The Poetics of Settler Fatalism:
Responses to Ecocide from within the Anthropocene[1]

Phil Henderson

Abstract: It is impossible to think today, without thinking of the Anthropocene. As biospheres are pushed ever-closer towards exhaustion, collapse, and/or radically inhospitable transmutations, there is a simultaneous explosion of work striving to represent and understand this epoch. However, the Anthropocene should not be thought in isolation from other social, political, and ecological processes. In this paper, I investigate the Anthropocene's intersection with settler colonialism. Of particular interest to this paper are the metaphorical and narrative accounts about wastelanded spaces; that is, how meaning is ascribed to the local manifests of the Anthropocene as they are birthed on colonized territories. I ask what sort of futurities or recuperations are imagined as extant within the Anthropocene; in particular, whether possibilities for anti-colonial futures are imagined as existing within or emerging from wastelanded spaces.

I investigate Richard-Yves Sitoski's (settler) brownfields. In this intensely located book of poetry—which Sitoski describes as a "poetic 'autogeography" of Owen Sound"—identifying the presence of what I call settler fatalism in the face of the Anthropocene and its attendant brownfields. I suggest this fatalism is brought about by a melancholic attachment to the processes of wastelanding that are endemic to settler colonization. The final section of this paper contrasts the settler fatalism of Sitoski with the still ambivalent, though more generative poetry of Liz Howard (Ashinaabek). I suggest that Howard's Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent approaches the Anthropocene not as a terminal epoch, but as what Donna Haraway calls "a boundary event".

> *you cannot sing the depredations*
> *of cadmium*
> *hydrocarbons*
> *asbestos or coal ash*
> – "*vii.*" brownfields, *Richard-Yves Sitoski*
>
> *I will press myself into potential, into your breath,*
> *and maybe what was lost will return in sleep [...]*
> – "*A Wake,*" Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent, *Liz Howard*

Biospheres at a planetary level are being pushed towards exhaustion, collapse, and radically inhospitable transmutations. Simultaneously, there is an explosion

of cultural and academic work striving to represent and understand this emerging epoch. Within the mushrooming academic literature, much of what is produced is emblematic of the representational and symbolic economy that depends upon and reproduces a fatalism in the face of the Anthropocene. The implication in much of this work being that as the Holocene passes so too will all life worthy of signification *as life*.

While the Anthropocene is being taken up as a central conceptual tool across a number of disciplines, it should not be thought in isolation from other social, political, and ecological phenomena. It is *not* an event or process unto itself. Rather, the Anthropocene must be understood as intersecting, and indeed emerging in co-constitution, with other social phenomena such as capitalism, misogyny, heterosexism, and racism (Angus; Grusin; Woelfle-Erskine; Mirzoeff). In this paper, I investigate the Anthropocene's intersection with settler colonialism. Without naming the Anthropocene, Traci Brynne Voyles investigates one of its most acute manifestations in the process that she calls "wastelanding." Voyles observes that "those in power [...] exert their power by manipulating resources and degrading the natural environment" and that, far from being novel, this is, in fact, a tactic "with which colonized people are all too familiar" (7). Settler colonialism and the Anthropocene, then, function as intensely interwoven processes that mutually reinforce one another. As Voyles suggests, in North America, the "treadmill of production can quite clearly be seen as being built on and through the degradation of Native land and life" through the discursive and material (re)production of Indigenous territories *as* wastelands (9). In light of Voyles's point, this paper attends to the metaphorical and narrative accounts about wastelanded spaces and how meaning is projected onto the local manifestations of the Anthropocene taking shape on colonized territories. In it, I ask what sort of futurities or recuperations are imagined from within the

Anthropocene – in particular, whether possibilities for anti-colonial futures are imagined as existing within or emerging from wastelanded spaces.

In the first section of this paper, I discuss the intersections of the Anthropocene and settler colonialism. Highlighting debates around the Anthropocene, this section notes the ways in which settler colonialism is facilitated by, and itself encourages, processes of ecocide. In addition, I also note the importance of narrative and story in identifying the Anthropocene's impacts, in ascribing meaning to them, and in thinking through and beyond ecocide. Following this discussion of narrative, and engaging Julie Cruikshank's twinned dictums that "the aftermaths of colonialism are always local" and that "all knowledge is incontrovertibly local," I investigate Richard-Yves Sitoski's (settler) *brownfields* (Cruishank 9-10). In this collection of intensely located poetry, which Sitoski describes as a "poetic 'autogeography' of Owen Sound," I identify the presence of what I call settler fatalism in the face of the Anthropocene and its attendant brownfields (Sitoski ix). I surmise that this fatalism is brought about by a melancholic attachment to the processes of wastelanding endemic to settler colonization. The final section of this paper contrasts the settler fatalism of Sitoski with the still ambivalent, though more generative, poetry of Liz Howard (Ashinaabek). Similarly post-apocalyptic, Howard's work refuses the fatalism that ensnares *brownfields*. Absent Sitoski's nostalgic melancholia, I suggest that Howard's *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent* approaches the Anthropocene not as the terminal epoch of bios itself but as what Donna Haraway calls "a boundary event" (100). If the Anthropocene is approached as a threshold, then fears of an ontological foreclosure must be replaced with an appreciation of the continued – though strained – relationships of life that will necessarily diverge from those that preceded. Ultimately, Howard shows that fatalism is an unethical indulgence in light of the obligations and relationships that persist in the face of accelerating destruction.

