

WRITING THE ETHICS OF WATER IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE, THOMAS KING,
AND ANNE MICHAELS

by

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ABSTRACT

In July 2010, the United Nations declared access to water and sanitation a human right. Certainly a success for water rights advocates worldwide, this resolution also poses a number of questions, such as how to find and distribute this water on a planet that is running out of fresh water (Barlow et al, *Blue Gold* xi). With this question in mind, this thesis looks at the treatment of water management projects in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), and Anne Michaels' *The Winter Vault* (2009). More specifically, it examines the ways competing visions of the common good and of what development should (and should not) look like are imbricated therein. In so doing, my discussion focuses on the inextricability of social justice from water justice and it suggests that narrative can play a key role in connecting the two.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

When you think of it, water is everything. Or rather,

Water ventures into everything and becomes everything.

It has

All tastes and moods imaginable; water is history

And the end of the world is water also. (MacEwan 3)

Water has profound and varying effects on humanity. It is a biological necessity and human right¹, a commercial commodity, and and as a pervasive metaphorical presence in cultural production. Indeed, as Gwendolyn MacEwan suggests in her poem “Water,” “water is everything.” The earth’s survival depends upon localized operations and practices of water usage, yet we find ourselves in a position where, as Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke have argued, “unless we dramatically change our ways, between one-half and two-thirds of humanity will be living with severe fresh water shortages within the next quarter century” (*Blue Gold* xii). War will not be far behind such massive and widespread shortages (Barlow, “The Global Water Crisis” n.pag.). And in these wars, Canada—one of the world’s largest owners and consumers of water (Shrubsole and Draper 40)—will undoubtedly play a crucial role. It would be natural, then, for Canadians to be “fiercely protective of our water,” and yet, as Karen Bakker argues in *Eau Canada* (2007), we are also “hugely wasteful with it, using more water per capita than any other nation in the world” (1). Canada is also one of the leading water damming and diverting

¹ As of July 28, 2010, the United Nations officially considers access to “safe and clean drinking water and sanitation” a human right. One hundred and twenty-two countries voted in favour of the resolution proposed by Bolivia, while forty-one countries—Canada among them—abstained. See “Win! UN General Assembly passes historic Human Right to Water and Sanitation resolution” for more information on the resolution or “The Right to Water” for information on Canada’s position on water generally.

countries among Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) member nations (Shrubsole and Draper 44). Bakker suggests that this curious contradiction in Canadian attitudes towards water stems from a number of sources, including “a mistaken belief in water’s unlimited abundance, [and] an assumption that water resources can be diverted to suit human purposes, with little regard for environmental consequences” (1). Canada’s excessive water consumption causes immense but often underestimated environmental stresses on the country’s water resources, including “falling water tables and lower water levels as well as degraded water quality” (Shrubsole and Draper 38). This potentially dangerous attitude towards water as an infinite rather than an invaluable resource can have devastating long-range effects on how societies choose to manage their water.

Indeed, as Barlow and Clarke demonstrate in *Blue Gold* (2003), water and water infrastructure—the pipes, gauges, taps, filters, and various apparatus of the water delivery process and those who operate them—are increasingly perceived for their of saleable value and, indeed, water is being sold—at the municipal, provincial, and national levels—to private corporations around the world. Privatization is not necessarily a bad thing, yet it cannot be denied that corporate entities have an entirely different set of imperatives and responsibilities than, say, a municipal council or civil servants. The main differences between a privatization model and a public model of water management comes down to how water is conceptualized by various stake-holders: for the former, water is a commodity like any other; for the latter, it is part of the public domain. On this question, I unequivocally agree with Barlow and Clarke’s declaration that “fresh water belongs to the earth and all species and that no one has the right to appropriate it for personal profit” (*Blue Gold* xvi).

That being said, the discourse of water is in fact moving in both public and private directions: through the rhetoric of “Washington Consensus” advocates, various governments around the world, and a number of private corporations, water is articulated as a commodity. Such an attitude can be summed up in Ismail Serageldin’s comment that “[f]ood and water are basic rights, but we pay for food. Why should we not pay for water” (qtd. in Gleick et al 57)? On the other hand, water is also increasingly understood as “part of the world’s heritage” (Barlow et al, *Blue Gold* xiv) and a shared resource. Indeed, the recent United Nations vote to declare water a human right is evidence of this less commercially-driven understanding of water (“Win!”). However, there is much speculation as to the best way of going about delivering water to people around the world, and what the best financial and managerial approaches to water development might be. And development, understood as the orchestrated and deliberate “potential and possibility for a linear movement of human improvement” (or rather, an attempt at such a thing), is always “a site within and through which multiple contestations over power and identity take place” (Vandergeest et al 13, 14). As such, water and water infrastructures have become important sites of contestation for competing visions of development².

