

Uranium Mining, Interdisciplinarity, and Ecofeminism in Donna Smyth's *Subversive Elements*

I believe that the question of disarmament is the most pressing practical, moral, and spiritual issue of our times. I'm not talking about abstractions.

—Margaret Laurence, “My Final Hour”

Forty years ago, the possibility of uranium mining in Nova Scotia ignited controversy and debate that led to a provincial inquiry and, ultimately, a moratorium on uranium mining in the province. Those who protested this resource extraction held both local and global concerns: they worried that the mining would have disastrous environmental and health consequences for the region, and they opposed the production of uranium destined for the nuclear arms industry. In the late Cold War setting, questions of nuclear armament and the threat of global destruction were prominent in the Canadian public sphere, as elsewhere. Anti-nuclear peace advocacy was experiencing one of its global peaks in the early 1980s (Wittner 164). When Margaret Laurence delivered her address “My Final Hour” to the Trent University Philosophy Society in 1983, she outlined the international geopolitical contexts that gave rise to the fear of planetary nuclear destruction.¹ Her presentation, from which I quote in the epigraph, was published in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Canadian Literature* (no. 100, 1984). She writes of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the anti-nuclear work of Dr. Helen Caldicott, cruise missile testing, American national security, and Canada’s capacity for anti-war and

disarmament mobilization. Though she does not specifically describe the connection between Canadian uranium and the bombs dropped on Japan—a connection that Marie Clements explores in her 2002 play *Burning Vision*—she does denounce Canada’s complicity in nuclear arms production (Laurence 194). This industry complicity, along with the menace of “nuclear holocaust,” were concerns behind the anti-uranium protest movement that emerged in Nova Scotia (190).

Upon learning that several multinational corporations were searching for mineable uranium in Nova Scotia in the late 1970s, citizen groups quickly formed to oppose such prospecting (Leeming 103; Smyth, “Uranium” 10). The Women’s Institute of Hants County, Nova Scotia, was a key player in alerting residents to the prospect of uranium mining and its attendant dangers (Leeming 104). One of the people made aware of uranium prospecting via the Women’s Institute was writer and Acadia University English professor Donna Smyth (Smyth, *Subversive* 11-13). Against the geopolitical backdrop described above, Smyth became an environmental activist, covered the uranium controversy for local newspapers, was sued for libel by a prominent pro-nuclear chemist, and published a novel that directly portrays the struggle to ban uranium mining in the province. Smyth’s activism, and her textual documentation of the movement, have impacted the ways in which this story is told, decades later. Her anti-nuclear advocacy is cited as an example of women’s activism in *Canadian Women’s Issues: Bold Visions* (1995), and historians of Nova Scotian environmentalism draw from her writing as a primary source (Pierson and Cohen 378-79; Bantjes and Trussler 185, 190, 191; Leeming 105, 123, 129). Smyth’s 1986 book, *Subversive Elements*, functions as an archive of the uranium controversy: it reproduces newspaper articles from the period, and one of its main plotlines is distinctly autobiographical, recounting the protests and inquiry from the perspective of an environmental activist. Though it is not a memoir (or at least, it is not *only* a memoir), it does provide an important first-hand account of the movement and is narrated from a first-person perspective that Diana Brydon identifies as “autobiographical documentary” (45).

One of *Subversive Elements’* contributions is thus its representation of the ethos and issues surrounding uranium controversies in the context of 1980s Canada. Given the nation-state’s longstanding and ongoing capitalist

and colonial exploitation of the land, there is a substantial literary corpus depicting resistance to, and the effects of, natural resource industries. Anti-extractive, anti-colonial works by Indigenous writers are foundational to this corpus; examples related specifically to uranium include David Groulx's mining poems in *A Difficult Beauty*, Richard Van Camp's "The Uranium Leaking from Port Radium and Ray Rock Mines Is Killing Us," and Clements' *Burning Vision*, mentioned in my introductory paragraph. On the East Coast, a region particularly defined by natural resources industries, *Subversive Elements* takes its place among Atlantic Canadian fiction such as Percy Janes' *House of Hate*, Sheldon Currie's *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum*, and Lisa Moore's *February*. *Subversive Elements* constitutes a rather unique contribution to this thematic corpus because it depicts *averted* resource extraction, but the book is not only about environmental protest. In fact, it includes a whole other narrative plotline and addresses a wide range of other themes and topics. This essay pays attention to the literary qualities of the novel and explores how its themes, form, and structure enact complex connectivities. Despite elements that seem to clash, such as the two very distinct main stories, the book is ultimately invested in non-dualistic connections. *Subversive Elements* is a postmodern, multi-generic, interdisciplinary, and widely intertextual book that invites readers into the kinds of connective, holistic thinking that the narrator herself uses to understand environmental issues. After establishing the essential heterogeneity of the novel as seen in its intertextuality and interdisciplinarity, I will argue that representations of silence and language constitute one point of connection between the two plotlines, and that these representations illuminate the novel's environmental concerns through ecofeminism. In our present moment of energy megaprojects, unprecedented climate change, and global environmental activism, I look back to *Subversive Elements* and its historical context, when fear of environmental destruction was likewise, but differently, manifest.

