

RISKY BUSINESS: INDUSTRIAL DISASTER AND THE COST OF ENERGY
EXTRACTION IN LISA MOORE'S *FEBRUARY* AND LEO MCKAY JR.'S *TWENTY-
SIX*

by

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ABSTRACT

Our assumptions about the costs of industrial energy extraction underlie its discourse. Literature can create a space to question the validity of dominant paradigms. Lisa Moore's *February* and Leo McKay Jr.'s *Twenty-six*, through their explorations of the 1982 sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* oil rig and the Westray coal mine explosion respectively, encourage readers to reconsider neo-liberal assertions that energy development is an absolute necessity and serves the common good. Beyond their mimetic representation of disasters, these novels are meditations on the ways in which people from a traditionally "have-not" region negotiate choices within an increasingly globalized, neo-liberal world. Both novels expand the idea of risk from that of individuals in dangerous workplaces to the more far-reaching impacts that energy development has on the places we live. They invite consideration of the degree to which we are prepared to offer up our home communities to development.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

HMDC	Hibernia Management and Development Company
MP	Member of Parliament
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Bitumen...is a by-product of the culture that enables its production.”

Jon Gordon, *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions*

Our assumptions about the economic, social, and environmental costs of energy production, and our willingness, or unwillingness, to accept these costs form the foundation of the discourse about energy extraction operations. As Jon Gordon contends in his recent monograph about the Alberta Oil Sands, *Unsustainable Oil: Facts, Counterfactuals and Fictions*, literature has the potential to “interrupt the relentless justifications of and for the status quo” (XXII). Because literature calls upon readers to imagine and inhabit alternate realities, and to accommodate new ideas, it requires us to risk our orientation to the *status quo*. Gordon suggests that literature does not push us towards any particular meaning but offers space, or a “pause for thought” to encourage scrutinizing what is presented as scientific fact (XXII). The place of literature, Gordon contends, is to interrupt dominant messages and, by offering other ways of thinking, to provide space in which to imagine other realities. It allows readers space to question the “truth” of the dominant paradigm (XXVIII).

Lisa Moore’s 2009 novel, *February*, and Leo McKay Jr.’s 2003 novel, *Twenty-six*, offer up just such an opportunity. Through their explorations of two very real industrial disasters these novels invite questions about the value of place within neo-liberal paradigms of energy extraction. *February* focuses on the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* oil rig, which went down in the Hibernia oil field off the east coast of Newfoundland in February 1982. All 84 men aboard were lost. *Twenty-six* presents a

fictionalized account of the 1992 explosion at the Westray Coal mine in Pictou County, Nova Scotia which killed all 26 men underground.¹ Beyond their mimetic representation of real industrial disasters in the late twentieth century in Atlantic Canada, these novels share further commonalities. Both were published years after the disasters they describe and well after official inquiries presented “the facts” of the disasters and made their recommendations. Thus, these novels are not exposés meant to spark specific reforms in labour law or political stances, nor are they are laments for lost workers. Rather, they are moving, imaginative meditations on the ways in which people from a traditionally “have-not” region define and negotiate their choices within an increasingly globalized world shaped by neoliberal thought.

Neoliberalism presupposes that “private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” are the key to well-being (Harvey 22). Nation states do not interfere with commerce beyond ensuring the free flow of capital across borders and the privatizing of all resources and services (Harvey 22-3).² For neoliberals, trade dominates all concerns. In an era where everything is valued in economic terms and everything is for sale, land and water and seabed become the purview of capital. Place is

¹ McKay sets his explosion four years earlier in 1988. He uses the fictional name Albion Mines for Stellarton and the fictional Eastyard Mine for Westray Mine. All characters’ names are fictionalized. McKay changes the names of several bars and businesses but most of the landmarks are represented factually. Street names are preserved, as is the neighbourhood name, Red Row.

² Harvey argues that neoliberalism has become hegemonic through its appeals to the common sense idea that liberty and freedom are good things. He tracks the ascendancy of neoliberalism through the IMF, the WTF, and through most of the world’s nation states. While he notes the uneven geographical development of neoliberalism, he contends that it has “swept across the world like a vast tidal wave of institutional reform and discursive adjustment” (23). Foucault deftly notes that where classical liberalism focused on market exchange, neoliberalism concentrates on competition (qtd. in Huber 229). Exchange maximizes the value of resources but competition concentrates profits. In his 1978-79 lectures Foucault foresaw that “in an ideal neoliberal society...the ‘enterprise form’ will dominate the social body” (qtd. In Huber 229).

displaced; cultural significance is suffused by economic imperatives. These central traits of neoliberalism and their creep into cultural assumptions threaten the idea of home.

How are people to respond to economic opportunities that carry with them the assumptions inherent in neoliberal thinking? To what degree must people internalize neoliberal values so as to allow their participation in the new economic order? And when is the cost of development too high? How do people inhabit a place that has been chosen to provide energy for the wider world? Paying particular attention to the obvious physical risk at the center of these two novels, this thesis addresses these questions and uses them to consider how Moore and McKay help us to better understand the less visible, more insidious risks of adopting the assumptions that accompany modern energy development.³ After all, risk implies potential gain; the calculated risk of accepting dangerous employment is predicated on the belief that disaster will likely *not* occur. Supposing no disasters, is development worth the cost? In exploring such questions, Moore and McKay address the broader risks of living with the fundamental changes in the world of work increasingly defined by the pressure of neo-liberal assumptions. Both novels expand the notion of risk from the dangerous workplaces that lead to highly visible disaster, to the more far-reaching impact that energy development in a globalized world has on the places we live.

Non-fiction accounts of the two disasters make clear that the Westray coal mine and the *Ocean Ranger* (known colloquially to workers in the Hibernia oil field as the *Ocean Danger*) were notoriously hazardous. Inquiries from both disasters produced

³ I am addressing two human, workplace disasters. I have not addressed environmental disaster which is the focus of much new work in the field of petro culture. Of sources used here, see Gordon and see Barrett, Worden, and Stoekl for example.

reams of evidence of flagrant disregard for the safety of the workers. In the wake of disaster people are pressed to ask how such appalling conditions were tolerated. That workers wanted the work is the simple answer but our living with inordinate risk deserves closer, more piercing examination. How do we, in Atlantic Canada, envision our orientation in the global business environment? Moore and McKay ask the reader to consider the significance of our idea of history and place in a world of borderless mega-business. With this in mind, I begin by looking at conceptions of Atlantic Canada and the questions these novels encourage about the different ways we understand locality and the meanings we have constructed around it. Looking at local lore and its meanings suggests multiple ways we understand the present. In the aftermath of disaster both novels suggest that neo-liberal thought can be viewed as less reliable and less meaningful than folklore. That a surfeit of energy serves the public good, that we must download risk to workers in order to preserve capitalist profit, are assertions that deserve pause for thought. I will look at how these neo-liberal assertions are treated in these two novels and how Moore and McKay encourage a broader, more critical view of presented “facts.” I will look particularly at how the novels question the individualization of risk, the internalization of capitalist assumptions, and the implications of the government position in overseeing safety. How are we changed by negotiating with the risk of energy development and how are our places changed through the on-going integration of old and new, local and global? In managing the false division between work and life, how much of our conception of place can be risked in order to maintain what is most valuable about this place?

Chapter 2: Constructions of Time and Place

In his book, *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*, Herb Wyile lays the foundation for the study of how Atlantic Canadian writers respond to neo-liberalism. He outlines how, since confederation, capitalist interests and government policy have led to the economic underdevelopment of Atlantic Canada and how this pattern of marginalization has been exacerbated in recent decades by neo-liberalism (239). He demonstrates how Atlantic writers have engaged and subverted the disempowering trope of happy, pre-industrial fisher Folk by constructing narratives less focused on struggle against nature and more against industry and globalization. Wyile poses questions of the value of place and the cost of capital seeking to extract profit without committing to place. Wyile opens up several questions I build on here. He argues that Lisa Moore's *February*, in reminding us that no one knows what happened in the last hours on the *Ocean Ranger*, foregrounds the disaster's unknowability and therefore the essential place of imaginative reconstruction. By highlighting this unknowability she encourages us to meditate on, rather than erase, the experience (80). I will build on this idea both by looking more closely at *February* and in extending the idea to Leo McKay's *Twenty-six*.