² Sustainable visions of development are perhaps the most pertinent during this time of rapid globalization and economic expansion coinciding with ecological upheaval. Sustainable development is typically defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission qtd. in Das xi) and thus entails the “simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity” (Das xi). For a general overview of environmental, economic, and social issues within sustainable development discourse, see Das’s *Sustainable Development* (2009); for information discussions of sustainable development governance and policy issues in Canada, see *Changing Currents* (2010) or Toner and Meadowcroft’s special issue of *Innovation, Science, Environment* (2009). Also refer to the United Nations Environment Programme publication edited by Emily Corcoran, *Sick Water?* (2010) for information on the relationship between development and the global water and wastewater management crises.

These competing versions of development and water management typically result in a utilitarian weighing of pros and cons, costs and benefits. The dominant calculus for designing development projects can be simplified with Jeremy Bentham's formulation: "the greatest good for the greatest number" (qtd. in Keys 13). However, Peter Vandergeest, Pablo Idahosa, and Pablo S. Bose argue that this choice, "usually expressed as 'the public interest' or as 'public good'," assumes that "often vaguely defined benefits that accrue at larger scales (national, global) trump concrete losses experienced at smaller scales" (23), obscuring if not erasing drastic human and ecological damage. This is particularly troubling when one takes into account that the "concrete losses experienced at smaller scales" tend to affect "socially and economically vulnerable (and often politically marginalized) groups and indigenous communities worldwide" disproportionately (6). Indeed, Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose go on to argue that such a utilitarian rationalizing process "demands winners and losers, and that [it] is fundamentally a tool that enshrines existing power inequities" (24). But these asymmetries are only a fraction of the difficulties with a utilitarian understanding which, as Mary M. Keys notes, usually to favour top-down decision making; most importantly, there is a pressing and daunting need to address the slipperiness of common good discourse's terminology. Particularly, how does one define 'common' or 'public' and 'good' or 'interest'? And who gets to decide? In terms of water management, these questions ask nothing less than "[w]ho is the custodian of Nature's lifeblood?" (Barlow et al, *Blue Gold* xiv). Or, who can hope to act for all the living things water management affects?

Although my project is critical of the utilitarian framework currently prevailing in water management and development discourses, it does not seek to replace it. Instead, it

is interested in how competing versions of the common good are continually contested in debates over water management. With Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose, I ask, “how does one decide what is in the larger good” (24)? Embedded within such a question is, as Arundhati Roy asks in the documentary, *Dam/Age* (2002), how does one decide and who decides “who counts, who doesn’t; what matters, what doesn’t; what counts as a cost, what doesn’t”? History has a tendency to erase the struggles that would answer these questions within any given development project; the building of a dam or the clearing of a forest both suggest a particular answer that does not, and rarely can, include the contestation that led up to the construction/destruction.

Indeed, water is much like history in this respect for it “has no conscience and no shame” (MacEwan, “Water” 3). And yet, as Joan Didion notes in “Holy Water,” while there may be “considerable transcendent value in a river running wild and undammed,” there is also considerable tribulation in living “beneath such a river when it was running flood, and [going] without showers when it was running dry” (64-65): some “[k]inds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not” (Carson, *Plainwater* 131). Imaginative literary approaches can view water in a moralized way and negotiate the necessity of balancing respect for human life with reverence for the environment, in ways that an ecological, political science, or sociological approaches only skirt—and this moralization is essential if we are to ethically approach water development projects. As such, these difficult and somewhat messy questions at the heart of my thesis often fall under the purview of literature which, because of the “singularity” of its reading (Attridge 1), is never commensurate with the discourses within which it circulates. That is, “[l]iterature may be a cultural product, but it is never simply contained by a culture” (6) and therefore has a certain vitality that resists the oversimplification of both questions and answers; it cannot

be made to serve as an instrument without at the same time challenging the basis of instrumentality itself” (13). Instead, it is inevitably a site and course of contestation, variance, and innovation.

Accordingly then, this is not a scientific or economic treatise on the relationship between water, development, and inequitable incarnations of the common good. Instead, I am taking a literary approach and thinking about how stories shape and contribute to water discourse. For what is a story but a microcosmic articulation of how the world works, a thesis on what is good and bad and both and neither about humanity? Whether troubling, promising or fantastical, stories offer a view of humanity and, to varying degrees, suggest its ethics or meaning. Stories allow for what Anne Michaels describes as a moment of contemplation that is the beginning of change (“Frozen Acrobatics”). In a similar vein, Thomas King also advocates a sincere belief in the power of stories, indeed, in the belief that stories constitute humanity: “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (*Stories* 2, 32, 62, 92, 122, 153). In choosing a literary approach to comprehend the relationship between water, development, and the common good, I am looking to see how particular explanations and critiques of the world’s workings—located within the context of a given story—can situate humans more ethically, ecologically, and equitably in the world.