Within the structure of the novel, the narrative that Brydon characterizes as autobiographical documentary is narrated by Smyth herself, or by a Smyth-like authorial persona. I will refer to this narrative as "the uranium plotline." In these sections, the narrator recounts aspects of her life in rural Nova Scotia as she gardens, raises goats, builds a greenhouse, and becomes an environmental activist. She co-founds an organization called Citizen

Action to Protect the Environment (CAPE) through which she protests prospective uranium mining in Nova Scotia while also writing about the controversy for local newspapers (Smyth 24). The sections of this narrative vary in style and tone. Some offer personal anecdotes of amateur goat husbandry while others present factual information about the history of uranium and its connection to the nuclear industry (e.g., 55-58, 113-19). The second primary plotline, which, like the narrator, I will refer to as “the Last Novel,” tells the story of Beatrice and Lewis. They meet and fall in love when Beatrice visits Lewis, a monk, for spiritual guidance. Lewis grew up with two aunts and served in the British army in India during World War II before entering the monastery, where he experiences depression and serious doubt about his calling. Beatrice had a wide range of relationships and careers before meeting Lewis, from vaudeville performance with her mother to co-management of a publishing house in Paris. The Last Novel describes Beatrice and Lewis’ life together up to Lewis’ sudden death, while also recounting their back stories through alternating episodes. These episodes are dramatic in the sense that they involve intense emotion and striking plot twists, as when Beatrice finds her husband in bed with her mother (150), or when Lewis languishes wretchedly at an altar, imagining himself as a “vile worm in the dust” (158).

Clearly these two narratives are very different from each other in terms of characters, settings, themes, and tone. This distinctiveness is emphasized in the summary on the back cover of the novel when it refers to “two seemingly unrelated strands—a highly romantic and unlikely love story and a timely account of the controversy surrounding uranium mining in Nova Scotia.” Structurally, the Last Novel plotline constitutes a *mise-en-abyme* because the narrator of the uranium plotline is actually writing the Last Novel (Sandrock 93). This is made clear in the opening sections when the narrator refers to the process of writing Beatrice and Lewis’ story (Smyth 14, 17). She calls attention to her authorship in the first segments of the Last Novel through statements such as, “For two years I’ve been trying to write a novel” and “I call them Lewis and Beatrice” (14, 17). However, the first-person narrator quickly disappears from the Beatrice and Lewis sections, allowing their story to unfold parallel to the narrator’s plotline. Many of the Last Novel segments begin with “Beatrice said:” or “Lewis said:”—further emphasizing the characters rather than the writing practice

behind the story—until the end of the novel when the narrator declares, “I have finished the Last Novel” (254). Although it is clear that one narrative technically frames the other, the reading experience for the bulk of the book suggests two parallel tracks: the first-person narrative, and the love story. The movement between the two tracks is frequent. Within the 263-page book, there are almost thirty separate sections of the Last Novel. On the one hand, this structure emphasizes breakages: there is a potential whiplash effect as we start-stop-start between the plotlines. On the other hand, the frequent changes can also be experienced as connective, as if two strands are being twisted around each other, or we are moving between two sides of the same coin.

The transitions between the two narratives are typographically signalled through three diamond-shaped bullet points in the section breaks, often accompanied by one or two indented quotes. Through direct quotation, Smyth brings in a rather stunning array of intertextual references. In fact, even before readers of *Subversive Elements* encounter the narrator or any characters, we learn of the wide variety of sources interspersed throughout the book. Just beyond the requisite copyright page, *Subversive Elements* opens with a list of publications excerpted in the novel. The titles demonstrate the range of citation, moving from Theodor Adorno’s critical theory text *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, to a manual on dairy goats, to an article on plutonium (5). Following this bibliography, we turn the page expecting to encounter the beginning of Smyth’s narrative, only to find three lengthy quotations over two pages: the first taken from a 1649 British Diggers pamphlet, the second from C. H. Grandgent’s commentary on Dante’s *Paradiso*, and the last from C. G. Jung’s foreword to the ancient Chinese divination text, the *I Ching* (6-7). When the narrator addresses us directly on the following page, her “Dear Reader” feels intimate after the historical and thematic breadth of the citations and bibliography. Right away, she describes something that is smaller, local, focused, and domestic: the process of preparing soil for her garden in rural Nova Scotia. We soon learn that there are goats around and the garden could connect with the Diggers quote since Diggers cultivated unclaimed land to establish it as communally owned—but otherwise, we are not sure how Adorno, Jung, and Dante will relate. In addition to verbatim quotations, there are a handful of reproduced newspaper articles in the novel, five of which take

