into another, without distinction or connection:

The wine seeped between his pantlegs and dissolved in a sweet circle in the dirt. Lester Murphy's faded sign just above the hollow read: "Atlantic Salmon Centre of the World."

The road signs told of bends and curves and deer crossings. He stared up at Karen's legs, the rough skin about her knees, the power-lines like a crucifixion all the way to Calvin Simms' Irving garage. (38-39)

Just as the road signs give equal significance to "bends" and "deer crossings," Richards' sentences provide description without perspective. The components of the physical environment seem to hold meaning—the signs "tell"—but because the powerlines and tourist signs appear on the same spatial scale as legs and knees, any sense of proportion or relative importance is impossible. In a similar way, the absence of links between sentences or plot development presents these details without the historical depth usually provided by causation. Everything is immediate.

Within the dense accumulation of detail, Richards ascribes significance through repetition and symbolism. The powerlines always run to the Irving garage "like crosses" (24), a "crucifixion" (39), or the "crosses of missionaries" (167). The repeated associating of crosses with Irving, the wealthy family corporation with a virtual monopoly on oil, gas, and timber in New Brunswick, calls attention to the double meaning of "power" as electrical energy and as influence or authority. The Christian imagery implies the electrical lines involve sacrifice and the imposition of foreign values, justified by their seemingly good intentions. Energy production is the *sine qua non* of modernization and regional development, enabling increased resource extraction and industrial-level production as well as the expansion of consumer markets.

Richards uses repetition rather than narrative continuity to trace this history, showing capitalist development to be ideological rather than linear

and progressive. Jingoistic phrases used to sell consumer items and experiences—“Volare Volare—woa woa woa woa,” came the commercial from somewhere” (65); “Atlantic Salmon Centre of the World” (73, 88, 161, 204, 205)—are interspersed with absurdly optimistic statements that the benefits of economic development are worth the sacrifices: “When the woods were gone the river’d be gone, but there’d be iron ore, and when that was gone there was uranium also” (186). The flippant list shows how economic “missionaries” conceive the region and the environment solely as a source of raw materials and a market for products. The isolation of the economic pronouncements from any specific actors or places and their random appearance, like the commercials and news reports “from somewhere” (14, 63, 65, 68), makes them appear inevitable. The difficulty of contesting or resisting their logic is indicated by the impossibility of pinning down where they come from, much less whom. The decline of the salmon, the poisoning of the river, the incursion of multinational corporations are all events that seem to happen *to* the people of the river, who at best play bit roles trying to imitate or profit from the external forces that invisibly structure their lives. With the sacrifice of the forests and the life of the river come the fast food, cars, and consumer goods and styles that most of the novel’s characters not only accept but yearn for, making no connection between the system that produces these goods and their own cultural decline and political disenfranchisement.

The question of knowledge is raised most explicitly in the novel by the wide gap between the localized knowledge of the characters and the broader historical and geographical knowledge needed to appreciate the relations of power in which they are embedded. A woodsman for most of his 82 years, illiterate Old Simon has never heard of the Bay of Fundy, which forms the southern boundary of New Brunswick (78). At the same time, the knowledge gained from his experience in the woods has become obsolete: “And what could you tell them? That you made 74¢ a day and had to walk 40 miles on snowshoes, and had built camps from cedar and skids with the bow ribs made from roots and had stayed up two months in the woods alone and could smell fourteen different kinds of snow?” (94). The rhetorical question shows the depth of Simon’s localized environmental knowledge—too substantial to be easily relayed and explained—while ultimately demonstrating its tragic irrelevance in the globalized, consumer culture that dominates the river. In *The Disinherited*, Richard Thomas’ local knowledge positions him as change agent on the farm; in *Lives*, by contrast, Simon Terri’s much

more intimate and less instrumental knowledge of the river is a mark of his underclass position and his powerlessness to stop the river from being made into an environmental sacrifice zone.