Wyile introduces the concept of risk and looks at how danger is defined by social and economic factors (66). Wyile addresses the question of risk in the workplace and the conundrums that surround accepting, or at least accommodating, dangerous working conditions under neo-liberal standards. I will expand on Wyile's work by introducing the work of several disaster studies theorists who examine the downloading of risk onto workers and its implications for hegemonic acceptance of new assumptions by

government and workers. Also I will look more closely at how Moore and McKay approach the process of internalization of new ideas and how they encourage us to scrutinize, re-evaluate, and re-imagine the *status quo*. Wylie considers the commodification of the Atlantic provinces as a starting point for his work on globalization (29). He draws on the work of Ian McKay, as I do here. To begin, I will look at the two novels under study through the lens of Ian McKay's work to demonstrate how both Lisa Moore and Leo McKay work with conceptions of place—how they view the history of their localities and the relationship of these historical narratives to their present.

What assumptions does business bring with it and how are these assumptions insinuated into the societies that host it? Ian McKay, in his seminal study *The Quest of the Folk*, demonstrates how conceptions of place are not solely the product of inhabitants but can be constructed, manipulated, and marketed by others outside the community. Ian McKay addresses this issue of commodification of place by examining the rise of handicraft industries in Nova Scotia and the attendant creation of the idea of quaint, pre-industrial Folk and anti-modern communities for the tourist industry. Ian McKay's work is particularly relevant in his contention that the building of an anti-modern constructed norm undermines our understanding of workers because the idea of hardy Folk "removes any detailed consideration of the structure of power" (298). This not only solidifies the *status quo*, but blocks the formation of alternative responses. He points out that a view of Folk history is not merely selective in what is chosen to represent the past but dictates the possibilities for constructing narratives of the present. Agency in the working population requires a dynamic population rather than a static, passive people who live in pastoral

harmony, rich and poor alike (296). In his parallel study of the development of tourism in Newfoundland, James Overton makes a similar point, arguing that there “is no world untouched by capitalist social relations” (168). Drawing on Overton and Ian McKay, Herb Wylie argues that the novels of Lisa Moore and Leo McKay challenge Folk stereotypes by presenting communities shaped by economic, political, and social development (6). Their communities are not simply leisure spaces but are very much a part of the modern world and struggling to integrate the advantages of development while mitigating the costs.

In Newfoundland, neo-liberal ideologies have worked against income redistribution nationally and have contributed to the decline in resource industries (Wylie 4). International ravaging of the cod stocks and increased reliance on tourism and a resurgent cultural nationalism in the 1970s created a new vision of Newfoundland—branded and marketable. The quaint, the quirky, the hilarious, the tough and resourceful Folk of “The Rock” have become a popular product. With careful attention to the power of such stereotypes, Moore introduces the spectre of Newfoundland culture as though it is both real and unreal, a part of the past both linked and disconnected from the life her protagonist lives. She addresses the weight that Newfoundland’s past has for her characters. Protagonist Helen O’Mara sees this imagined world as distant; as with most people anywhere, her concerns are with the present. Remembering her husband, Cal, who dies on the *Ocean Ranger*, she reports that:

Cal liked to drive by dilapidated old houses around the bay, with rippled glass in the windows and a storm door....the long grass and the root cellar. He felt an affinity for silvered wood and cobwebs and the battered suitcase under the feather bed with old receipts written by hand and spelled wrong. (117-8)

Helen is happy to follow Cal in any enthusiasm but she speaks of this world as utterly separate from her own. It certainly does not define her. Thus, Moore both reminds the reader of our created conceptions of Newfoundland and highlights the artificiality of a romanticized picture of the past. Years after Cal's death, when Helen gets to know Barry, the carpenter, she discovers, with pleasure, that he "built a boat alongside his father" (145): "Helen found it very Old World and romantic. But this was not the old world. Or, they still lived in the old world but it was not romantic" (145). Here Moore alludes to the central problem that Ian McKay addresses: economic context must be erased for romance (I. McKay 12). A man building a boat with his son, skills passed down through generations, hardy independent fishers—Helen sees this outside their current reality.⁴ In Helen's modern world, this is no longer how people learn or practice trades, rather people get jobs from employers.

However, Helen is not simply dismissive of Newfoundland folklore; her response is far more nuanced. The lore of the past both connects and severs her from a collective sense of Newfoundland history. Moore calls up folklore beliefs on two separate occasions to demonstrate its value. At the mass for the *Ocean Ranger* families—who were insane with hope that there were survivors—Moore insists on the significance of folklore: "the lore is that hope can bring lost sailors home. That's the lore. Hope can raise the dead if you have enough of it" (13). As a grieving widow, Helen knows that hope cannot raise the dead, and yet she receives the story as a consolation, one that articulates shared

⁴ The Rooms museum in St. John's offers this romance in most of their historical exhibits. They present isolated pieces of material culture meant to recall the pre-industrial outport. Fishing-related tools and artifacts are labelled and explained and displayed behind glass but social context is absent. A single sentence is provided to acknowledge the cod fishery's highly exploitative truck system which kept Newfoundlanders in poverty and in perpetual debt. For a sample exhibits, see www.therooms.ca.

experience and a sense of continuity through loss. Helen understands that this is a story from a manufactured ideal of the past rather than a literal truth. What connects to this constructed lore is her desperate desire to believe in hope despite empirical evidence denying its possibility. This desire, this experience, is more meaningful to her than cold facts at the time of crisis. Although the story is not true, the emotion behind it is authentic. The value of the lore is that, in this time of crisis, it speaks to the emotional rather than the empirical reality.

Moore's second example demonstrating the significance of folklore involves young John's experiences of the folkloric Old Hag. John, whose life is defined by globalized trends, tastes, fashions, and mega-business in a world apparently untouched by the past, remembers being visited by the Old Hag as a child in the years following his father's death. Moore's description of the Old Hag's visitation reads like a folklore text. John was accosted by an:

evil presence, in the form of a cloud, wet and cold. It swirled over his bed...and settled on his chest.... Then the cloud took on the form of a naked old woman who squeezed her hands over his throat. He'd feel himself suffocate....An old woman whose face changed shape; or sometimes there was no face, but she climbed on top of him anyway. (92-3)

Placing John's experience within the larger tradition, the school counsellor tells John how his symptoms parallel those commonly described by outport fishermen. The counsellor also describes the traditional cure: people hammered multiple long nails through a board and strapped the board to their chest, nails outward, to keep the Old Hag off. The counsellor is clear in his instruction to John that "it was folklore; it wasn't true. Nobody really used a hag board...but the old folks talked about it" (93). He reports that the museum, which collects artifacts of the *real* past, had a hag board built, presumably

because no real example existed. The counsellor does not talk to John about sleep paralysis, the documented phenomena that is responsible for this experience.⁵ The counsellor validates young John's experience and connects it to Newfoundland tradition. But he is clear that purported old remedies are not applicable to modern circumstances; they may not have been applicable ever.

In both the belief in hope having the power to save sailors and in the Old Hag, the lore is untrue yet the experience of feelings is meaningful. The hope family members feel and the night panic John feels are important. Experience is meaningful even when the facts are not verifiable. Through her treatment of Folk culture, Moore sets this dichotomy against the "fact" that the rig is safe, that the company is concerned with safety, that the government is regulating safety in the industry. In doing so, she also subverts the idyllic view of the Folk, pointing to the reality that past generations suffered from powerlessness that was no less terrifying than Helen's.

Moore's calling up of folklore contrasts with Leo McKay's invocation of an industrial labour tradition. Leo McKay attacks the notion of the rustic Folk with a vengeance. The trope of the bucolic fishing villages peopled by pre-industrial, oilskin-clad fishermen that Ian McKay posits as the iconic Nova Scotia image is nowhere to be seen. Rather, Leo McKay sets his novel solidly in the context of unionized industrial labour and their battles through the twentieth century. This industrial narrative contains the elements of class awareness and conflict that are typically bypassed in favour of the

⁵ While the Old Hag is a well-known phenomenon in Newfoundland folklore, sleep paralysis stories have been collected from all over the world with remarkably consistent descriptions of a frightening person (witch, devil, old woman) climbing onto the chest and restricting breathing during the night (Bower 27). New research has linked PTSD, stress, and panic attacks to sleep paralysis (Bower 28). See also Owen Davies. Moore implies that John's sleep paralysis is a symptom of his traumatic grief.

simple, sanitized images of fishing and farming Folk.⁶ In *Twenty-six*, the Burrows family has two sons in their 20s who get the opportunity to work in the new coalmine: the older boy, Ziv, quits the mine after only one shift and his younger brother, Arvel, stays and is ultimately killed in the explosion. Ziv had “grown up with the myth and lore of the Pictou County coalfield, and that lore was about nothing if it was not about injury, perilous danger, and violent death” (265). Indeed, from its early mining days Pictou County held the dubious distinction of being the most dangerous coalfield among nations that kept accident statistics.⁷ For Ziv, that he is “a descendant of coal miners,” is central to his sense of self (5). Yet this mining lore is about bygone days. Ziv himself, has no access to a self-defining job. His connection to mining is a connection to an idea that no longer has an expression in the real world.