up its closing pages. There are also many in-text allusions to other texts. In some scenes, historical authors themselves make appearances. Samuel Beckett wins a poetry contest that Beatrice co-organizes (112), and later, Beatrice becomes quite close with Dylan Thomas (163-67).

In addition to—and partly because of—its pronounced intertextuality, *Subversive Elements* is a profoundly interdisciplinary novel. Science, theology, psychology, religious studies, literature, communications, women's and gender studies, agriculture, and journalism all figure in the book. The interdisciplinarity of the novel goes beyond simply having themes or topics that relate to a variety of disciplines. Through characters' conversations, didactic passages, and citation, the book explicitly draws on a range of fields of knowledge. For example, in one passage of the uranium plotline, the narrator references Marshall McLuhan to discuss media coverage of uranium protests as she draws on medical expertise to explain the dangers of exposure to uranium ore (66-67). In the Last Novel plotline, Beatrice, Lewis, and the monastery's abbot discuss the value of psychoanalysis, with Beatrice drawing on her personal experience with sex psychologist Havelock Ellis to convince the monks of the value of a "modern medical approach" (210). In the former example, media theory meets medicine and science; in the latter, psychology dialogues with theology. In some ways, the interdisciplinarity of the novel emerges from the centring of the first-person narrator. She mostly absents herself from the Last Novel sections, and large portions of the uranium plotline are information-driven and not particularly confessional. However, she is the narrative consciousness behind all the heterogeneity: she is the one tending goats and gardens, writing a love story involving characters with diverse interests, and engaging in an intense "self-education process" to understand and protest uranium mining (Sandrock 80). In this way, the interdisciplinarity of the novel is an effect of its realism, and is further compounded by the fact that the narrator is actively researching an interdisciplinary topic. In support of her activism and journalism, she is educating herself about the uranium industry, nuclear arms production, mining-related environmental and health hazards, and government regulation of resource extraction. The uranium plotline showcases her growing knowledge, beginning with her first cognizance of the issue in 1981 (Smyth 11, 13), and ending with Nova Scotia's 1985 extended moratorium on uranium exploration and Smyth's court win against a prominent nuclear

chemist (258, 262). In didactic passages, we learn along with the narrator. For example, she explains radiation from the work of Pierre and Marie Curie up through the twentieth century (30-33), and later, the history of uranium mining in Canada (113-19). She adopts a staunchly interdisciplinary approach to her topics, noting connections and complicities. In the radiation passage, for instance, she counters the idea that this is a uniquely scientific topic by stating, “Recent discoveries in quantum physics have taught us that we see what we want to see. We are really in the realm of metaphysics. And politics” (33).

Taken as a whole, the interdisciplinarity, intertextuality, and distinctive plotlines form a book that is deeply heterogeneous. Indeed, in one of the few critical studies of *Subversive Elements*, Kirsten Sandrock notes its “large corpus of intertexts” and the “thematic and stylistic heterogeneity” of the novel, which she describes in terms of polysemy, polyphony, and inter-generic hybridity (77-79). These descriptors emphasize the diversity of components in the book—the different topics, styles, language registers, voices, allusions, and genres between its covers. In its eclectic blurring of boundaries, *Subversive Elements* is quintessentially postmodern fiction. Its postmodern “self-consciousness,” its concern with its own “status as fiction, narrative, or language,” as Linda Hutcheon famously theorizes postmodern fiction (612), are evident in the *mise-en-abyme* of the Last Novel and through the narrator’s comments on the history of fiction and the practice of literary analysis. Just as there is a novel within the novel, there are musings on fiction as a genre within this (multi-generic) piece of fiction. In introducing the Last Novel, the narrator explains why she calls it so: “The Last Novel. Meaning the last one I shall write but also accumulating meaning in the sense of a disappearing species” (Smyth 14). In a quick, characteristic interdisciplinary move, the metaphor of the “disappearing species” connects her comment on the literary marketplace with the book’s overarching concern with environmental degradation. She uses this same metaphor to introduce a longer section on the history of English fiction: “If fiction is an endangered species, it is fair to ask what the function of this species is in our society” (48). Such metafictional passages are examples of the interdisciplinarity and postmodernity of *Subversive Elements*, but they also offer interpretive hints to readers because the narrator explains how she thinks fiction works. Beginning her explanation with “the most basic element of fiction is story,”