In his discussion of *Nights Below Station Street*, Frank Davey interprets the gap between the knowledge of Richards' characters and narrator as "condescension" (*Post-National* 78). He argues that the "large superiority in linguistic power the narrator and novelist enjoy over their characters opens a wide political gap in the text. . . . [T]he book's characters . . . are construed . . . as better off leading passive, acquiescent, non-constructive, geographically limited lives" (78). However, Janice Kulyk Keefer, drawing explicitly on Lukács, argues that Richards' depiction of poverty involves an immediacy and totality that serves to elicit empathy for individuals and provide an understanding of the historically and regionally specific condition of their poverty: "*Lives* reveals . . . the degradation of human life and the despoiling of the natural world are not mere *fait accomplis*—alternatives exist, however shakily. For the reader to merely shrug them off is to become complicit in the very degradation and despoliation this fiction represents" (175). The force of this novel lies in bringing to public light material conditions and underpinning relations that are usually discounted and invisible—and giving this knowledge moral significance. Richards' use of repetition and structural discontinuity underscores how the material relations of place and history are neither simple nor self-evident. The reader must actively work at making sense of the disjointed narrative. As Philip Milner notes, the demands placed on the reader are the focus of many of the early reviews and criticism of Richards' fiction: he cites one reviewer who asks, "Why is Richards making me *work* so hard?" (202, italics in original).

Richards' comparison of the Miramichi with Third World conditions, but without the TV-induced sympathy or donations, is a biting indictment of middle-class Canadian complacency and ignorance:

People with swollen bodies lay in various corners of the earth—so Anne Murray told him on television, people with their skins wracked with sores, or hungry—and he'd seen on television Begin and Sadat too, and the Palestinians—and children with flies crawling over their body, as he'd seen them crawl over Daniel Ward's children in Daniel Ward's house . . . (145)

In describing the conditions on the Micmac reserve, Richards refuses the comfortable distance offered by the TV screen and a continental divide, and immerses the reader in the ugliness of the region's desolation. Again and again the phrase "Now you might feel some discomfort" appears in the novel,

once addressed to a 19-year-old girl sent for a backroom abortion, but usually repeated without any particular audience except the reader, each repetition heightening its understatement (41, 160, 368). The purpose of this discomfort seems to be to elicit a recognition that the moral failing of “not giving up one ounce of human commitment” extends from the main characters to the larger world that they—and the novel’s audience—inhabit (149, 200, 209, 322). The narrator’s cultivation of discomfort alongside the dizzying shifts of the narrative perspective implies that knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for responsible action in the world. The reader may appear to have more worldly knowledge than the characters, as Davey argues, but is not placed in a position of moral superiority. *Lives* partakes of the “certain romanticism” that Christopher Armstrong and Herb Wylie associate with Richards’ later Miramichi trilogy, where “the protagonists prevail—if not survive—under circumstances that position them as the moral superiors of their critics” (6).

Moral Agency: *Mercy Among the Children*

Richards’ moral tone and framework has challenged critics who try to place his work into a socially progressive context. As Armstrong and Wylie point out, Davey’s reading of Richards’ fiction as determinist too readily discounts the way his novels valorize a form of agency not based on rationalist enlightenment, but on “religious and moral terms” (7). *Mercy Among the Children*, described by David Creelman as a “moral romance” (168), even more explicitly offers a moral response to the epistemological dilemmas of environmental degradation. In contrast to the disjointed structure and perspective of *Lives*, *Mercy* features a chronological narrative and ostensibly first person narrator. The straightforwardness of the narrative serves to highlight even more starkly the different levels of knowledge held by the characters, narrator and reader. Water contamination is implicated in the most serious turns of the plot, but does not preoccupy the main characters, who focus their attention on day-to-day survival and social acts of injustice and intolerance. The discrepancy between presumed and actual risks, and the inability to read the environment and know the consequences of one’s actions, thereby becomes significant.