Storying the Anthropocene

Despite its affective and rhetorical power, the Anthropocene requires some conceptual unpacking if it is to be analytically useful in understanding settler fatalism. Indeed, substantial disagreement persists over the very usage of "anthropos" to describe this emerging epoch at all.[2] As such, the first section of my paper establishes its position within a broader series of debates and concerns, by exploring three major questions: what is the Anthropocene? How does it intersect with settler colonialism? And why are site-specific narratives important in the face of the Anthropocene?

While it had been floating around for several decades, the term "Anthropocene" only became widely popularized in the early 2000s. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer conceived of the term as a way to describe the planetary ecological impact of human agents, which could be stratigraphically measured in the same way as a geological epoch (Moore 595). Such a quantification suggests that the ecological and geological impacts of human agents are, at present, so acute that the effects of transformative processes that typically unfold over millennia are compressing into time-scales measurable in human lives, or even shorter. "Anthropocene," then, is a term with which to conceptualize the ecological consequences of the ongoing catastrophe in which we live; it is, to quote Paul Voosen, "an argument wrapped in a word" (qtd. in Moore 595). This argument, according to Lesley Instone and Affrica Taylor, is "an urgent call to recognize that accelerating anthropogenic changes are now threatening the kind of life on earth that we have known in the Holocene" (138). As a single word, "Anthropocene" tries to acknowledge that this new epoch is actively linked to the upheaval and destruction of the life-systems that defined the Holocene—systems, in fact, responsible for supporting the emergence and flourishing of human life as it presently exists. As Hamish Dalley writes, the *idea* of the Anthropocene draws its "force from public anxiety about climate change,"

conveying that the effects of human actions "may well render *the planet* uninhabitable to humans," much less to more-than-human others who are already verging on or falling into extinction (32). Conceptualizing the Anthropocene, with its geological – even planetary – impact, gives a name to the imperative of recognizing that, in James Tully's words, human agents have reached an ecological moment wherein "[n]o one is offsite or not responsible. The choice is *change or self-destruction*" (qtd. in Wiebe xiii).

In as much as it is premised on a universal indictment of humanity (anthropos), however, the conceptual configuration of the Anthropocene has also generated significant pushback. Chief amongst the concerns is the way in which discourses about the Anthropocene work to flatten understandings of how the impacts of this new epoch emerged historically and have been experienced. As Cruikshank notes, the "universalizing discourse of science" can too easily be used to "attack" (erase) local, community-based knowledge (25). Because the Anthropocene presumes the planetary biosphere as its level of analysis, and all humanity (homo-sapiens) as a singular unified subject, it accounts for ongoing ecocide in a way that pays remarkably little attention to the specificities of how ecocide is encountered and experienced by disparately positioned and related communities, groups, and nations.

As the Anthropocene is hegemonically conceptualized all of anthropos become undifferentiated, simultaneously victims and perpetrators of this epochal swing. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that the way in which the Anthropocene is discussed – as a universalizing interpellation of *all* humanity as the culprit of this planetary catastrophe – effectively constructs "the human" as *essentially* "a geophysical force with no deliberate agency" (qtd. in Saranillio 641), which suggests that the concept of the Anthropocene lends itself all too easily to the sentiment that environmental degradation and destruction are simply 'part of human nature' and thus an inevitability.[3] This metanarrative within the story

of the Anthropocene reinforces what Robin Wall Kimmerer already sees amongst her botany and ecology students: after decades of being disciplined by education within a particular cultural framing, these students "cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment" (6). If humanity is the cause of environmental destruction, then the trap seems to be always already set and there is no alternative but to march – perhaps at various velocities – towards an inevitable ecocidal endpoint. This universalism, Chakrabarty implies, is simply too myopic to be either analytically accurate or politically productive.

Moreover, much of the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene depends upon a romanticized imagination of the pre-anthropos biosphere. As Cruikshank notes, "the nature we are most likely to hear about in the early twenty-first century is increasingly represented as marvelous, but endangered, pristine, or bio-diverse" (258). It is certainly true that the Holocene was characterized by a biosphere hospitable to the flourishing of a multiplicity of life-systems and, in particular, the systems in which homo-sapiens have thrived. However, it serves little purpose beyond rhetoric to suggest that the passing of the Holocene represents some sort of post-Edenic moment, a "Paradise Lost" scenario. Indeed, as Alexis Shotwell suggests, the very ethos of the Anthropocene is characterized by this sentiment, "the moment that humans worry that we have lost a natural state of *purity* or decide that *purity* is something we ought to pursue and defend." Such an ethos amounts to a nostalgic hunt for a time "before the fall from innocence, when the world at large [was] *truly beautiful*" (Shotwell 3; emphasis mine). What animates this sentiment, and what makes it so truly dangerous, is that it rests upon a disavowal of the world *as it actually is* – a messy series of entanglements and relationships that, while fraught, are also ripe with potential – in favour of an ideal world *as "we" desire it to be*. Ultimately, constructing the discursive antithesis of the Anthropocene on the foundation of a past ecological purity that was never truly present replicates the constitutive logic that underpins

ecocide in the first place: a will to see more-than-human life transformed, (re)constructed for the purposes of highly a specific group of humans.