the narrator offers the example of a story of seeing a dog standing in the middle of a road: “On the one level, the abandoned dog is simply an object of passing interest. On the fictive level, he becomes a character in a crisis. He engages our attention, our sympathy. By a sleight of hand, ‘reality’ is rearranged and we acquiesce. This acquiescence of the audience is vital to the fictive process which depends upon audience” (48-49).

How, then, does *Subversive Elements* orchestrate our own “acquiescence,” engaging “our attention, our sympathy,” particularly when its eclecticism may seem disorienting at first, as students have reminded me? I posit that for Smyth’s implied reader, the heterogeneity of the novel is experienced as invitational, not alienating. The apparent disconnectedness between the two plotlines, or between disparate intertextual sources or disciplinary ideas, intentionally *invites* readers to form connections and links. As Sandrock argues, “Smyth undermines traditional demarcations between genres and raises the readers’ awareness of the interrelatedness of different societal voices” (81). The readers’ connective work thus mirrors the work of the narrator as she also seeks to understand connections between things that might seem very far apart from each other, such as her backyard garden and multinational uranium corporations, or nuclear power and misogyny. Early on in the book, a quotation from Herbert Read’s *The Origins of Form in Art* reads,

To the extent that it is deeply rooted in daily life, art can no longer, in its simplest expression, be presented as mere fiction. This means that the imagined work is no longer presented in its “invented” or abstract naivety, but tends to contain a force which is borrowed or extracted from the most banal and the most trivial reality. We have entered the *age of collage*. (14, emphasis original)

The passage connects to *Subversive Elements*’ generic hybridity and its depiction of the everyday, but it also offers the useful metaphor of collage to conceive of the book’s patchwork of citations and topics as forming a whole, integrated piece of art.

Images of webs have a similar metaphorical tenor and recur throughout the book. Like the disparate pieces of a collage, the strands of a web remain distinct from each other but also intersect and overlap to form a whole structure or system. The first occurrence of “web” comes at the end of the narrator’s description of the steep learning curve that accompanied her environmentally-motivated lifestyle change. She concludes by evoking

“[a] multiplicity, a complexity of relationships. A new web” (Smyth 9). Because she has just described organic gardening, this “web” suggests ecosystems, a connection made more explicit in a subsequent passage: “The disappearance of the several species contained within the ecological systems that have evolved over thousands of years in the rain forests will alter everything, including our climate. This web of nature contains us and sustains us” (38-39). Humans are part of the ecological web (“Me, the garden, the goats, we are part of a web which sustains us as we sustain it” [129]) and form their own social webs (“we are webbed in, connected to each other. Our human eco-systems are as vital as the ones we observe in nature” [179]). Webs suggest interdependency and complex connectivity, eschewing the limitations of binary or dualistic thinking. The narrator identifies dichotomous conceptions of reality as being at the origins of a number of large-scale problems. For instance, in a section that denounces the gaslighting of women environmental activists, the worship of scientific objectivity, and the distractions of capitalist society, she deplores the gendered mind/body split: “[I]ntellect is split off from the world. The female is body, the male the severed head . . . intellect has been allowed to function apart from body and emotion and intuition and imagination” (146-147, 148). In another essayistic passage, she criticizes the binary thinking that undergirds xenophobia, resulting in “the world split in half like a rotten apple. Us and Them. Black and White. Left and Right” (83).

In other words, not only does the web metaphor offer a way to conceive of the formal and stylistic qualities of this book, but it also represents the kind of thinking that the narrator upholds: web-like conceptions of reality over dualist ones. Shifts in thinking, to her, necessitate shifts in textual strategies, circling back to form and style. “New art, new society,” she proclaims, “Nothing more, nothing less” (108). It is thus not surprising that both plotlines are interested in cultural movements and paradigm shifts, such as feminism, modernism, environmentalism, and postmodernity. In the Last Novel, Beatrice remembers what it was like to experience a shift in perception that also relates to “new art” when she recalls her time in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, when “surrealism was . . . a new way of seeing” (80). The narrator of *Subversive Elements* is also embracing ways of perceiving the world that are new to her and artistic forms to represent those perceptions.