Given Michaels’s and King’s shared faith in the power of stories, it seems logical that they each comprise a chapter of my project: chapter two addresses King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) and chapter three looks at Michaels’s *The Winter Vault* (2009). Chapter one considers Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). Despite all three writers’ interest in storytelling and history generally, they are also all concerned with something more obviously material in nature; they all tell stories of the built world:

Ondaatje writes about the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Toronto Waterworks; King, foregrounds the Grand Baleen Dam; and Michaels considers the Aswan High Dam and the St. Lawrence Seaway. All three foreground the political character of each of these construction projects by focusing on water's role therein, which, as an element, a commodity, or a metaphor, each of these writers uses water to questions of social and environmental justice in relation to particular development projects.

In choosing to take up stories about the building of structures that variously contain or deliver water, these writers each ask—in different ways and with different answers—how we can more ethically and equitably balance the drive towards change and development with the demands and needs of the human and non-human world. I will look at how these narratives explore the struggles that are central to development projects concerned with the socially, politically, and ecologically charged field of water management. Beyond investigating the competing versions of the common good at play in these struggles, these novels also offer new avenues for understanding and meeting the challenges involved in development and water management.

With this in mind, I would now like to turn to a novel deeply interested in the relationship between water and the development of a more equitable, sustainable world: Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984). Findley's novel introduces some of the ideas at the heart of my thesis, such as the discrepancy between history's ostensibly objective narratives and the struggles effaced therein, and the ethical pitfalls of leaving behind an old world, among other things.

1.1 Continuing the Voyage in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*

[A]nd Yaweh was saying to Noah; ‘that trick of yours...the bottle...the penny...by the sheer application of water...’

It disappears. (Findley 111)

Findley’s Yaweh, fascinated by his friend Noah Noyes’s magic trick in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, has decided to destroy the world and all of humankind with the exception of the Noyes family. Confronted with a corrupt and violent world, a broken and depressed God turns to Noah and instructs him to build an ark; Yaweh provides Noah with an Edict for how preparations for the flood are to be carried out and then departs, presumably to his death, leaving Noah and his family to ready themselves for the coming rains. Taking the Biblical narrative as his base, Findley seeks to fill in the story’s blank spaces with both human and non-human tragedy, madness, and violence. The narrative begins with an epigraph from *Genesis* telling of Noah and his family boarding the ark in, presumably, a calm and orderly fashion. The narrator adds, however, that “Everyone knows it wasn’t like that” (3). The story that follows is characterized by increasing desperation and violence as Doctor Noah Noyes seeks to maintain control over the “lower orders,” including his wife, Mrs. Noyes.

Findley challenges the relative sparseness of the *Genesis* version of the Flood, reimagining the injustice, suffering, titanic labour and inequality that the Flood and the ark both demonstrated as well as caused. His approach to the story of Noah, then, is concerned with the human and non-human cost and, ultimately, futility of leaving an old world behind to seek a new one. Indeed, as David Jefferess argues, the novel is about the “continuation of the voyage” and taking responsibility for the creation of an equitable world *now*, not later, some place else, and that this is an unending process (154). For

Findley there is no Paradise—only the struggle between all the different paths purporting to lead to it.

The central questions of Findley's text and of my project are thus the same: what is the cost of a new world? Who determines the calculus that decides who is not wanted on the voyage? Whose lives will be sacrificed and for whom or what? Findley's novel is centrally concerned with the critique of the Biblical story's apparent blindness to these questions, and thus his narrative is rife with competing versions of the common good in a battle of life and death. The texts I have chosen to consider, however, are not about a Biblical flood and its story's myopia. But, as mentioned above, they do share a common thread, a central force implicated in the loss of an old world and the creation of a new in all four novels: water. Thus, in the same way that water is contentious within development discourse, so too does water become a site of struggle in these novels; water is politicized in life as in art. Whereas in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* the ark is the site of contestation and the water around it simply an imposing environmental condition, in Ondaatje's, King's, and Michaels's texts, water takes centre stage as that which is fought over and for.