As such, if it is to be anything more than an enervating elegy, the concept of the Anthropocene must be brought down from its overdetermined bird's-eye view, in order to engage with, and be engaged by, its specifically located manifestations. Moreover, universalisms must be eschewed in favour of recognizing that the ontological condition of the Anthropocene is one of radical heterotopia, in which attention to the strength or fragility of particular relations constituted through disparity and differentiation is the precondition for analytical clarity and politically productive activity. It is certainly true, as the hegemonic discourse of the Anthropocene suggests, that *all* humans – indeed all *life* – are ultimately affected by ecological degradation. However, it is critical to draw out the multiplicity of temporalities and positionalities that are at work in the process of said degradation. While I agree with Seb Bonet that, in the long durée, the particular social relations that have birthed the Anthropocene were "profoundly suicidal," I cannot help but linger on the fact that, prior to self-destruction, this social order was not only suicidal but more imminently murderous (Bonet). A starting point for this reoriented understanding of the Anthropocene could be an engagement with Ann Stoler's notion of "imperial ruination," a process whereby "*certain* peoples, relations, and things" are deliberately subjected to the full epochal force of the Anthropocene in order to facilitate the extension of imperial domination (qtd. in Gordillo 229; emphasis mine). Similarly, Kimmerer's idea of collateral damage – a way of declaring the *killability* of particular humans and more-than-human life – helps to explain how life is made into grist for the mill of the market (348-9). As a settler writing from within empire, in the occupied territories of the various Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, it is imperative for me to know the Anthropocene from and through those locations and from those specific histories and obligations (Coulthard).[4]

Despite academia presenting the concept of the Anthropocene as almost wholly new, Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird note that ecological destruction has long been endemic to processes of colonization. They write that the ecological and geological impact of the Anthropocene "has been occurring on Turtle Island for the last five centuries" and that, as Indigenous peoples, their ancestors have been targeted by said destruction, even as they assert that ultimately this violence "portends a future of deep hardship and dramatic change for *all* forms of life on the earth" (Waziyatawin; emphasis mine). This intersection of the Anthropocene with settler colonialism in Turtle Island emerges from the very ontological condition of colonization itself. As Voyles notes, the process of reconfiguring Indigenous peoples' territories "*as settler home* involves the exploitation of environmental resources" (7).

In a real sense, then, the Anthropocene and settler colonialism do not *merely* intersect with one another. Theirs is not simply a spatial and temporal meeting of happenstance, nor are these processes layered atop one another. Rather, each has a role in constituting the other. The Anthropocene and settler colonialism are deeply interwoven, illustrating Zoe Todd's assertion that "settler colonialism co-opts our more-than-human kin in its insidious reformation of environments" (Todd n.p.). In settler colonies, the processes that I have discussed above as emblematizing the Anthropocene instantiate a "weaponization of various kin, relations, stories and terrains by settler colonial forces" against the Indigenous peoples whose territories are undergoing the degrading processes of colonial occupation (Todd).[5] Todd's work also echoes that of Kimmerer, who describes the effects of colonialism and extractive industry as leaving "Windigo footprints" on the land; she draws on Potawatomi stories about the monstrous cannibal figure to explain the toxification of the landscape through tailing ponds (307). When it is brought down from its presumptive global perspective, and understood in its particular expressions across Turtle Island, the Anthropocene is

experienced as "genocide by industrial fiat," manifest in the processes that distribute "poison in the water and foodways of Indigenous peoples" (Shotwell 87).

This imperial ruination, or wastelanding, can be read ubiquitously in and throughout contemporary landscapes of settler colonies. There is truth in the recognition that it is ultimately a threat to all forms of life as they are currently organized, but the imminent intensity of this threat is nevertheless distributed and embodied in temporally disproportionate ways. This suggests that the duration of time between the present moment and the inevitable reorganization of life-systems into unliveable-systems contracts or expands depending on how a given community, group, or nation is positioned within those systems. For some – typically white, male bourgeois subjects – there may be considerable time before the effects of the Anthropocene make themselves felt in a meaningful way. However, for Indigenous peoples, racialized subjects, and poor and working-class people, to live in the present is to already "bear the harms of being a spatial fix for toxicity [...] [of] living in polluted sites, breathing that air, drinking that water" (Shotwell 94). The effects of the Anthropocene are not *to come*; they constitute the conditions of the relations that make even toxified life possible.

As I explore in the next two sections of this paper in more detail, part of this process of imperial ruination – which manifests most acutely in the toxic landscapes of both Sitoski's and Howard's poetry – requires cultural productions that facilitate an active denial of the fact that these wastelands "could be sacred, could be claimed, could have a history, or could be thought of as home" at all, by anyone, *ever* (Voyles 26). Which is to simply make the crucial observation that the scientifically defined and ecologically measured epoch of the Anthropocene has emerged through, and been conditioned by, affective discursive formations.

My focus in what remains of this paper is on those formations and their alternatives. No doubt, given the threat posed by the Anthropocene, some are

likely to find this turn towards narrative, story, and art to be a merely academic indulgence or an escape from praxis. I, however, concur with Cruikshank that culture – and in particular, narrative – "provides one crucial way of engaging *directly* with the contemporary world" (Cruikshank 61; emphasis mine). Narrative offers more than a mere gloss on reality: it is an indication of how people(s) actually understand their world and the roles or obligations they have within it. Thomas King has powerfully argued that "the truth about stories, is that that's all we are" (1). Kimmerer similarly notes that stories "are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness" (7). If Haraway's assertion that "[i]t matters what stories make worlds, what worlds makes stories" is to be taken seriously, then poetic analysis is not merely an indulgence but rather a critical way by which to understand how the Anthropocene is understood (12). Moreover, because narrative analysis "requires close attention to local metaphor and local narrative conventions," the turn towards a cultural analysis of representations of the Anthropocene offers a route by which to avoid the universalisms and erasures that I have already suggested plague the hegemonic expressions of these discourses.[6] Again in Haraway's words, the "risk of listening to a story is that it can obligate us in ramifying webs that cannot be known in advance of venturing among their myriad threads" (132). Or, as King notes, they can inform us in living our lives differently. I follow this line of thought, because I think that the stories that are being told today, about the world that is coming through and after the Anthropocene, will play a critical role in shaping how we might engage that world.