Once we recognize the extent to which the narrator's worldview *and* the book's themes and narrative strategies are shaped by complex connectivity, we see that resonances between its two "seemingly unrelated" plotlines are to be expected—and that it might take some work to find them. One important example of a strand in this multi-genre web involves language and its absence, a theme in both plotlines. In keeping with its postmodern linguistic self-consciousness, *Subversive Elements* partly signals its engagement with language through wordplay and meditations on the resonances of particular words, such as "subversive" (107, 214). In addition, language is crucial to character development in the Last Novel and is a major part of the narrator's environmental analysis in the uranium plotline. Already, the structural device of the fictional *mise-en-abyme* and the narrator's comments on the place of literature in society signal a focus on language. The narrator's concern that fiction is a "disappearing species" is juxtaposed with the powerful role that literature plays in the lives of the Last Novel characters, particularly Lewis. Although Lewis entered the Greystones monastery with great conviction (69-70) and felt "free" for the first few years (121), he eventually begins to feel imprisoned—not within the monastery but within himself (140). He becomes afraid, depressed, and withdrawn, much to the alarm of his superior, the Abbott (140-46, 155-60). One sign of his inner entrapment is an aversion to language, the "loss of his voice" (Sandrock 95). When the Abbott asks him what troubles him, Lewis refuses to respond: "He had learned speech was risky. . . . They all wanted words from him. Couldn't they see how useless words were. When Christ was not risen, words were cold and damp as the tomb where Christ lay buried in his heart. He had no idea why God had abandoned him. Silence" (Smyth 141-42). This sense of silence is out of character for Lewis, a teacher of literature (the monastery has a school) who loves the deft wordplay of debate and has published a volume of poetry (97, 122, 190). After Lewis barely responds to the Abbott's query, he opens a letter from his friend and former fellow monk, Gordon. The line from the letter that repeats in Lewis' mind is "I have never met anyone as eloquent as you" (143, 145). The letter details Gordon's own decision to leave the monastic order and this, along with Gordon's affirmation of Lewis' eloquence, begins to pull Lewis back to life. In the next passage that features Lewis, he stumbles upon the abandoned baby bird that will be part of his rejuvenation (159).

Subsequently, Beatrice arrives, bearing a name that already connects her to Dante's beloved guide and muse (and, more problematically, with Lewis Carroll's child muse Beatrice Hatch). For Lewis, Beatrice is indeed a kind of divine feminine figure who encourages him to write poetry, try psychoanalysis, and eventually fall in love (190-95).

Lewis' retrospective commentary on this time of healing identifies intersections between creative literary expression, his evolving sense of faith, and Beatrice as his sacred guide:

Lewis said: Writing poems is an act of faith. I let go of what I know and wait for what I don't know to take shape in words. It's like waiting for a miracle. I often wondered why it was the women who brought word that Christ was risen. Are miracles easier for them? When I met Beatrice I began to understand. (189)

Beatrice also fosters healing, albeit temporary, in the life of another writer character, a fictional version of canonical Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. At the request of Thomas' wife, Caitlin, Beatrice accompanies him to a countryside cottage where he sobers up and begins to write poetry again. As with Lewis, the movement from silence back to poetics signals and fosters healing: "Chain, change, chance.' The words dropped through the ceiling like pebbles into a pond. His voice carried through the small cottage, a benediction upon her head, her dwelling place. Thank God, Dylan was sober and working again" (163). Dylan's poems-in-progress benefit Beatrice as their recipient ("a benediction upon her head"); she is both muse and ideal reader. When Beatrice later meets Lewis, she becomes Lewis' reader too. She tells him how much his poems moved her and explains that her work in publishing has led her to conclude that poets are "recording angels" (190-92). As a reader, muse, and publisher, Beatrice is a catalyst and shepherd of writing without being a writer herself, as the text clearly states: "Did Beatrice ever try to write herself? No" (108). An implicit question follows: Does Beatrice play a powerful, pivotal role in these male writers' lives, or is she relegated to a supportive role as per the longstanding gendering of literary muse figures and in keeping with the gender dynamics of her era? The narrative is conscious of the tension between Beatrice as a major or minor actor in literary production, a tension that is underscored through the association between Beatrice and Mary, mother of Jesus (195). The wooden sculpture of Mary in the monastery's Lady Chapel is a touchstone location for Lewis as he grapples with his inner turmoil (156-58).