Ennis Burrows, the patriarch of the family, is a long-time union organizer and a dedicated labour supporter. The novel lays out the enormous impact of the labour movement on workers’ lives and the benefits it brought to the county in the twentieth century, but it also shows how labour’s power was undercut by the economic shifts of the 1980s. In the expanding post-war economy unionized workers achieved the comfortable living standards that had once connoted white collar work. But benefits transcended the

⁶ As Ian McKay points out, this representation of Nova Scotians as independent fishers and farmers is not only highly selective, but counterfactual. Pictou County has a long history of industrial labour, particularly in coal mining and a long tradition of an active labour movement. Even before the establishment of the Provincial Workmen’s Association (the first miners’ union in NS), the miners acted collectively to address questions of safety, wages, and control of work tasks. Miners took control of the Albion Mine in Stellarton in 1876, for example, when “the pits [were] occupied by miners and the whole community united against [the management]” (MacLeod, 235). Stellarton was home to the *Trades Journal*, the official publication of the miners’ union. Unionism developed along with the mining industry with the United Mine Workers taking over representing Nova Scotia miners after 1917 (MacIntosh 45).

⁷ In 1899, 3.6 accidents/1000 workers gave Pictou County the worst record. However this figure was down from an earlier high of 4.08/1000 (MacLeod 226).

material goods; the attachment to workplace provided stability and with it a sense of personal identity and position within their workplace community. Ziv observes that, “In his father’s day people were defined by their work” (6) and that work was defined by the power struggles between labour and management. For sons, Ziv and Arvel, minimum wage and temporary, part-time jobs have taken the place of unionized industrial work. Neither Ziv nor Arvel have steady work around which to build identities. They have no permanent situations or workmates. Ziv, who works at Zellers is classified as an “*extra*, a category that all but a handful of the people who worked at the store fit into” (6). Even the job description declares the ephemeral attachment between employer and worker. Ziv does not invest himself in the job and the company does not invest in him; he has no benefits, pension, or reliable schedule. Ziv never mentions his relationships with other workers and gives no indication of work culture other than hinting at an underlying, fragmented desperation. Arvel’s position is perhaps worse in that he lacks even the little stability Ziv has. Although he is a qualified electrician he seldom finds work in his trade. He recognizes how devalued he is and that “the sort of work that had been sustaining him was economic table scraps” which makes him “no better than a dog whose owner doesn’t care enough to buy it its own food” (244). When the sons are goaded by their father to change a situation they cannot control, Arvel asks, “Who are today’s young people going to threaten with a strike? The unemployment office? Their social worker? The parents they’re living off?”(264). The ravages of a new balance of power in the labour market and the fragmentation of the workforce have left the sons feeling powerless and without an identity attached to their work.

Ennis's restricted, pre-globalized view of market forces blinds him to the changes in the world of work. Ennis sees his own dedication and hard work and the fruits of that labour thus:

His union work had put upward pressure on the wage market....People he knew, living in Red Row houses they'd grown up in, had gone from having no sewage or running water, to owning camper trailers to take their vacations in.... He knew people who'd been afflicted with the complications of malnutrition in childhood who now had plastic hip joints that the health-care system had paid for in full (26).

But Ennis ignores the expanding post-war economy that made this possible and blames his sons for their inability to find steady work in the new globalized world of Mc-jobs. Not only does he not see the fundamental shifts in power in the labour market, he also fails to appreciate that labour strength was highly dependent on the strength of markets, on supply, demand, and price throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that periods of strength were followed by losses for reasons beyond worker control. Seeking solace in his own simplified, idealized version of the past, Ennis fails to appreciate that, for Ziv and Arvel, mining represents a past narrative that does not reflect the realities of contemporary work where globalization and recession strip power from organized labour. Ennis has constructed his own lore around trade unionism.

By engaging with lore, both Leo McKay and Lisa Moore call up questions of different types of knowledge. Narratives that are meaningful without being provable challenge official analysis of the disasters. Without depicting their characters as Folk Innocents or fatalists, both writers point to other ways of knowing. For Moore particularly, this is key. The instinctive "knowing" that hope can save lives is demonstrably untrue. But the scientific approach to knowledge advocated by the company turns out to be just as unreliable. The men on the rig were afraid but the

company says “that was only intuition” and the company “strongly advised against intuition” (118). Allegedly empirical data provided by the company turns out to be no more accurate and is shown to be simply a different narrative—one serving corporate interests.⁸ Helen’s imagining of the men’s final night, while imperfect and ultimately unknowable, is what allows her to move on with her life. Her son John, who has a photographic memory and excellent face recognition and recall, knows that these skills only look like intelligence. For John “[s]mart was about intuition....the answer came via a different route.... The answer came in the back door while you were cooking or even while you slept” (135). Intuition is connected with emotions and imagination rather than empirically verifiable facts. And it is, Moore suggests, this kind of knowledge that is most valuable. Similarly, for Leo McKay’s Ziv it is fear (what Moore’s oil representatives call intuition) that saves him. He is afraid of entering the mine on a tractor with an internal combustion engine because he knows “the dangers of bringing flammable materials into the mine” are “part of the lore of mining in Pictou County” (270). He recalls a family story about his grandfather accidentally carrying two wooden matches into the mine in his pocket and upon discovering them, his running with the matches “like a live grenade” to submerge them in sump water (270). Ziv distrusts whatever modern science may have developed that enables a sparking engine to operate in a gassy seam. Ziv puts his faith in family lore over modern information from the company. The mining company has no narrative, no history, no attachment to place beyond the coal they are extracting for profit and this isolates them from anything *except*

⁸ During the 1988 *Piper Alpha* oil rig disaster in Britain’s North Sea the men who disregarded prescribed safety procedures and sought out their own escape routes from the onboard fire were much more likely to have been among the 61 survivors. Those who complied with protocols were among the 167 killed (Whyte 182).

scientific knowledge refracted through the profit motive. Despite dreading telling his father that he has passed up the opportunity for a permanent job, Ziv relies on his instincts and quits before he has completed his first tour of the mine. Arvel continues to work in the mine despite what he knows, and he is killed in the explosion.

Dodd argues that the official story of the disaster which is produced through the inquiries must follow a rigid “shock-forensics-action narrative” (*Ocean* 147). The power of art lies in its drawing its authority from feeling. As a result it can unsettle us through our empathic engagement rather than our intellect (*Ocean* 147-8). Inquiry reports offer basic information that serve as starting points. Leo McKay uses details that are reported in the inquiry report but, just as Moore leaves the actual sinking of the rig in enigmatic silence, McKay also leaves the blast unwritten. By approaching the blast through the experience of multiple characters above ground who feel the earth shake, McKay highlights the unknowability of the blast and its separateness from life above ground. We must imagine. Both novelists challenge the authority of the official versions of the disasters produced in the inquiry reports by broadening the experience that can be tapped, by representing a truth that cannot be quantified or verified, only imagined or intuited.

In his book *Speculative Fictions*, Wyile argues that while historical fiction is often presumed to be mimetic, it can also challenge accepted wisdom and question the veracity of historical record. For Wyile, narratives set in the past are “undeniably increasingly speculative” (xii). The linking of the local history and culture, presented within a framework of lore, suggests a malleable, constructed truth. The Newfoundland lore of the outports and the Pictou County lore of the miners opens the reader to questioning the source and relative value of information. Posing questions about the place of imagination

and intuition and different ways of knowing prepares the reader to question assumptions of society at large. What roles are various narratives playing? Certainly the “truths” as presented by the energy companies are called into question. Both Moore and McKay encourage readers to look more closely at the underlying assumptions from which the energy companies operate. What narratives underlie the growth of neo-liberal assumptions and how are these assumptions internalized or rejected? I will look now at some of the assumptions that accompany oil development. While the Westray coal mine benefitted from the neo-liberal business environment, oil development more clearly illustrates the force of narrative on culture. Modern petro-culture comes with its own lore that has gained hegemonic ascendance.