Turning towards poetry, then, is a way of engaging with a host of important questions regarding how the Anthropocene is understood, how its effects are disparately felt, and how futures beyond this boundary event are imagined (or not). Poetic representations of the Anthropocene are thus at once symbol and

symptom: they represent and can simultaneously manifest the logics of ecological destruction. As Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird write, part of the decolonization process, which is necessarily bound up in seeking a world beyond the Anthropocene, "requires each of us to consciously consider" the effects of colonization, not merely in a material sense, "but also the psychological, mental, and spiritual" ways that colonialism reproduces itself (Waziyatawin n.p.). Particularly if it offers a space in which interdependence and relationships are more readily perceived – especially in their messy and impure realities – poetry is a site at which those effects of colonialism can be identified and productively worked through.

As such, in what remains of this paper, I follow Shotwell, in that I try to:

> take seriously the impossibility of telling value-neutral stories about the world, scientific stories or otherwise, holding in mind the ethical necessity for response that I believe attends human complicity in the damage done to the critters and biota with whom we share damaged ecosystems. (Shotwell 100)

As I turn towards Sitoski's and Howard's poetry, I remain attentive to the ways in which settler colonialism is reproduced through fatalism in the face of the Anthropocene. That is, how the very logic of wastelanding is recapitulated by a poetic melancholia that disavows the possibility of agency and life persisting within imperial ruination. I do not, however, intend to simplistically valorize said life. Colonization in the territories presently known as Canada has been organized largely in order to ensure that I, as a white settler, can access clean and hospitable environments. Thus, it is not my intention to imply that lives lived in wastelands are free of either chronic or acute pain, suffering, or deprivation. All of these things characterize the confluence of settler colonialism and the Anthropocene. I do, however, uphold Erica Violet Lee's assertion that in the process of making "a home in lands and bodies considered wastelands, we attest that these places *are* worthy of healing and that *we* are worthy of life *beyond survival*" (Lee n.p.,

emphasis mine). Failure to recognize this risks recapitulating the constitutive logics of both the Anthropocene and settler colonialism: that some lands can be or must be wastelands.

brownfields and Settler Fatalism

Richard-Yves Sitoski's first book of poetry, *brownfields* (2014), is a lyrical meditation on the plots of toxically contaminated land that dot Owen Sound, marking the spaces where the small Ontario city's industrial processes continue to make themselves felt in chronic and quotidian ways, even decades after said industries have failed economically. Described in the book blurb as "[e]qual parts lament and encomium," *brownfields* is a site-specific attempt to think the Anthropocene as it manifests itself in one of the edges of empire in which I also find myself deeply entangled. Sitoski suggests that his poetry grapples with brownfields, which are akin to the wastelands Voyles describes but in urban microcosm, in order to come to terms with the "unsettling void in the midst of a dynamic community" (Sitoski viii). Whereas Voyles suggests that wastelands are a "floating signifier" and do not necessarily "have a specific somatic or material referent," Sitoski's brownfields are, by contrast, all too real and seemingly ever-present within this community (Voyles 15). In this section, I read Sitoski's poetry, not in a systematically rigorous manner but in order to identify what I perceive as two crucial themes in his work: Owen Sound's location within the Anthropocene (which must continue to be thought alongside processes of settler colonialism) and the logic undergirding his lamentations for these brownfields. I conclude this section by commenting on the role of settler fatalism in Sitoski's work.

Without ever naming it as such, the figure of the Anthropocene looms large in Sitoski's poems. It is not, however, represented as some sort of abstract planetary catastrophe that occurs at a distance. Rather, Sitoski reads the Anthropocene from where he sits; it is a daily chronic encounter that continually

imposes itself. Indeed, Sitoski is able to see and compellingly grasp the Anthropocene where it is perhaps most slippery: in its banal and mundane formulations. He does not need to seek out the spectacle of collapsing coral reefs, nor travel to the rapid expansion of the Sahara (comparable only to the more rapid contraction of ice-shelves). Sitoski finds the Anthropocene in the traffic outside his window. He writes of this vehicular cacophony that "it is the enlarged heart murmur/ of blood forced through tissue/ and it is the sound along this harbour/ and in brownfields everywhere/ vacuums abhorring nature" (Sitoski 90). Beyond merely grasping the Anthropocene as something at once less grand but more familiar, and therefore more pernicious than the spectacular scenes often conveyed in academic literature or in film, Sitoski also positions the Anthropocene as definitively intimate. Metaphorically coupled with the chronic (perhaps congenital) struggles of a less-than-regular heartbeat, this passage brings the congestion, the concrete, the carbon dioxide, and heavy metals of daily traffic into close – even indistinguishable – proximity with the human body. A productive confusion is rendered, wherein the Anthropocene ceases to be an event 'out there' and instead can be read as constitutive of the most intimate 'in here' – the body. Sitoski's metaphor, then, seems to circumvent the ontological bifurcation of land and bodies that Voyles identifies within colonial epistemologies (Voyles 10). He weaves them together in an inextricable metaphorical entanglement. While Sitoski's "enlarged heart murmur" is meant to indicate the traffic, it is also clearly sensitive to Sarah Wiebe's assertion that "bodies are porous, vulnerable, and susceptible to toxic encroachment" (185). This "enlarged heart murmur" could just as easily also belong to that fleshy body that must imbibe the toxic effluence of the traffic-congested landscapes of brownfields.[7]