In an epiphanic moment, he realizes that the Mary statue looks like Beatrice (195). Like Beatrice, Mary can be perceived as a secondary figure in a male hero's story, even as she can also be revered for her power and agency. The novel's ecofeminism, which I will address below, is manifest here in the tension between recognizing countercultural womanly wisdom and denouncing the structural misogyny that relegates women to supporting roles.

As Beatrice helps others move to self-expression, the uranium plotline also depicts silence and speech, moving beyond the level of the individual. In the scene in which Dylan Thomas, under Beatrice's watch, begins composing poetry again, Beatrice imagines the nascent poem "spreading through the house, curling tendrils around the granite lintel, overrunning the doorstep outside" (166). These poetic tendrils are a fitting image for the literary references spreading and curling within and between the narrative segments of *Subversive Elements*, which references Henry Vaughan (24), William Blake (34), Oscar Wilde (131), and many others. Immediately following the poetic tendrils scene, the book switches back to the uranium plotline, where there are also silences that must be broken. The section lists a number of people who were partially or entirely silenced for speaking publicly against the nuclear industry and uranium or plutonium mining. Among others, the list includes filmmaker Ian Ball, scientist and peace activist Rosalie Bertell, and Donna Smyth herself, who was sued for libel by a prominent nuclear chemist (167-70). By speaking out, these individuals break the silence around a controversial topic but risk being silenced themselves if they are perceived as a threat by those invested in resource extraction and nuclear power (107, 169). Earlier in the novel, the narrator asserts that "mainstream politics depends on complicity and silence and the people's unquestioning acceptance of the decision-making process" (107). Anti-uranium, anti-nuclear environmental activists are subversive when they "break silence," a silence described as lurking, immersive, dreadful, insidious, and effective (107). What is seen in the lives of individual characters in the Last Novel is here displayed at the societal level as well: language (speech, text, cultural production) "overruns the doorstep" to counter a corrosive silence (166). However, without diminishing the forces of alcoholism, depression, or oppressive institutions in Lewis' and Thomas' lives, we can still draw a distinction between their interior, personal

silences and the structurally imposed silencing of dissident voices. While silence and speech are themes in both plotlines, the silencing accomplished by powerful industry players in the uranium plotline is of a different order than the silences of Lewis' crisis of faith or Thomas' loss of voice.

In addition to demonstrating how mining and nuclear proponents attempt to silence their detractors, the narrator also denounces industry deployments of speech and language. In her overview of the health risks of being exposed to radiation such as that produced by uranium mining, the narrator asserts, "In this discussion, language is absolutely crucial" (30). She dissects the ways in which scientific or expert language can alienate concerned citizens or blur reality, such as the use of the word "safe" in relation to radiation exposure (33), the complete avoidance of the term "carcinogenic," or choosing the adjective "biologically effective" rather than "dangerous" (30). Reflecting on what does get said by uranium companies during public consultation, she notes that "complex, technical discussion of relative safety and relative risk" ostracizes community members (139). Consequently, at one point in the provincial inquiry, the narrator and her fellow activists worry that "highly technical testimony would leave most of the general public bewildered and confused" (235). This is a strategy that Thomas Gerry identifies in his essay "The Literary Crisis: The Nuclear Crisis," published in the same period as *Subversive Elements*. He argues that pro-nuclear governments "deliberately obfuscate the underlying insane reality with jargon and other forms of 'misinformation,' leading people to believe that because of the complexities, the whole matter had best be left to the experts" (Gerry 298). Herb Wyile makes a similar observation specifically in relation to resource extraction in Atlantic Canada, where the "glossy rhetoric" of the oil industry conceals real risk and exploitation (84). Smyth's commentary on the manipulative language of the inquiry is akin to the points made by these literary critics. Further, because the novel highlights the elasticity and power of language through its linguistic play and metafictional elements, we trust the narrator to be skilled in rhetorical analysis, giving substantial weight to her parsing of industry jargon.