Chapter 3: Ideas of Energy and Risk

Over the past two decades there has been a proliferation in academic work looking at oil production and its place as a cultural force in North America (Barrett and Worden 20). By deconstructing the hegemonic assumptions about oil and its centrality to modern life, scholars have identified ways that oil is married to individualism, privatization, and perceptions of prosperity. They have traced the origins of the narrative that posits an over-abundance of oil as essential for modern living, that sets the production of oil squarely in the realm of public good, and that celebrates the individual over community concerns. Frederick Buell argues that the properties of oil extraction contribute to its integration into this cultural narrative (281).⁹ Jennifer Wenzel, elaborating on what she terms “petro-magic,” notes how the geography of oil is integrated with the imagining of the nation state (214): in her study of Nigeria she argues that illusions of great wealth achieved with relatively little effort shapes national identity in that the land itself produces a miracle that anoints its people. The alluring promise of easy money, however, masks the destruction of environment and the dislocation of local populations. Although she writes about Nigeria, North American parallels are apparent. For Newfoundland, the discovery of the Hibernia oil field brought with it great hopes for wealth. On a provincial level oil would provide the road to riches. At the level of the individual, there were an estimated 13,000 men looking for the 1,000 jobs development

⁹ Looking at Edwin Drake’s original oil strike in Pennsylvania in 1859, Buell notes that oil came to the surface with relative ease. Oil drilling required only a small team of specialized workers, and compared to coal mines, a drilling platform required little capital to establish. The exuberance of the oil strike is an iconic American image which encapsulates the idea of a few daring, ambitious, and lucky men striking it rich—the rugged individual achieves the American dream. The enterprising, self-reliant oil prospector, Buell argues, represents a resurgence of the hero ideology and weds oil development to the triumph of individualism (281).

would bring (House 44). Oil rig jobs paid more than twice what a labourer might otherwise expect and the 3-week-on, 3-week-off schedule provided much more time off than most other jobs that took men away from home.¹⁰ *February* reflects the ethos of the bonanza of striking oil and the free-for-all attitude of development for both the company and the workers. As Helen says, the company “asked the public to consider the overall good to be achieved.... what they meant was: If you don’t do the job, we’ll give it to someone who will....They meant: There’s money to be made....We will develop the economy....there isn’t any risk so shut the fuck up about it” (118). Cal and the other men who get the jobs express their sense of random luck at their turn of fortune. Cal “just happened to be in the Harvey Road office at the right time” (119). Cal and Helen’s money problems disappear with the rig job; they buy a house in town and another around the bay. The sense of the frontier is prevalent in the hyper-masculine, rugged individual work culture. Safety concerns are seen as old-womanish. Men are expected to work through injury: “The men broke bones or lost a finger. That was common. They were expected to keep on working if it was just a bad sprain or a minor break” (97).

Similarly in *Twenty-six*, development arrives like a bonanza. The same sense of lottery pervades the hiring in Albion Mines despite the resource being coal rather than oil.¹¹ In Pictou County, the provincial government and the company boasted of creating 250 good jobs with men earning almost three times minimum wage (Jobb 4, 14). Westray, the Premier declared, was to be “a truly good project for the people” (Jobb 17).

¹⁰ For example, the men on the fishing trawlers worked 10 days on and 2 days off. Men on the Great Lakes boats would be gone for most of the year.

¹¹ Buell sets oil production in contrast to coal; oil is new, quick, easy and individualistic while coal was old, slow, and needed hordes of workers. This view is reflected in the historical coal mining lore of Pictou County but it is far from the modern reality of highly mechanized mining with shifts of only 26 men operating industrial miners. For an analysis of the change in energy paradigms see Buell 281-4.

Twenty-six reflects the same kind of lottery feeling; Arvel knew “he’d be one of thousands...applying for a few dozen jobs” (245). Furthermore, Arvel knows that any “workplace with that much government money tied up in it would be clogged up with political bumlickers” (245) and he expects “Tory Youth” (246) will make up the workforce. Only the favored will get this chance at good, steady work. *Twenty-six* reflects the same frontier work culture we see in *February*, where production is all and safety is for whiners. In the face of unsupported roofs and rock falls, high methane levels and machines gassing out, built up coal dust and garbage in the tunnels, the workers have no recourse except to complain to the underground manager. His consistent response to yell at them, call them lazy and worthless, and order them to “get the Jesus down there and get producing coal or [they’re] all Jesus fired” (73).

The neo-liberal valuing of the individual over the collective or public responsibility are intertwined with oil development. Huber argues that the roots of the neo-liberal attitudes of the 1970s and 1980s are to be found in the postwar economy where intense investment in suburban infrastructure accompanied growing privatization (229).¹² Oil production was diverted from the war economy to create and meet consumer demand. Roads, cars, detached homes in suburbs (with petro-chemical siding), fostered the idea of successful families each living in their own private sphere.¹³ Oil was seen as

¹² The American government underwrote a huge expansion in hydrocarbon “cracking” facilities during WWII. This process of “cracking” heavy crude produces both high octane fuel (necessary for airplanes) and olefins which are by-products necessary for making plastics. In the post-war economy, production of gasoline and plastics, rather than being curtailed, were directed towards the consumer economy (Huber 232-3).

¹³ Private homeowners began to run households like businesses where successful lives resulted from good decisions (Huber 230). With what Evan McKenzie terms the “ideology of hostile privatism” white suburban families became increasingly suspicious of taxes and income redistribution (qtd. in Huber 229). While suburban families expected investment in suburban infrastructure, government programs

foundational to the infrastructure and products that underlay the lives of the prosperous middle class family. Prosperity, free choice, and independence all depended on oil. By the 1970s and the rise of neo-liberalism where the notion of the indispensability of oil had become hegemonic. Huber notes that while Americans make up only 4% of the world's population they burn a quarter of the world's oil. He marvels at the success of a narrative that the American way of life absolutely depends on unlimited availability of oil. Not only oil production, but the profligate use of oil, has become normalized (238-9).

If oil consumption is linked to prosperity and supports individualism then it makes common sense that oil development serves the common good. Indeed this meets Gramsci's definition of common sense as "the incoherent set of generally held assumptions and belief common to any society" (qtd. in Daldal 153). Jon Gordon challenges the assertion that oil extraction serves the common good—that oil is not only necessary for society to continue but extraction actively *benefits* society. For him, this contention is our central problem (XXXVI). The cultural narrative that oil extraction benefits everyone is an attractive one in North American society because of its simplicity and its positivity. But this narrative ignores, in fact denies, the disastrous effects extraction has on the localities where it takes place. Development brings with it economic benefits but with it comes environmental costs and dangerous jobs. In the face of these downsides, the need for oil requires that certain localities must be sacrificed to the overall common good (Gordon 34). The needs of the many, the urban, the global trump those of

supporting low income (often Black, inner-city) people were increasingly viewed as handouts to those who had made poor life choices.

the few, the rural, and the local (Gordon 34). But for the residents of the localities affected, how are they to balance the narrative of the common good with the realities of their own loss?

February, and to a lesser extent *Twenty-six*, engage with questions about the wider narrative of energy development and its impact on the local community. In *February*, Moore uses an advertising executive to present the image of oil extraction that the industry wants to propagate. She designs her campaign around the idea that oil extraction serves the common good; it represents prosperity for all, and this wealth is the ultimate goal for all. Helen's grown son, John O'Mara, is listening to this newly hired advertising executive describing her idea to promote offshore drilling on a global scale. The ads, she says, will be:

specifically indigenous, acutely indigenous, showing high-powered cocktail parties, parties on rooftops, beach parties...just very, very international, speaking to that thing, that ethnic thing, that thing, connectedness. Zoom, we're in Thailand; zoom, we're in Alaska; zoom. Nigeria...the camera flits all over the world...this is everybody partying together....The thingies, the derricks or whatever, the rigs on the ocean fade to silhouette. Music, of course, something Wagnerian (224).

What connects people, according to her, is partying—in different ways, in different venues—but with everyone enjoying the economic benefits of oil extraction. What the company wants to sell is the idea that oil extraction for the greater good, the public good, is identified as the aim of the development carried out by energy companies.

Development produces prosperity for people all over the world. Risk to people and the environment are insignificant next to the benefits for all—they are not part of the picture. These risks, however have not dissipated but have been isolated, sheared off from the business of energy production as far as possible. Another of Moore's energy executives

(working for John's employer, Shoreline Group) directly connects this narrative of prosperity and the greater good with costs related to high safety standards. He claims that what he terms "redundant safety procedures," work against "the general good for communities at large, and profit margins, and there [are] stakeholders to consider" (139).