There is, however, a distinct tenor of anxiety underlining Sitoski's understanding of the Anthropocene. For while he puts bodies and toxified

landscapes into metaphorical indistinguishability from one another, he nevertheless posits a third pole which sits in radical alterity to these first two. As he writes, the "enlarged heart murmur" of the traffic/body – the brownfields – becomes a "*vacuum* abhorring nature." Here, nature and brownfields are set in stark opposition to one another; not only are they absolutely distinct, they are clearly *antithetical*. Brownfields, by their very essence, suggests Sitoski, *abhor* the natural. What is more, "nature" is assumed rather than pursued. Nature is a signifier that Sitoski relies upon to figure the Anthropocene as a degeneration in the present away from a past that is presumed to be more pristine - maybe even more natural. Thus, if brownfields are "vacuums" – spaces bereft of content, meaning, or signification – "nature" becomes saturated with meaning; it is an Edenic location from which Sitoski launches his critique of "the restive new" century of the Anthropocene (90).

In this way, Sitoski's relation to brownfields is akin to "the void" that Gastón Gordillo suggests also haunted settlers as they sought to subdue the jungle in what is presently known as Argentina. Gordillo explains that these settlers relayed their experiences outside of constructed settlements and the idyllic "nature" of the imperial imagination "as the terrifying experience of being immersed in a space of sheer *absences*, totally devoid of positivity" (Gordillo 237; emphasis mine). While the difference between Gordillo's subjects—who encounter their sense of 'the void' in the midst of a rainforest teeming with what can only be called 'nature,' and Sitoski, whose void emerges in toxified post-industrial landscapes, should not be understated, the logic underpinning the disavowal of the perceived "void" is strikingly similar in both colonial projects. In some ways, these similarities have already been noted through such classical treatments as Margaret Atwood's assertion that the image of "survival" in a hostile wilderness has been central to the development of Canadian literary culture, and Northrop Frye's investigation of the "garrison mentality" of felt

isolation that shapes Canadian authors (Atwood; Frye). Yet what travels most clearly from the Argentine jungle, through these survival narratives, to the abandoned Kennedy factory in Owen Sound is a disavowal that roots itself in the "perception that the void emptied [...] conquest of its positive spatial forms." These landscapes have become "a black hole of sorts because everything that had been built there," in the case of Argentina by the Spanish Crown and in Owen Sound by the British, "had been turned to dust" (Gordillo 231). Thus, it is the collapsing and decaying of the very nation-building project that Atwood and Frye observed in their earlier literary analyses that shape Sitoski's writing.

If *brownfields* is part lament, then I suspect that this is a process of mourning brought on by a sense that post-industrial wastelands are a "void," albeit a void with a tendency towards particularly toxic residues. Sitoski makes this absence palpable: "along the Bay/ there were factories/ and warehouses/ sheds/ fencing/ tracks/ and a million other things/ responsible/ for the A to B of life/ until surgical time/ sawed each digit/ extremity and limb/ from *our* writhing torso" (Sitoski 96; emphasis mine). Here, the (re)coupling of the body with the built environments is striking, as the withdrawal of industry is felt not merely as a chronic murmur but as an acute and methodical laceration. Elsewhere, in the wastelanded voids left toxic by industry, Sitoski continues his lament that there is "not enough of the genuine noise/ that is the *birthright* of a town" (92; emphasis mine). Tellingly, these "vacuums abhorring nature" are, for Sitoski, "monuments not to the century/ that *once belonged to us*/ but to the restive new one/ that belongs to no one/ and has turned its gaze away/" (90; emphasis mine).

What fascinates me in these passages is the collective subject that Sitoski posits. These lines are replete with collective signifiers asking to be attached to a signified subject. His poems host an "our" constituted by bodily revulsion at the amputative loss of industry. They mourn alongside an "us" constructed through a possessive sense of ownership over the Twentieth Century. These

pronouns clearly imagine a collective subject that maintains affective attachments to many of the clear markers of ongoing colonization. Thus, through these collective pronouns, the anxiety that Sitoski conveys in the face of the Anthropocene occupies a highly particular positionality. The collective subject floating through *brownfields* encounters the Anthropocene not at the outset of colonization on Turtle Island, nor even when Giche Namewikwedong (Owen Sound Bay) began choking on industrial refuse. For Sitoski's lamenting collective subject, the Anthropocene begins when industry is no longer a boon but has instead gone bust. In light of this specific cause of Sitoski's lament, the inclusion on the first pages of *brownfields*, of expertly narrated poems about Sky Woman, Kahgegagahbowh, and Nahnebahweque, must be reread within a teleological movement throughout the book. This telos is partially evidenced by the increasingly sparse presence of Indigenous peoples in later poems, when compared to earlier in the text. Indigenous peoples recede as the text progresses. This culminates in the presumed tragedy of post-industrialism working to somewhat occlude the still ongoing colonization of Saugeen Anishinabek territory in Sitoski's poetry. Despite Sitoski's revulsion when faced with "*our* writhing torso," the fact remains that, for many, the factories, warehouses, sheds, and tracks that lined the harbour were not responsible "for the A to B of life" but were rather a serious impediment to the living of lives in reciprocation with the land and all other relations. The industrial expansion of Owen Sound – the formation of that A to B – was largely made possible only after removal of the Saugeen Anishinabek from Newash Village on the North shore of the Pottawatomi River.