The relationship between knowledge and power is dramatized by Sydney Henderson’s antagonistic relationship with the professors at the university. As a young man, Sydney, protagonist of the novel and father of the narrator, vows to God to “never raise his hand or his voice to another soul” (23-24). Remaining consistently faithful to this vow, Sydney and his family are taken

advantage of and persecuted by most of the people and institutions they encounter, including several seemingly well-meaning professionals in social work, the university, the legal system, and the church. The plot reveals there is no necessary link between knowledge and authority, or knowledge and ethics. As a well-read, though self-taught intellectual, Sydney is as articulate and analytical as the Marxist professor, David Scone, who patronizingly suggests he take up a trade rather than try to enter university. Sydney's knowledge brings him scorn rather than any greater capacity to improve his life or step beyond his class origins. As his son remarks, "Those men my father had done favours for, filled out application forms for, helped with their unemployment benefits, forgot him and remembered only a man who read strange books" (125). The university professors, meanwhile, lack the moral courage to defend those "strange books" for fear of being associated with a man they presume to be a backward, degenerate sexual predator. They fail to wield responsibly the power they hold because of their privileged association with a social institution that lends their words and knowledge legitimacy: "a man with a grade five education accused of being an elitist and *against* the working man, by Prof. David Scone, who had met the working class, not by calluses on his hands, but by reading Engels and Marx" (82-83, italics in original).

Armstrong and Wylie discuss similar depictions of "progressive liberalism" as ruthless and hypocritical in other Richards novels (11). They argue the effect of this didacticism, "combined with its traditional realist aesthetic, closes the reader out of the narrative" (12). Indeed, unlike *Lives*, which demands the reader to piece together meaning from the fragments, *Mercy* imposes a moral stance on the reader. But the hypocrisy of the university-based scholars also comments on the limits of knowledge. It shows they are blind to the class system in which they live (whether wilfully or merely through the complacency of privilege). This blindness is made apparent, as Shaw emphasizes in his description of the effect of opening a gap between the knowledge of characters and reader, by the broader perspective provided by the narrator. The academics appear hypocritical because the narrative perspective provided to the reader unequivocally shows Sydney to be innocent. The novel's clear-cut lines of innocence and guilt are taken to such an extreme with the depiction of the more epistemologically complicated and more humanly devastating scenario of poisoned water that the novel does not merely implicitly construct a totalizing moral framework, but confronts the reader with its moral stance.

The water subplot uses the epistemological crisis of the risk society, whereby causal knowledge about environmental hazards is imprecise, unpredicted, and difficult to establish with certitude, to separate knowledge production from morality. Whereas Cohen presents a spatial distance between decision-makers and victims in *Elizabeth*, Richards collapses that distance into the same locale in *Mercy*. Richards implicates most of his main characters in contaminating the water supply of the poverty-stricken, violent roadway where the novel takes place. The chemicals in the water are traced to pesticides and herbicides used on the woods and stored at the pulp mill run by local tycoon Leo McVicer, with the encouragement of provincial forestry officials and the knowledge of his workers, who themselves dump the chemicals during a raucous lock-out. Although a hidden graveyard reveals the workers who likely died prematurely due to their occupational exposure to the chemicals, the contamination is also linked to stillbirths and to childhood leukemia, albinism, and cancers. These are the workers' children and grandchildren (and McVicer's unacknowledged children and grandchildren), who live on the roadway. In *Mercy*, it is primarily children who embody the "sacrifice zone" of industrial development; their innocence heightens the moral stakes of the epistemological crisis.

By tracing characters' actions to their material effects, and especially in making children the primary victims of these actions, *Mercy* seems to condemn these men as harshly as it condemns the hypocritical academics. But their limited perspective is due less to social prejudice than to the epistemological complications of Beck's risk society. McVicer insists that at the time none of them knew the seriousness of the risks:

Nothing made him more furious than to think that *these men, these grown men, men he trusted*, who used those chemicals to keep down budworm disease and clear roads—when everyone else was doing the *same*, back in the sixties—would stop using these chemicals the exact moment everyone else did, and charge that *he*, Leo McVicer, was guilty of knowing what they themselves, and even scientists, did not! (82, italics in original)