In *Twenty-six*, coal extraction cannot have the same appeal as oil in terms of its value to overall societal good. Unlike oil, Pictou County coal is both mined and burned (to make electricity) in the county, not exported.¹⁴ The public good is presented by Leo McKay as a highly fragmented concept. Provincial and federal governments are repeatedly portrayed as pressing their own murky agendas. While jobs are needed, the company is always portrayed as acting only in its own interest. For Ennis, it is organized labour, not industry, which is responsible for advancing the public good. The question posed for Ennis and his sons is, in an era of advancing neo-liberalism where labour influence is eroded, who is protecting the common good? That safety is sacrificed for company profit is clear. When Gavin, an experienced miner from out West, draws up a list of safety improvements needed and finally gets a meeting with the general manager of the mine, the manager ignores the list and "puffed up with confidence after the failure of the certification vote" (72), he tells Gavin to quit if he doesn't like the way the mine is run. In the age of neo-liberalism the company simply abrogates risk to the workers—personal safety is the workers' problem. The company's job is to make money.

¹⁴ Some attempts were made to appeal to the greater good on behalf of Pictou County coal. Environmental arguments were used to justify developing the Westray Mine. At the time when acid rain was a concern, Pictou County coal was held up as more environmentally friendly because of its lower sulphur content in relation to the Cape Breton coal that would otherwise have been burned at the Trenton power plant (Jobb 11).

Both Moore and McKay bring together the concepts of profit and risk. As risk theorists point out, for industry, risk is measurable, calculable, and insurable; it opens the door to investment (Dannreuther and Lekki 576). Risk is both diluted by calculating statistics from multiple similar worksites globally, and concentrated by fixing it in the control of actuaries and accountants (Dannreuther and Lekki 576). Once risk calculation is moved into the hands of accountants it is divorced from its human implications and managing risk is a technical, not a moral endeavor (O'Malley 190-91).¹⁵ Risk is managed through numbers and is controlled and monitored from a distance, unconnected to specific people or places. With risk management seen as part of operating expenses, it is seen in opposition to profit. What makes workers less efficient detracts from profit (O'Malley 196). Efficiency becomes the watchword. O'Malley explores the concept of prudentialism whereby, in the neo-liberal model, "the responsible (moral) and...rational (calculating) individual...will wish to become responsible for the self [and]... will take rational steps to avoid and to insure against risk" (199-200). The efficient downloading of risk onto the individual is thus seen as both a reasonable and moral approach. In this way of thinking, workers should think for themselves and be responsible for their own safety acting in partnership with the company (203). Indeed, Moore's Shoreline executive makes this very point in arguing for reduced safety provisions on the rig. They want "men who can think for themselves" (139). Later, John parrots this company line to his family saying, "the trouble now is a guy doesn't have to think anymore. And this can be a danger" (178). Moore presents the absurdity of neo-liberal thinking in this situation.

¹⁵ In his discussion of neo-liberal politics O'Malley contends that actuarial discourse is used to justify the shrinking of welfare programs provided by governments and to shift attention to efficient operation of governments (195). The same process of working towards efficiency can be observed in industry.

How can removing safety provisions encourage safety? How can disempowered workers control their own safety? Furthermore, the company clearly does *not* want John to think for himself but instead to replicate the lines they feed him. McKay displays the same contradiction through the mine operators' hostility to safety concerns. If the miners want to keep themselves safe they need to do it in ways that do not impact on productivity. In their treatment of safety contradictions on the rig and in the mine, Moore and McKay illuminate two implications of costing out and downloading risk. First is the erroneous idea that labour and capital are equal partners in producing a safe work environment and therefore government oversight simply facilitates their symbiotic relationship. Secondly, both authors address the advantages and costs of internalizing the neo-liberal world view of the employers. Moore and McKay approach these ideas in different ways. While McKay exposes these implications through the eyes of characters with different viewpoints, Moore leaves conspicuous holes in the narrative inviting the reader to consider the questions raised.

Moore leaves the question of government culpability open. Helen turns to the inquiry to ascribe blame. "The Royal Commission said there was a fatal chain of events that could have been avoided but for the inadequate training of personnel, lack of manuals and technical information. And that is the true story. It is the company's fault" (301). The facts of the matter are true and we can look them up. But for Helen the truth as described in a report is not the truth about the important things. She does not enter into debates, even with herself, about fault. She knows that the company is entirely untrustworthy both before and after the accident, and that they constantly engage in doublespeak and misrepresentation. For Helen, the government barely enters the picture.

Her omission leaves the impression that companies as huge as Mobil Oil and ODECO cannot be touched by government; they have replaced government. Eric Tucker, in his work on occupational risk, analyses the contradiction inherent in government regulation. He argues that the contradiction stems from the notion that concern for safety is equally shared by labour and management (297). Because safety is seen to be in industry's best interest, gentle nudging in the right direction should be sufficient; enforcement depends on persuasion (Tucker 283). Failure to recognize the antagonistic relationship between safety and profit (well understood in the field of business management) and the unequal power relations between labour and capital undercuts the watchdog role of government safety inspection.¹⁶ Government inspectors work with management rather than labour to meet standards.¹⁷ Further, government investment in energy development compromises, or is seen to compromise, their neutrality. None of these complications impinge on Helen. The federal government is entirely absent from the novel. Despite the very real infighting between the federal and provincial governments over offshore oil royalties for Newfoundland and the part this may have played in lax safety oversight before the *Ocean Ranger* sinking,¹⁸ Moore's characters rarely invoke governments. *February* leaves the impression that governments are powerless to do anything more than point the finger at

¹⁶See David Cooke's modeling of the lack of safety culture at Westray for the relationship between profit and safety. See David Whyte's excellent study on the 1988 *Piper Alpha* disaster for an analysis of the shortcomings of rig safety provisions. In a study of government safety inspectors working in the offshore oil industry Whyte argues that they shared three fundamental "common sense" assumptions: that cost-cutting was essential to the industry's viability; that profit and safety were not linked; and that labour and industry had a common interest in safety. The oil industry was thus able to establish hegemony with these assumptions widely accepted as truth.

¹⁷ The Occupational Health and Safety inspectors on the North Sea oil rigs work with management because they believe this is where change can most easily be made. Workers who complain to management are sent to the OHS inspectors and the OHS inspectors send them to management (Whyte 198).

¹⁸ For accounts of these disputes and their possible consequences see, for example, Dodd's *The Ocean Ranger: Remaking the Promise of Oil* 8, and O'Neill 153.

the oil companies after the fact. When the provincial government is mentioned (much later and in a labour situation unrelated to the disaster) it is portrayed as so ineffectual as to be almost cute: Helen's sister Louise reports that the province is giving the police riot training because the nurses may go out on strike, but then scoffs, adding, "They do this every year.... Half the cops are married to nurses" (231). She describes the government plan thus: "If the nurses get out of hand they'll hit [them] over the head with those batons they have. I'm here in my car just to watch [the training]. Those horses, Helen, what lovely animals" (231). The provincial government cannot manage its own affairs, has no understanding of its own workers, and cannot learn from experience. For Louise, the provincial government does little more than provide entertainment—and lovely horses.

McKay's characters, however, are much more political. Gavin and Ennis are the most vocal about the implications of government investment in the fictional Eastyard mine; they both have union experience and have seen the implications of the safety/profit trade-off and the government/management relationships. In the case of the real Pictou County Westray mine, there is disagreement in non-fiction sources about the meaning and implications of government financial backing for the mine.¹⁹ For Gavin (the experienced miner from out west who quit after the management refused to address safety issues), this is both a source of the problem and an opportunity to address it. When

¹⁹ Westray received a mixture of loans and guarantees totaling \$12 million from Nova Scotia and \$85 million from the federal government. They also got a 15-year contract to supply Nova Scotia Power with \$200 million worth of coal over 15 years (McCormick 204). Long-time Conservative MP Elmer McKay gave up his Central Nova seat to Brian Mulroney in a by-election for the years 1983-4 when Mulroney was leader of the opposition without a seat. Federal money coming into the riding in the years following 1984 recalled this political debt. Mulroney dismissed any notion of federal government culpability. Donald Cameron was Nova Scotia energy minister when the Westray project was announced and was premier at the time of the explosion. Cameron defended the Nova Scotian government's impartiality in an interview with Dean Jobb in 1994 (295-7).