The collective subject that Sitoski constructs as lamenting posits an impassible fatalism in the face of the Anthropocene – narrowly understood – that sustains the erasure of Indigenous peoples upon which settler colonialism depends. This fatalism results from an unavowed melancholia over the loss of a

sense of mastery, as the effects of the long durée Anthropocene particular to Owen Sound begin to impress themselves not only on the Saugeen Anishinabek and other racialized and marginalized communities but now, finally, onto the white de-proletarianized subject. Perhaps, then, Sitoski is drawn to brownfields for the same reasons that Atwood sees the theme of survival returned to again and again or in the same way that Gordillo suggests Spanish and Argentine settlers were continually drawn back to the void they found so horrifying: "[B]ecause it was one of the last feeble traces of the ruination of their ancestors, it was a node of negativity, a reminder of the now elusive detritus of human remains generated by state violence" (Gordillo 244). Brownfields, thus, are not lamentable primarily because they sustain colonial violence or even because of their toxicity but because they are imagined as voids that no longer sustain settlers' sense of emplacement or mastery over territories that rightfully belong to another people(s).

As Dalley observes, part of the affective economy of settler colonialism is a "love" of contemplating "the possibility of [...] extinction" (30). This love is not, however, a form of contemplation that positions itself in solidarity with Indigenous peoples' efforts at decolonization: settlers tend not to contemplate their "extinction" as a metaphor for the withdrawal of colonial institutions. Rather, faced with the Anthropocene, settlers become melancholic and fatalistic over what it might mean to live a life without the imperative of mastery. This unease becomes quite clear in our fatalism regarding the Anthropocene. Responding to the relative decline of Canadian industrialism, Sitoski says: "C'est la vie. Empires don't last forever [...] I *don't want to be pessimistic, but I get the feeling that our time is simply up*" ("Interview"; emphasis mine). Sitoski's admission reveals, in microcosm, the precise formulation of the settler fatalism that I suggest haunts his poetry. For even as he grasps an understanding of Canada *as empire*, Sitoski is unable to see a possible world beyond that superstructure. He

can account for the oppressive, destructive, even genocidal imperatives that construct Canada in general and Owen Sound in particular; but the violence of these processes are ultimately sublimated to sustain his poetic lament that the century "that once belonged to us" now slips into one that "that belongs to no one" (90). Possession is a critical marker here, but it is marked as a now fading sense of affective attachment, the loss of which obscures the fact that – in the case of settlers – possession is necessarily buttressed by colonial regimes of proprietorship (Moreton-Robinson 19-32). Thus, the Anthropocene, as emblematized for Sitoski by brownfields, marks an apocalyptic rupture in the settler colonial worldview, as it constitutes a process that cannot be fully mastered. Yet the very idea of solidarity between settlers and Indigenous peoples, along with more-than-human others who continue to live in toxified landscapes, is unable to sustain the imaginative potential of another way of being in the world. For Sitoski, brownfields represent a fatalistic terminal point, not merely for the settlers of Owen Sound but seemingly for all life worthy of the name.

An *Infinite Citizen* as Resurgent Poesis

Similar to Sitoski's work in both form and subject matter, Liz Howard's poems grapple with the effects of the Anthropocene. Unlike *brownfields*, however, *Infinite Citizen* eschews a fatalistic response to the present ecological crisis. Instead, it presents, as the book blurb indicates, a poetic language by which to understand how the "waters of northern Ontario shield country are the toxic origin *and* an image of potential" (emphasis mine). While Howard is utterly unwavering in her assessment of the ecological destruction that settler colonialism causes, she maintains a resolve that affirms that such destruction does *not* in fact represent an incontestable endpoint. Rather, Howard's poems represent what Instone and Taylor call for when they demand a politics premised on "strategically practicing new ways of knitting ourselves back into the world by thinking *with* it" (136).

In spite of the Anthropocene, and the increasingly inhospitable terrains that it (re)produces, Howard insists on finding relationality and place where Sitoski sees alienation and depredation. This final section is, however, not meant to compare and contrast Howard and Sitoski, at least not directly. Rather, I provide a thematic reading of Howard in order to evidence that fatalism and misanthropy in the face of the Anthropocene are not the only – and certainly not the most ethical – responses available. I note that Howard's poetry instantiates a productive confusion of bodies and land similar to Sitoski. However, whereas Sitoski falters when the entanglement of bodies and land lacked a pristine or pure quality, Howard, by contrast, has no such compunction. Her capacity to see the generative elements within complex relationality, even when these relations are fraught and do not adhere to an ideal type, is an important ethical lesson to be learned in light of the Anthropocene.

Like Sitoski, Howard deploys metaphor throughout her poetry in order to instantiate a language by which she can creatively confuse any clear delineations between bodies and the territories in which they are unavoidably situated. In the opening poem, she writes that "where I hunt along a creek as/ you pack bits of bone away within a system/ of conservation the site was discovered/ during construction of a new venous/ highways for stars birthing themselves/ out of pyroclastic dust and telepathy/ in the time of some desperate hour" (1). As highways become the "new venous," like Sitoski, Howard renders vehicular infrastructure in metaphorical proximity to the body's vascular system. Body and infrastructure collide together in Howard's poems in a way similar to Sitoski's *brownfields*. Perhaps more starkly than even Sitoski, however, Howard notes that these collisions are occurring in a "desperate hour." Elsewhere, she ties this desperation directly to the Anthropocene, commenting on her self-image as "a Sanguine/ Melancholic in these days of warming" (5). Yet while Sitoski hears only the "rebuking [...] silence that is not the charged quiet of nature but the

emptiness of human loss," Howard perceives the persistent flourishing of life (Sitoski ix). To Howard, even in this "desperate hour," bodies/landscape continue "birthing themselves"—the Anthropocene is not a boundary event that stifles *all* futurities. Even in the landscape of a "barren terroir," Howard writes of herself: "I became emergent/ my simian tumble, my velvet fictive, my *freakish ecology*/ lifted/… I assembled a trajectory" (Howard 59-60; emphasis mine).