In addition to diagnosing industry prose as propagandistic and stifling, the narrator also sees it as emblematic, even deterministic, of the pro-nuclear military-industrial-government complex (Smyth 169). Two passages that mirror each other state, first, "'Overkill.' 'Megadeaths.' You are what you

speak. Or you disappear one reality and try to replace it with another by merely changing a name” (120); and later, in a formally unique passage:

overkill
 megadeaths
 acceptable risk
 limited nuclear war

“They” are what they speak
“They” are:

 thrust
 penetration
 power
 Male power (169)

Margaret Laurence highlights the same nouns in “My Final Hour,” arguing that “such words as ‘overkill’ and ‘megadeath’ do not convey in any sense at all what would really happen” (191). Whereas Smyth proposes a near-metonymic relationship between “Them” and their vocabulary, Laurence faults these terms for misrepresenting the realities of nuclear apocalypse: “[T]he jargon of militarists is a distortion and a twisting of language, of our human ability to communicate” (191). Smyth’s analyses of how language both represents and reproduces oppressive power is also evident in her essay “Getting Tough and Making Sacrifices: The Language of War in the 1980s,” published in the 1989 collection *Up and Doing: Canadian Women and Peace*. As the title suggests, Smyth scrutinizes the aggressive discourse used to mobilize support for military spending and international military action. In the essay, as in *Subversive Elements*, Smyth’s denunciation of these strategies is grounded in an ecofeminist stance. As Sandrock has charted in her analysis of *Subversive Elements*, the narrator associates uranium and nuclear industries with misogynist oppression (100-03). Resource extraction is construed as “[m]ale power” that violates the “she” of the Earth (Smyth 93). This ecofeminist approach is strategically essentialist, making a point about gendered power through sweeping equations of man-oppressor and woman-oppressed. Perhaps the most explicit example of this stance comes in a passage that deconstructs the “central cultural myth: progress” as “the phallic thrust into the future. . . . Alternative energy sources and systems have bad press and a bad name: ‘soft’ energy. Associations with femaleness. Hard energy: hard-on” (127-28). Through her feminist lens, the narrator

deliberately genders the simplified dualisms of nature versus technology, alternative versus mainstream, and sustainability versus destruction.

The narrator also recognizes one way that misogyny overlaps with the dismissal of environmental activists: both women and environmentalists are derided for being excessively emotional (146, 149). For the narrator, there is actual overlap between these two groups. In her Nova Scotian context, anti-uranium advocacy is initiated by the Women's Institute (11) and is connected with broader women's anti-nuclear activism such as that associated with Rosalie Bertell, who "wears a button saying she is a feminist for peace" (168). The narrator asserts that "the 80s environmental and peace movements are charged with women's energies and commitment," offering the example of Witches Against Nuclear Development in Ontario (149). Insofar as anti-uranium activism is also anti-nuclear, it is indeed part of a long history of women's anti-nuclear peace activism in Canada. In her overview of this activism, Barbara Roberts demonstrates that Canadian women have protested nuclear weapons since the 1945 US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that their activism can be seen in continuity with pre-World War II Canadian women's peace movements (293-96). The 1960 founding of Voice of Women (VOW), which Penni Mitchell calls "one of the most successful women's organizations in Canada," was catalyzed by a call for women to mobilize for disarmament (Dean 285; Mitchell 145). This felt urgent in the context of Cold War controversies over the North American Air Defense Agreement (NORAD), the deployment of nuclear missiles over Canadian territory, and concern over the environmental and health impacts of radioactive waste (Dean 286; Mitchell 145). Although the women of VOW also intervened in other issues, for them "the paramount global issues . . . were the threat of annihilation from nuclear war and from the proliferation of nuclear arms and the hazards to health from nuclear arms testing" (Pierson and Cohen 376).

At the time of the uranium controversies documented in *Subversive Elements*, VOW had a "tremendous following" among women in Nova Scotia (Bantjes and Trussler 193). In 1985, Halifax was the location for an international gathering on Women's Alternatives for Negotiating Peace, organized by VOW with representation from thirty countries (Roberts 298). Many of the Nova Scotian members of VOW were also involved with key environmental organizations in the province, such as those that

participated in the provincial uranium inquiry (Bantjes and Trussler 192). And like Smyth's narrator, some of those women brought feminist and ecofeminist perspectives to the consultations (Bantjes and Trussler 190). Thus, the passages of *Subversive Elements* that employ ecofeminist discourse connect to the real-life activism of Smyth's context and to the broader history of Canadian women's peace activism, while also offering conceptual and ideological standpoints from which to critique resource extraction in the experimental prose of the book. In fact, the novel's overall insistence on the intricacies of webs and interrelations provides a counterbalancing backdrop for the sometimes essentialist binaries of ecofeminism. Still, the 1980s ecofeminist reliance on a woman/man gender binary may strike us as problematic, as does the fact that a novel so invested in issues of land and environment makes little mention of Indigenous sovereignty or environmental racism in Mi'kma'ki, where the uranium plotline unfolds.