Arvel comes to him for advice about what to do about the hazardous conditions in the mine Gavin replies, “The federal and provincial governments are into this mine for a hundred million dollars. If a whole shift quit together, you’d have the media doing handsprings in a second” (78). He admits that all the members of the shift would be out of work, however. A couple of weeks after quitting, Gavin meets privately with the visiting provincial mine inspector, who says he can do nothing about the safety infractions. Shortly after the explosion the inspector “retires from the Department of Labour with a full pension” (317). For Gavin, there is no doubt that the inspector is compromised by being an employee of a government that has a financial and political stake in the company. He sees a clear division between worker and capital interests. Safety is not approached as a shared responsibility but a matter of expense versus profit.

For Ennis, government support for capital at the expense of workers is a systemic problem. But before the disaster he speaks with confidence about labour law and the advances made in it and with it over the past fifty years. Before the disaster he believes that the unionization of the mine is inevitable. Yes, companies try to prevent unionization and the government needs to be kept in line but labour law gives workers the tools to achieve what they need. In response to his friend’s declaration that the government will keep the unions out of Eastyard Ennis declares, “it’s not the government’s decision.... You don’t know shit about labour law” (24). For Ennis, “Unions are just an extension of democracy into the workplace” (23). His friend counters with evidence of the government’s willingness to quash labour by citing the passing of the notoriously anti-

labour “Michelin Bill” which infuriates Ennis.²⁰ After the mine disaster Ennis is silenced, both literally and figuratively. In the hospital with his jaw wired shut, a TV shot of the prime minister at the televised memorial service for the dead miners enrages him: “This was the bastard who’d tried to buy votes by setting up the mine in the first place” (214). The disaster demonstrates to Ennis the extent to which the power of working people has been undermined by the coalition of capital and government. He recognizes the degree to which power shifts have occurred and the degree to which workers’ control has been eroded.

More insidious than the abrogation of safety responsibility and the downloading of risk is the internalization of the underlying assumptions that result in risk’s individuation. Leo McKay demonstrates how Arvel and Ziv suffer from their father’s attitudes and how Arvel’s internalization of his father’s world view keeps him working the mine that ultimately kills him. On the other side of the political spectrum, Ennis is so committed to labour theory that he is unable to see the very real changes that have occurred in the economy. He is unable to see that the advancements of labour in the postwar years had as much to do with economic circumstances as with pressure exerted by organized labour. Both Moore and McKay present workers with internalized low self-worth as a result of living in economically depressed areas. They both portray cultures of shut-up-and-work. Given the history of economic hardship in Atlantic Canada and the recessionary years of the 1980s and early 90s it is not surprising to see workers in weak

²⁰ Bill 98, popularly known as the ‘Michelin Bill’, is the 1979 amendment to the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act which requires all factories belonging to the same company in the same industry to be unionized at the same time. Michelin workers in their three Nova Scotia plants (Bridgewater, Granton, and Waterville) can only be unionized as a whole and not on a plant-by-plant basis. The challenging requirement of three simultaneous union drives has successfully kept the unions out of Michelin.

negotiating positions. However, accommodating to reality and internalizing it are different things entirely.

While McKay's portrayal of low self-worth is fairly straight-forward, Moore presents an intimate picture of the moment Helen's son, John, internalizes a worldview that is ultimately detrimental to him and the community at large. Through the crucial job interview scene where John is offered an executive position in Shoreline Group, a company working to scale back safety procedures for oil companies, Moore explores the question of how he comes to accept the neo-liberal assumptions of the oil companies. I will look closely at this scene to isolate some of the questions Moore encourages us to consider about adopting the neo-liberal ideas that drive development.

John does not suddenly decide to work against rig safety. Moore gives a fragmented history of John's gradual slide into the industry. At first John's work life up to this point (he is 32) is understandable through Helen's journey. Helen wants to understand what Cal's death is like and, because the last hours are unknowable, she must imagine them. For John, his journey to know his father's experience involves working in the oil industry. He is both attracted to following his father's path and repelled by fear. He begins in Fort McMurray where he learns to inspect tanks for fissures. This job, John thinks, has "an added advantage: you were doing something for the environment" (131). He claims he wanted to make a difference, thinks "maybe [the job] had integrity, reporting to watch groups...telling it like it is" (134). But then he augments this motivation with a more personal motive: he kept the job "because he wanted to stay off the water" (134). He does not seek opportunities outside the oil industry. Moore invites us to consider John's selective vision. John's past has narrowed his sense of possibility.

We see him wrestling with a need to replicate, and through this to perhaps understand, his father's experience. Once he is inside the oil business, however, he stops seeing options outside the business. As a result of his mother's and his girlfriend's encouragement he earns an engineering degree but he does not use the degree to leave the industry. He sells oil drill bits. Then he takes a labouring job on an offshore rig—the job that killed his father. Before he can fly out to the rig he must pass a safety course that requires him to kick his way out of a submerged simulated helicopter. He must endure this torture repeatedly as he keeps passing out before he completes the exercise. Through this we see the complexity of his personal need to experience his father's workplace yet his resistance to it. He is surrounded by the ethos of oil as he tries to understand it. Extricating himself from the industry is increasingly difficult.

We learn about John's work history during the job interview scene. Throughout the scene the larger world intrudes on his personal decision. Through the office windows reflections of St. John's and the ocean impose themselves on office surfaces. The local and the foreign blur to the degree that neither is distinct. Everything John hears and sees distracts his attention from the decision he is about to make or perhaps already has made. Red McPherson, the interviewer, makes it clear, by saying the opposite (that their company, the Shoreline Group, is "an independent arm" of the oil companies) that the company's business is making reduced safety practices look legitimate (136). The company is impartial, Red assures John. From this point on John understands that much of what is being said to him is untrue, or involves a particular skewing of the perception and careful selectivity of facts. His continuing to stand in the office, understanding what he will be asked to do, feels to him like an acceptance of the company's offer. At this

point, although no one has yet mentioned Cal's death on the *Ocean Ranger* or what this means to the company, John feels "the interview ha[s] turned before he ha[s] the chance to speak" (137). He has not denied the company's claims or challenged their narrative and this, he feels, is sufficient to place him in their camp. Once John goes along with the assertion that the company is impartial he must then assume their world view.

Indeed, from this point on, John's attitude changes. In the earlier part of the interview John distances himself from Red's ideas by ascribing them to Red only: "The unions were getting to be a pain in the ass, according to Red McPherson" (130). John has his own definition of "smart" which differs from Red's. Unlike Red, John understands the various places oil is produced to be different in culturally significant ways. But after the moment where the interview turns, John stops resisting Red's assertions in his mind. He is willing to believe that Shoreline is impressed with his engineering degree. He thinks, "Here [is] a company that [can] appreciate" (137). Now John accepts that places from which oil is extracted are not significantly different and they are not particularly important. It is only once John is securely in oil's camp that price is spoken of. John's authority in promoting the reduction of safety procedures on the rigs, his ability to "hold sway" in this arena, arises from his willingness to uphold the beliefs that set the stage for his father's death. The salary offer is huge; John was expecting a large sum but the offer "was more than he'd imagined and he kept a neutral expression" (140). Through John we see Buell's contention that profligacy in the oil industry has been normalized. The exchange is clear—John will join the new way of thinking and the oil business will make him wealthy.

Moore thus demonstrates the gradual slide into the ethos that enables oil development. She invites us to consider questions about how we internalize the ethos of progress. She puts forth the question of agency: John understands what is happening and how he is being asked to adopt new ways of thinking but appears powerless in the face of the new philosophy. She invites us to question this apparent powerlessness. John is lured to the interview with the expectation of a high salary but accepts the job before he sees the excessive figure being offered. Moore acknowledges that the promise of wealth is part of the lure of oil but does not accept money as the sole contributor. John joins the new world order of excess and of sacrificing the local to the global. He will “hold sway.” In driving oil development, will John destroy the life his father had been seeking to preserve in the first place?

When the O’Mara family is gathered for Helen’s granddaughter’s high school graduation John tries out the company line on the family: “There are safety protocols designed...so the men don’t think....a guy doesn’t have to think any more. And this can be a danger. It’s not good for the industry, the culture that has developed around safety” (175, 178). Helen replies, “Safety is a good thing” (178) followed by an icy silence then verbal scuttling to move the conversation to safer ground. “‘John knows safety is important,’ Cathy assures them” (178). John has equated established safety priorities and protocols with mindlessness so that safety works against safety. John has agreed that what is good for the industry is good for the workers. Accepting these blatant contradictions as fact recalls the folklore that flew in the face of scientific truth but nonetheless served a purpose for those who believed. Here the lore of the company, directed towards profit maximization, is equally unbelievable.