Though both Howard and Sitoski seek a poetic language with which to understand the Anthropocene, they come to radically disparate endpoints in their searches. Certainly Howard's entanglement in a "freakish ecology" bears little resemblance to the "quiet of nature" that Sitoski – as he writes amidst noise-polluted and toxified brownfields – longs for. The distance between these positions is, I believe, constituted by the particular understanding that each author has of the ontological condition of what they call nature/ecology. As I suggested above, Sitoski's presentation of nature is primarily aesthetic. That is, his view of nature is as pristine, beautiful, and consecrated in its externality to human life. In effect, this aestheticization of "nature" serves to reify and idealize into fixed and objective positions what is in fact relational and processual. By contrast, Howard's "freakish ecologies" bear no responsibility to anyone's aesthetic sensibilities. Her's is not a fixed and beautified understanding of "nature." Rather, it appreciates that even grotesque assemblages are constituted through relationships of interdependency that are teeming with various forms of life that are constantly "birthing themselves." Howard's poetry embodies Shotwell's charge to take "seriously a notion of real interdependence of self with social world and ecologies" (Shotwell 34). This entanglement is an ontological condition of existence, even if such environments do not reflect a preferred aesthetic. To recognize these conditions, suggests Shotwell, imposes on all entangled subjects the fact that "those worlds and those environments" in which we are entangled, "would need substantial redress" (34). Put differently, whether

in the Holocene or the Anthropocene, humans, like all bios, are always already entangled in relations of interdependence and co-constitution, and those relations require particular forms of reciprocity, even if they are aesthetically unsettling.

As one reviewer comments, *Infinite Citizen* "affirms there is no clear-cut way through points of intersectionality [...]. And needing things to be clear-cut is perhaps its own issue" (Howell n.p.). Rather than retreat into tired categories of thought, or into misanthropy, Howard's poetry manages to stay with the troubling consequences of the Anthropocene and to work through them in a deeply ethical and generative way. In her writing, she follows Instone and Taylor's charge to eschew the politics of "insurance and control," in favour of "reaching out and risking attachment with all manner of unlike others" (Instone and Taylor 148). Indeed, Howard pushes beyond this, emphasizing the fact that her attachment to "unlike others" precedes an agentive "reaching out." She underscores the self's entanglement with others at an ontological level. In a manner that recalls Robin Wall Kimmerer's engagement with Windigo – in which she refuses to kill that which is by definition a threat to her own life, but instead reaches out with medicine and story – through her poetry, Howard makes herself continually open to that which is radically other.

As I have said, however, Howard does not romanticize this entanglement. She recognizes all too well that, especially within the nexus of the Anthropocene and settler colonialism, entanglement often means relations of toxicity, as "*bioaccumulation became us Athabasca/ sweet reconciliation spoke in/ mercury, arsenic, lead, and cadmium/ along the physiognomy of the amphibian/ via which we descended*" (37). Biologist by training and an Anishinabekwe from North Ontario - with its industrial runoff and open-pit mining - Howard may be no stranger to what bioaccumulation of toxicity means at the most intimate and personal level. Yet, despite this, her poetry promises that life persists in the Anthropocene, that

life is always accompanied by responsibility, and that the chronic, often lethal complications that accompany life in the Anthropocene only heighten those obligations. Far from fatalism, then, Howard faces the Anthropocene and responds: "I will be as loud/ as I need to/ LOLing/ in the middle/ of mere existence/ in the throes/ of *mystery/ a thing/ with claws*/" (42; emphasis mine). Her "LOLing" loudly in the face of the Anthropocene stands starkly in contrast to the quiescence of Sitoski's vacuums abhorring nature.

If settlers are to engage in relationships of solidarity that at once challenge the Anthropocene and settler colonialism as co-constituting processes, we must move beyond a sense of fatalism in the face of ongoing ecocide. Making space to mourn the loss of life and destruction of life-systems is important as an insurrectionary act informed by ways of knowing that are actively repressed within the Anthropocene. Moreover, mourning can be productive by providing ethical ground from which to expand understandings of what/who counts as a life worthy of life. If, however, mourning is not accompanied by a recognition and embrace of the multiplicity of deeply entangled and less-than-pure lives that remain and continue to emerge within the Anthropocene, it risks becoming a stifling form of melancholia. Avoiding the trap of fatalism requires the capacity to ask "how we might create new modes of relation that foster the flourishing of *all* life forms, rather than shifting towards technocratic human survivalism" (Instone and Taylor 138). Haraway poses a similar problematique for settlers when she suggest that, "[l]ike all offspring of colonizing and imperial histories, I—we—have to relearn how to conjugate worlds with partial connections and not universals and particulars" (13). That need to relearn the conjugation of worlds is also what informs Kimmerer's simple but evocative question of how one could even begin to return the gift of strawberries: life and sweetness, given without thought of return (32).