Returning briefly to the Last Novel narrative with ecofeminism in mind, we can see that Beatrice's womanly intelligence is meant to exemplify the ecofeminist valorization of matriarchal wisdom. Passages that denounce "hard-energy: hard-on" present woman-nature as victim, but passages that proclaim Beatrice's and the women activists' influence connect to the ecofeminist belief in women's environmental knowledge. Beatrice offers Lewis exactly what he needs to be rescued from the patriarchal institution of the priesthood. And Beatrice's salvific powers are not only for Lewis and Thomas. For instance, Beatrice nurses her friend Caitlin (Dylan Thomas' widow) through a period of intense grief and suicidal ideation. Her methods include the maternal practices of breastfeeding and lullabies: "[H]er breast she offered Caitlin's mouth and she clung to Beatrice like a stone and Bea sang, dilly-dilly, the silly little song all the night through" (Smyth 202). Caitlin, who is associated with Christ through stigmata imagery (174-75), is cast as the (female) Christ-child in this scene, and Beatrice, already strongly associated with the Biblical Mary, is the Marion comforter. This all-woman recasting of the sacred Mother-Child dyad connects to ecofeminist understandings of women's healing powers. It also likely reveals the influence of Rosalie Bertell, whom the narrator mentions as a mentor in the feminist peace movement (30, 167-68). In her summation of Bertell's ecofeminist perspective, Lisa Rumié notes that in the 1980s,

Bertell's work was "unapologetically shaped" by her "belief in women's unique role in caring for, nurturing, and protecting the earth" (143). As a member of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, Bertell and her anti-nuclear ecofeminism were "deeply enmeshed" with progressive Catholic theology (138). Clearly, the narrator of *Subversive Elements* chooses to employ and subvert sacred Christian iconography in her affirmation of womanly power.

This religiously inflected subversive feminist imagery connects to the novel's ecofeminism and provides an example of the kinds of connections that can be drawn between the two very distinct stories. Though we might come to *Subversive Elements* out of a curiosity about environmental activism, a literary analysis that considers its experimental features and disparate plotlines deepens our understanding of how those environmental issues are depicted. In this essay, I have considered one specific thematic web involving language, silence, literature, gender, and environment. The formal and structural features of the novel emphasize pieces that are both discrete and integrated: two story strands wrapping around each other, particular voices evoked and placed in intertextual conversation, and whole disciplinary discussions seen in relation one to another. As Diana Brydon points out, in *Subversive Elements* "the dual texts remind us of the connections linking even apparently disparate material and tying us all to each other" (45-46). This is not to suggest that the novel's webs or collages are perfect; important connections are elided, such as that between settler colonialism and resource extraction. The heterogeneity of the novel invites us into the connective thinking that undergirds the narrator's environmental activism, and indeed her larger worldview, even as that worldview is rooted in Christianity, a Eurocentric literary canon, and second-wave feminist environmental consciousness raising.

From our current vantage point, there are aspects of *Subversive Elements* that feel strikingly familiar, most notably the sense of urgency around the future of the planet. We can add this understudied novel to our bibliography of environment-related literature, while contextualizing it in relation to 1980s Canada. At the same time that Smyth and her fellow activists were fighting against the uranium and nuclear industries in Nova Scotia, Margaret Laurence asserted that "the question of disarmament is the most pressing practical, moral, and spiritual issue of our times" (Laurence 189). *Subversive Elements* engages with this "most pressing" issue from the kind

of complex, holistic perspective evoked by Laurence's declaration, albeit with the limitations and blind spots emerging from its positionality and historical context. Further on in "My Final Hour," Laurence specifically grounds her anti-nuclear stance in her identity as a writer. She evokes a long history of dissident artists and asserts that "artists, the real ones, the committed ones, have always sought, sometimes in ways prophetic and beyond their own times, to clarify and proclaim and enhance life" (196). She writes, "I believe that as a writer . . . as an artist, if you will . . . I have a responsibility, a moral responsibility, to work against the nuclear arms race, to work for a recognition on the part of governments and military leaders that nuclear weapons must never be used and must systematically be reduced" (195). Laurence and Smyth are very different from each other in terms of fame, career trajectory, and literary style, but clearly they share this conviction. And if writers shoulder a responsibility to depict their anti-nuclear convictions in their creative writing, then it is through attention to the literary details of that creative writing that we perceive the craft, subtleties, limitations, and strengths of their literary activism.

NOTES

- 1 Literary critics such as Nora Foster Stovel, Laura Davis, and Thomas Gerry have discussed Laurence's anti-nuclear stance, which extends beyond this one essay. As this article goes to press, Stovel has just published an edited collection of Laurence's short non-fiction writings which includes a section on nuclear disarmament.

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