Outside the job interview scene Moore gives no information about John's time on the rig. Without this scene we would not even know that John followed his father's path. Unlike Cal, John does not seek offshore work for lack of other opportunities; he ignores other options and goes to great lengths to qualify for rig work. He remains on the rig for years, working up from roustabout to tool pusher. Yet Helen's response to John's rig work is entirely—and loudly—absent. This omission creates another unknowable space beside the unknowability of Cal's last hours. John's following his father to the rigs in order to understand Cal's death parallels Helen's imagining but in the end John's experiential path is no more successful in uncovering the truth of Cal's death than Helen's imagining of it. John, like Helen, can only imagine Cal's death: "He must have stood on the deck as the rig was tipping...and then he probably jumped. His father would have had all his bones broken if he'd jumped from that height. But he might still have been alive when he hit, John thinks....He had always imagined [he was alive]" (139). The absence of discussion around John's work has broader implications, however. Moore points to what we fail to notice in the course of life. She prompts us to see that John's increasing proximity with the oil industry and his gradual assimilation into the world of oil goes unmarked. John starts monitoring the companies from outside (checking for fissures in tanks), then he moves to serving the industry by selling drill bits, then on the rig he is directly involved in pulling oil up from beneath the ocean. With each job he moves closer to the heart of the industry. The job at Shoreline is by far the most pernicious and John understands this. He will be providing rationalizations for scraping away safety procedures and promoting the idea that oil extraction (for the public good) is more important than the people and places it may damage. Normalizing these ideas has a

far wider-ranging impact than the drilling itself. Through his work he moves from taking on individual risk to propagating the assumptions that exacerbate the risk for everyone working on rigs.

The silence around John's work points to the unknowability of the process of internalization just as we have seen the unknowability of the details of Cal's death. The first thing we learn about Helen's children is that her "daughters complied" (3), but that "Johnny had been ungovernable" (4). John does not "comply" with the loss but continues to be dogged by it. On the one hand he avoids the risk of the emotional intimacy that his parents shared and on the other hand he is lured into intimacy with the oil industry. He does not comply with his family's distrust of oil development and instead takes on the ethos of the petro-culture. When his infant daughter is born and he cries as he tells his mother of the birth, Moore leaves space for us to question John's future: will his new-found emotional commitment lead him to reconsider his valuing of profit over lives?

Moore and McKay ask us to consider the ways energy extraction, carried out in a neo-liberalized environment, pose risks beyond individual workplaces. The disasters Moore and McKay invoke resulted from the culmination of systemic approaches to production. To revisit this paper's opening quotation: "bitumen...is a by-product of the culture that enables its production." For our purposes, the same could be said for coal production. In what ways do Moore and McKay alert us to the wider changes in society that are enabling energy extraction? Or, how do the obvious risks that individual workers take point to greater risks to the community at large? Risks that endanger workers spread beyond workplaces and into living-places. Risking health for wages is one thing—risking home is another. In the following section, I will look at how Moore and McKay present

the barriers erected between the work site and the wider community. Before the disaster, home is tactile and present while work is removed, hidden and separate. But the consequences of the dangerous work environments flood the communities after the tragedies. By foregrounding our tendency to construe work and life as separate and then undermining this separation, Moore and McKay encourage us to see the artificiality of this division.

Chapter 4: Life and Work

Both authors juxtapose the specific, tangible local with the more elusive site of industry. Both industrial infrastructures are out of sight: worksites are removed from living communities, so workers disappear to work, then reappear. In *February*, for example, “the rig,” a place both physically and culturally removed, is invisible and unknowable. It is an entirely synthetic environment, built, owned and run by the oil companies, and its unknowability and unlocatedness is repeatedly contrasted with very detailed geographical description of Helen’s community: her apartment on Lime Street, Carter’s Hill, the Basilica with the statue of the Virgin, Buckmaster’s Circle, Water Street, King’s Road, the Colonial Building, Gower and Flavin streets. Neighbourhoods and civic buildings, routes and routines are all set in the intimate geography of the city. Her first ultrasound, Cal’s attempts to secure a job on the rigs, mourning, raising the children, indeed many of the myriad of vignettes that make up the novel, are tacked to a geographical spot in the city. Moving around the city links family, neighbours, friends, and strangers. This intimacy with place reinforces the sense of community which provides Helen with strength and solace. Her neighbour comes over with the news of the rig going down, her father-in-law drives them from place to place in bad weather, and Timmy’s constant playmate is a neighbour. The neighbourhood, the city, is the community. In one of many examples, Helen returns from the makeshift morgue where Cal’s body is being held. Moore unites geography with community as Louise and Helen sit immobile in front of Helen’s house with Louise’s car blocking traffic because the street has been narrowed by the accumulation of snow and the truck behind them cannot pass. The blocked driver alters from irate to compassionate on hearing the story and helps

Helen into the house. The other cars behind them back up and find other routes. Here even strangers meet, support, and accommodate each other within the realities of neighbourhoods and weather—accommodating to place.

Matthew Huber argues that neo-liberal policies privatize and commodify natural areas (128). Offshore development provides the quintessential example of the corporate colonializing of nature. The *Ocean Ranger* was towed to, and installed on, the Hibernia oil and gas field off the east coast of Newfoundland. Hibernia was identified, defined, and named by Mobil Oil's company geophysicists. It is described by the Hibernia Management and Development Company as:

a large structural prospect...a buried anticline... located on [Mobil's] exploration acreage on the western margin of the Jeanne d'Arc Basin on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland & Labrador.... [A]pplication of the name has been extended to include the Hibernia production platform (www.hibernia.ca).²¹

Hibernia is a place invented and constructed by industrial capital. Fittingly, its name encompasses an underwater geological formation, the rights to the resource, and the platforms used to extract the resource.

For Helen, Hibernia is invisible, not only because the rigs are too far out to be seen from shore, but because it is a construct and exists only in her imagination. Or, even more removed, she imagines what the men imaged about the rig. The word “imagine” recurs when she thinks about the rig:

The rig was the size of two football fields and try to *imagine* how small in relation to the ocean around it....Nobody could *imagine* the rig going down....it was impossible to *imagine* the whole rig capsizing. If the men did *imagine* it, they did not tell their wives; they did not tell their mothers (emphasis mine, 97).

²¹ This website is written and maintained by the HMDC, a group of oil companies with interests in Hibernia's development (accessed 5 June 2016).

The rig is imagined, yet very real. It is huge, yet it is ephemeral. It is separate from and even antithetical to the living environment that it supports. Not surprisingly, then, Helen notes the men “felt a marked difference in their balance when they came on shore” (96), and that the black humour with which the men expressed their understanding of the dangers they faced on the rig “didn’t translate on land, so they kept it mostly on the rig” (97). In short, Helen recognizes that “Cal had two separate lives” (98) and that separation is reinforced by the couple’s unspoken agreement to not share their plans for life after the rig, because this would mean “they were admitting the risk. And [this] was something they had agreed never to admit” (99).

The complications of this separation of place become apparent immediately. The offshore wages allow Cal and Helen to provide for their three children. Indeed, the offshore wages provide more than they need, and allow them to buy the house in Salmon Cove, which links them to the older, preindustrial outpost Newfoundland where life was intricately woven into the landscape of harbour, sea, and land. In the pre-industrial economy, boats, stages, flakes, sheds and houses were all built by the people who used them. The place around the bay provides, for Cal at least, a sense of continuity with an earlier time. But the world of the Folk, as we have seen, is also a constructed space that does not typically acknowledge exploitive capitalist relations. The Folk narrative, as Ian McKay points out, ascribes risk at sea to the vagaries of Nature rather than probing contributing socio-economic forces. Maintaining this narrative requires a certain myopia. Helen looks out through the rippled glass of the old window panes across the old inshore fishing grounds in Conception Bay to see Bell Island. The view through this glass offers a distorted view, a view of the folkloric idyll. Distortion, a myopia or refusal to see risk, is

as necessary to sustain this idyllic past as it is to support the present. Helen and Cal must distort their view by refusing to see the risk that they take on in order to support the life they lead. While the rig exists in the here and now it is less accessible than life of the past. Creating the imaginary space of the rig isolates its attendant risk. This isolation mirrors the neo-liberal individualizing of risk, making injury a fault of the irresponsible worker. The apparent unreality of the rig suggests the unreality of the risk and encourages its denial.

The separation of work and community is not as profound for Pictou County as it is for Hibernia because of the long history of mining and the location of the resource. Whereas Hibernia is a new, constructed place offshore, the coal mine is literally under the town. And yet, the coal pits cannot be readily seen the way a factory or even the strip mine can be seen. Miners must go underground. Leo McKay describes the prewar descent into the mine through Arvel's dreams. The miners "walk onto the platform and drop from sight.... [Arvel and his grandfather] step forward and disappear from the surface of the earth" (68). Ziv goes through the "portals...headlong down the shaft" where he feels he is "submerged in murky water" (270). This is a space quite separate from above; only working miners have access to this underworld.