If narratives and art have the capacity point in this direction – that is, if it truly matters what stories make worlds – then Howard has produced a critical text for recovering a complex understanding of the orientations of relationality and reciprocity that will enable a greater flourishing of life. In the face of the epochal destruction brought about by the Anthropocene, Howard enjoins: "and now that *the world/ has ended* and we have *not* ascended/ into heaven/ here comes the future/ let it in/ let it in and let/ our consumptive prom/ begin" (46).

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have discussed several ways in which the Anthropocene, as a process co-constitutive with settler colonialism, is understood and represented in poetry. By engaging with Richard-Yves Sitoski's *brownfields*, I uncovered some of the ways in which a settler poet from Owen Sound conceptualizes the acute effects of the Anthropocene within an increasingly toxified post-industrial landscape. In particular, I identified a penchant for settler fatalism: a sense of apocalypticism and misanthropy in the face of ongoing ecocide. In Liz Howard's *Infinite Citizen of the Shaking Tent*, I identified a generative poetic language that at once takes the calamity of the Anthropocene quiet seriously, while simultaneously refusing fatalism out of a sense of obligation to ensure that life continues to flourish. I suggested that Howard's poetry is perhaps less misanthropic and more generative because of the seriousness with which she treats the idea that existents live in a web of relationships that generate obligations towards reciprocity. Ultimately, I suggested that the stories and narratives that identify and give meaning to the Anthropocene are critically important, as they shape whatever futures will exist beyond this boundary event.

Endnotes

[1] My thanks to the editors at *Pivot* for their support and help with this article, and especially to both my anonymous reviewers whose kind but firm comments provided me with ample opportunity to rethink and

clarify many of the key points that I set out to make in this paper. Further acknowledgements go to the Indigenous Research Workshop at UVic for your work as friends and colleagues. Much of what is in here only emerges because of the intellectual labour that we have all undertaken together. Finally, thank you to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark. Your course was the starting point for this project and your teaching has informed it throughout. Any and all mistakes or missteps are my own.

[2] As many authors have pointed out, "Anthropocene" is a potentially misleading (if not dangerous) misnomer to the degree that "anthropos" indicates that all humanity—i.e. all homo sapiens—are the cause of this new geological period. In actual fact, humanity writ large is not responsible for the acceleration of ecological destruction; rather, particular humans living in particular social formations (i.e. capitalism) bear a greater degree of responsibility. As such, "Capitalocene" has been proposed to more precisely identify the definitive contours of this epoch. For my own part, I have elected to stay with "Anthropocene" out of an appreciation of poetic irony that the "anthropos" of the Greek polis was never meant to interpellate humanity qua homo sapiens, but only as the narrowly conceptualized (hu)mankind qua European and propertied male heads of households (Moore 594-630).

[3] Haraway begins *Staying with the Trouble* by recognizing that this precise problem in the concept of the Anthropocene facilitates the nihilistic position that "the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything better" because human failure is inevitable (3).

[4] The process of writing this paper can be read alongside the transit of Canadian settler imperialism. While much of the research was conducted in Lkwungen and W̱SÁNEĆ territories (Victoria, BC), I have also written portions while in the territories of the Haudenosaunee, Huron/Wendat, Anishinaabek, and Métis peoples, particularly in the area of the Dish with One Spoon treaty and Treaty 13 (1805) (Tkaronto/Toronto) and Treaty 2 (1790) (Windsor). The greatest portion of this paper was, however, written from the territories of the Saugeen Anishinaabek, particularly those under Treaty 45 1/2 (1836) (Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound). In fairness, other authors have suggested something similar in regards to origin points. Shotwell notes that Lewis and Maslin argue that "the origin point" of the Anthropocene is best marked at 1610, with the onset of colonization. This does, however, introduce a new flattening, wherein all colonization is reduced to a singular genesis (Shotwell 2).

[5] For instance, as Schertow notes, the Treasury Board of Canada Inventory reports that there are more than 4,464 toxic sites on reserves in Canada. This is just a single—though powerful—metric by which to measure how colonization has turned the very landscape into a space hostile to Indigenous peoples in particular and to life in general (Schertow).

[6] Cruikshank has noted that the supremacy of scientific discourse is producing a world in which "opportunities for transferring more foundational knowledge rapidly narrowed as the alleged universality of one set of concepts began to squeeze out alternatives that could then be disparaged as 'belief' or 'superstition'" (18, 66). For myself, poetry seemed like a critical venue for three primary reasons. First is the degree to which poets are often very *located* in their practice. Partially this is the result of institutionalized roles like city poet laureates. Poetry is often also publicly distributed in a very different way than novels. While book readings are common practice, the poetic formats lend themselves to public readings more easily and to engaged and diverse public audiences – something that both the authors I grapple with in the final sections of this paper do quite well. Finally, while poetry regularly grapples with the mundane and ordinary, it does so in a way that is both unmooring and imaginative.

[7] Importantly, and I am in debt to one of my reviewers for reminding me of this, while Sitoski's metaphors circumvent many tropes about divisions between lands and bodies, they may in fact play into other tropes that gender colonized spaces as embodied and as feminine. The metaphorical mixing of land and bodies, in and of itself, is not necessarily a progressive project.

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Phil Henderson is a settler, originally from Saugeen Anishinaabek territory, who now spends much of his time in Coast Salish territories. A PhD candidate at the University of Victoria, Phil's research is particularly interested in the rising tide of settler anger, and the ways in which neoliberalism functions to reinforce settler subjectivities.

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