The complicit involvement of so many different individuals and institutions might show the difficulty of assigning blame for environmental health effects, especially in a culture of acquiescence, complexity and incomplete knowledge. But McVicer's failure to take responsibility for his actions—blaming the social climate and environmental ignorance of his time—is contrasted with Sydney's courageous and steadfast moral convictions, sustained to the point of sacrificing his life in trying to help another. In

the novel, the invisibility and long latency period of environmental contamination serves to show that ethical questions are so difficult—and so important—precisely because we lack the complete, omniscient knowledge offered by the realist novel or by an idealized notion of science. In place of enlightenment, the novel provides morality: it is Sydney's religious vow that enables him to make choices about how to act, rather than let himself be overwhelmed by the limits of his knowledge or determined by the values of his social milieu.

The stark moral landscape of *Mercy* provokes as much discomfort as *Lives*' hopelessness does, but for different reasons. *Lives* uses spatial distance to place a moral burden on the reader whose urban comforts derive from the natural resources and labour extracted from the Miramichi rendered as "sacrifice zone." In *Mercy*, Sydney and his family seem to become willing victims, sacrificing themselves for the sake of independent thought and human compassion. While the novel might therefore be read as self-defeating environmental fatalism that closes the reader out of the narrative, it can also be read as exposing the limits of realist conventions and expectations—in both aesthetic and epistemological terms. As Justin Edwards notes, the children's deformed bodies function both as material traces of environmental contamination and as "grotesque markers" of "the brutal figures of power, the spectral hierarchies, that have dispossessed the poor" (63). Their gothic presence points to what lies "under the surface of this region (that which is known but not thought)" (Edwards 63-64). Edwards suggests that Sydney, as an innocent figure demonized as pure evil, haunts the community after his death. But his self-sacrifice also haunts the reader. Whereas Cohen's fiction seems to presume that the narrator and reader share a common moral register (the "naturalizing" tendency for which realism is often criticized), Richards' novels confront and challenge the reader to live up to a standard of duty and compassion.

Conclusions

As a fledgling field, ecocriticism is still searching for critical methodologies to illuminate the environmental implications of literary and cultural texts. In this essay, I propose that a key task for ecocriticism is to consider how knowledge of environmental ills and risks—or the very lack or limitations of environmental knowledge—is staged in contemporary literature. I draw on Marxist approaches to realism to outline an ecocritical method that foregrounds the politics of knowledge. I show how the depiction of

environmental change in the novels of Cohen and Richards depends on the construction and distortion of historical and spatial perspective. Both sets of texts map environmental degradation onto structural relationships of class and region in a globalized economy. In juxtaposing different knowledge registers, including the gap between the knowledge of the characters and narrator, they demonstrate that knowledge of causal relations across space and time is crucial for gaining perspective on environmental conditions and attributing ethical and political responsibility—but also that such knowledge is not necessarily achievable.

However, Cohen's shift from the localized domain of the farm in *The Disinherited* to the global commodity exchanges of *Elizabeth and After* seems to affirm that the realist novel can represent socio-ecological relations. By contrast, *Lives of Short Duration* fragments into absurdity and *Mercy Among the Children* approaches Christian allegory. Richards' fiction is more ambivalent about the capacity of realist aesthetics and realist epistemologies to make sense of a socially and environmentally degraded world. Richards' depiction of environmental degradation complicates the way his novels have been read within a realist aesthetic; his novels also challenge us, like Jameson, to consider what aesthetic forms may be most appropriate for engaging with the present historical condition of ecological crisis.

NOTES

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- 1 For further discussion of “environmental determinism” in regional writing, see Davey, “Toward the Ends of Regionalism”; Keahey 4-7; and Calder and Wardhaugh 3-10.
- 2 For elaboration on how realism constructs the represented world as known and knowable, and how this shifts with modernism, see Weinstein.
- 3 See Buell 13 and 432-33n35, and note the absence of references to Williams in most ecocriticism. Dominic Head, however, claims Williams as an ecocritic *avant la lettre*.
- 4 See Kulyk Keefer 170; Creelman 147; Milner 201.

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