Like Moore, Leo McKay calls up the local, tracing the movements of his characters as they walk through the streets of Albion Mines (Stellarton) and New Glasgow. For McKay, however, the local geography links characters to the narratives of their generations. Because they live literally on top of the resource, the link between space and history is more pronounced. The novel opens with Ziv walking the Red Row neighbourhood of former mine company houses. Then Ennis trods these same streets as

he makes his way home from the bar. Arvel walks them on his way to work at the mine. Always the walking is linked with the history of the space. Each of the three characters brings forth a different strand of history. Arvel imagines (and dreams) his grandfather's life working in the coal mine. Ennis thinks about the postwar lives of workers who achieved middle class prosperity through the efforts of organized labour. And Ziv laments the restricted life he lives in the depressed economic climate of the 1980s. The meaning of mining for each generation is skewed by the miners' experiences. Thinking of her father's life as a miner, Ziv's mother declares: "the people who worked in the mines in the old days didn't have the choices that you do.... A young person today would be crazy to go down there" (254). For her a mine is a mine and fifty years makes no difference. She is imagining a pick and shovel job and the toll mining took on mining families. For her, to "go down there," to leave the community and enter the underground world for work, is the last, desperate option. For Ennis, on the other hand, heavy industry means a continuation of his own reality with steady employment and a unionized workforce able to exert control over conditions and safety. He tells his newly hired sons that the industrial jobs his generation had were good jobs "because we made them good jobs.... If young people today aren't happy, it's up to them to fix it" (263). Neither Ennis nor his wife appreciate the wider changes that have occurred in the globalized world. For Kowalski, the worker who gets Ziv and Arvel their jobs, modern advancements make all the difference. For Kowalski the passage of time necessarily means progress; jobs are no longer difficult or dangerous. He tells Ziv, "This mine ain't gonna blow up. This is the 1980s, not the 1890s" (252). Ziv and Arvel who have lived the new reality, who have

struggled along on underpaid, temporary work and who have seen the state of the mine, understand that fundamental shifts have occurred in the work world.

The new mine, while at first suggesting a continuance of the long-standing mining tradition in the county, soon comes to highlight the break in this tradition. For Arvel and for Ziv this history is unconnected with the new reality. Albion Mines has a mining museum that Arvel visits as a boy. It has “dusty frames full of black-and-white photos” and outdated equipment that are “like the relics of a lost civilization” (83-4, 84). Ziv’s first reaction to the suggestion that he and Arvel apply to Eastyard is, “Coal mining? In 1987? That’s like deciding to be a caveman” (250). Ennis is blind to the changes that have happened underground, literally underneath his nose, partially because he sees the improvements in the standard of living his neighbourhood in the postwar decades. He does not understand the erosion of worker power. Like the neo-liberalists, he blames the workers for their inability to control an environment they cannot possibly control. Ziv understands his own situation with clarity. He accuses his father of “living in the past with his talk of justice and democracy” (286). For Ziv, fairness is not part of his work life possibilities.

While Moore isolates the work environment geographically, McKay stresses temporal division. The mine explosion ruptures the characters’ varying understandings of the local industrial history. The disaster particularly undermines Ennis’s understanding of the labour situation. He comes to a new understanding not through facts but through his emotional loss. His own pain immerses him in the helplessness of other workers and their families. In this state of emotional powerlessness Ennis, who has so much union organizing experience, cannot bring himself to join the Families’ Group executive. Often

he cannot even tolerate the meetings knowing nothing they do can have any impact. Neither Ziv nor Dunya will attend any meetings either, thus the impact of the new disempowerment of the workforce is finally clear to Ennis.

Eventually the official government inquiry is held in the brand new Miner's Museum. The official account of the disaster will be produced in the new politically-bought museum. The emotional devastation of the families will be redirected into a chronicling of verifiable evidence directed at establishing cause and effect. Official inquiries, as Dodd eloquently states, "prepare facts for burial" (Blame 268). Dodd argues that inquiries must restore confidence in the *status quo* by uncovering what went wrong and providing recommendations that will fix these problems. By stressing the preventability of the explosion, the inquiry reinforces the structures of capitalist profit (Blame 267-8). Laws, regulatory structures, and relations between labour and capital are not at fault; ignorance and failure to abide by proscribed regulations caused the accident. This, Dodd contends, ultimately serves to limit reflection on class antagonism and legitimize the bureaucratic capitalism at the root of the cause (Blame 268-9). Dodd reflects on the place of fiction in both augmenting and challenging the official narrative of the inquiry. Fiction explores "the hinge between personal attempts to work through [loss] and the broader public memory of the disaster" (*Ocean* 117). By stressing affect and without claim to empirical veracity, novels claim their validity from their "status of testimony of a traumatic experience" (*Ocean* 117). Leo McKay sets the personal and the official narratives side by side. For both Ennis and Ziv the distance between the personal and the official is vast. Ennis cannot bring himself to attend the inquiry. Although he understands that good may come of it in terms of labour standards and how these will be

monitored and upheld, the official details do not represent his experience. “Nothing is going to make [Arvel’s] death right. Nothing can justify it, nothing can explain it,” Ennis thinks (342). Ennis, for all his belief that the system of labour standard enforcement can be made to work, comes to understand the more important overarching narrative of personal loss. Ziv’s life experience precludes him from ever investing in the ideals of the labour movement rooted in an earlier time. Despite his overall sense of the futility of ideas of justice or worker control in the workplace he finds himself moved to attend the inquiry. Gavin’s testimony about the ineffectual government mine inspectors opens Ziv to a new kind of power. Gavin had “sat before the world, staring that TV camera in the eye, and told the truth. Ziv had felt the power of that, the power of bearing witness” (370). Dodd speaks to the importance of different ways of remembering disaster: of the dominant version laid out in the inquiries, and of the fictionalized versions that challenge this version by calling up the unmeasurable (*Ocean* 155). McKay reminds readers of the emotional and political impact of bearing witness. For Ziv, bearing witness is the bridge between the personal and the public response, between the emotional narrative and the official one. For both Leo McKay and Lisa Moore bearing witness means questioning the limits of official narratives and pointing to imaginative reconstruction as a way of understanding the broader experience and the broader understanding of the implications of resource extraction in the world of globalized corporations.

As Dodd notes, both these novelists are indebted to the official inquiries into the respective disasters—these are the repositories of “the facts.” The narratives of the disasters are a matter of public record and are “under the control of legitimate officials” (*Ocean* 148). As crucial as these records are, of equal importance are the literary works

that claim a different kind of power. Because they draw their validity from their power to evoke feeling they challenge the contained, dominant version of events. They point to the imagination as an avenue to ways of knowing that preserve grief in a safe form, free from the shock of the initial disaster (*Ocean* 148). They challenge the boundaries of the official reports, appealing to an alternate register, an imaginative, empathetic response that is forever current. This response, as Attridge argues, has the power to motivate us to reconfigure ourselves and our culture to encompass our new understanding (125).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

On the surface, the disasters explored in *February* and *Twenty-six* point to the dangers of working in poorly-regulated industries, but the importance of these novels lies beyond this as meditations on how they invite our scrutiny of a culture that enables unfettered energy development. They pose questions about the place of development in an increasingly globalized world and offer a space to scrutinize the alleged “facts” about energy extraction. These authors did not set out to simply write accessible reports of the disasters; instead, they examine the world these disasters occurred in and continue to occur in. Far from portraying the communities as victims of modern development these novels consider the degree to which we are prepared to offer our home communities to development beyond our control. Unlike disaster inquiries that offer solutions to specific situations—workers must have survival suits or miners must be able to refuse to work in high methane areas—the novels point to the bigger picture. They invite us to look at the assumptions that accompany energy development. Who is being asked to risk what for whom? What both *February* and *Twenty-six* ask us to consider is that industry does not operate in isolated pockets; globalized energy extraction arrives with attendant risks, benefits, and the assumptions that make its operations possible. These novels encourage us to pause to consider the worldview attendant with energy extraction and consider the validity of the messages presented. Moore and McKay ask us to imagine our place and to imagine the global economy in which it exists or could exist. By sparking cultural inquiry Moore and McKay open a space to consider the nature of place and the multiple ways of assessing the risk to place that energy extraction can pose.

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