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, the management and availability of water is central to Ondaatje's vision of a more civic city and is key to understanding the protagonist's personal struggles. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, water trapped behind the Grand Baleen Dam forms the linchpin in King's critique of a hierarchical world-view that subjugates, labels, and seeks to control the Native population of Blossom, Alberta, while also allowing for a more healthful world-view. In *The Winter Vault*, the novel's rivers—the Nile, the St. Lawrence, and the Vistula—form the organizing structure around which Michaels argues for a productive engagement with loss as a potential catalyst for genuine

change. In all these novels, water is a key site where both injustice *and* justice are exemplified. The fight for and over the ownership of rivers, the lands and lives dependant on inland waters, and the technological structures that regulate and transport water, are the novels' arks. Each novel portrays power struggles and competing versions of the common good, articulating and critiquing differing visions of what a better world looks like and what a reasonable cost of obtaining such a place might be. Accordingly, each author takes aim at what is a demonstrably unreasonable cost before offering their own theses about salubrious forms of development. Ondaatje criticizes the hypocrisy of a city built upon the backs of immigrant labourers that controls, punishes, and effaces those same labourers; King deflates the idea of amoral technological development for the greater good by demonstrating the repeated ecological violence inflicted upon Native populations by damming projects and mainstream Western culture more generally; and Michaels both condemns a world that fails to acknowledge and incorporate loss into future developmental projects as well as questions its the overall potential. Thus, my analysis of each text considers how water works as a site of social, political, and economic contestation and how these novels demand, like Findley, that individuals, governments, and societies take responsibility for the state of this world rather than constantly and blindly placing one's faith in the hope that the next one obtained, whatever the cost, will be better.

Chapter 2 Building the City: Being Civil & Civic in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

Like Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* includes reference to an ancient myth about the great flood as a key intertext. Ondaatje uses *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which, like the Biblical story of Noah, is concerned with the creation of a new, more just world. Yet despite this surface similarity between the two myths, their underlying thematic concerns differ greatly. The Biblical story depends on divine intervention for the creation of a new, perfect earth—a promised land. As a result, responsibility for the state of *this* world is continually displaced in hopes of a better one being created somewhere else. Thus the Biblical story focuses on what comes after death, after the flood, rather than focusing on the demands of the present. *The Epic*, by contrast, is centrally concerned with taking responsibility for the present state of things and thus also changing them. Whereas stories of Noah and the Flood traditionally detail the creation of a new world after the moral failure of the old one, *The Epic* centres around the creation of a responsible civic leader and consequently of a civic city as well as the management of grief and the potentially dangerous irresponsibility of withdrawing from society. Ondaatje uses *The Epic*'s attention to civic possibility as a way of questioning, quite literally, how one builds a civic city³.

Deepening the differences between these two mythic contexts, each novelist takes a different approach to revising these stories. Findley's text retains, more or less, the

³ For my purposes, a city can be thought of primarily as a political organization; that is, a city is a collection of individuals falling under the jurisdiction of an elected mayor or alderman. Beyond this, a city can also be thought of as an organizational entity, measured by such things as shared infrastructure/utilities management or public space upkeep management. In this sense, then, a city can be any geographic or demographic area sharing political leadership and/or organizational management.

original cast of Noah's story of extraordinary people in extraordinary circumstances—the chosen (and only) survivors of a world divinely condemned to destruction—but introduces the ongoing power struggles between the ark's inhabitants. By contrast, Ondaatje's narrative addresses the lives of ordinary people building civic monuments (the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Toronto Waterworks) against the thematic backdrop of King Gilgamesh's story. Where Findley focuses on the 'labourers' (Ham, Mrs. Noyes, and others) struggle to survive within Dr. Noyes's oppressive and exploitative regime, Ondaatje focuses on how a group of immigrant labourers' struggle for a civic voice (and, arguably, survival) is effaced within the official records of a growing Toronto.

These contrasting foci are epitomized in the different treatments of water in the two novels. For Findley, the unleashing of water is linked to the destruction of cities and the imposition of punishment and grief on the totality of humankind by divine edict. For Ondaatje, by contrast, the harnessing of water for everyday use is fundamental to the creation of a more civic city. Linked by the presence of water, the building and politicization of the Viaduct and the Waterworks as well as protagonist Patrick Lewis's struggles with civility and civic/political engagement form the centre of Ondaatje's sociopolitical vision of a more just city in *In the Skin of a Lion*.

The complexity of Ondaatje's vision of a more civic city emerges from the deeper continuities between *The Epic* and the novel. Herb Wyile identifies several important plot parallels, suggesting that *The Epic* and the novel share

a concern for the responsible exercise of power, a grieving over the death of a beloved friend that precipitates a quest for a way to be outside of historical existence, and a reaching of knowledge that effects a reconciliation to one's place, to one's responsibility, in the historical world. (194)

Though they are useful for illustrating the novel's vision of a responsible, just leadership and a civic city, the commonalities Wyile identifies are only part of the novel's engagement with Gilgamesh's story. I would suggest that beyond the points Wyile identifies, there is also the basic correlation between Gilgamesh's rejection of civil society and his failure to perform his civic duties.

To better understand this correlation, we need to think about the connections between *civil* and *civic*. A key meaning of civic is something which "belongs to citizens" (*OED*), meaning something which is controlled by, exists for, and answers to the citizenry. In this sense, then, 'civic participation' means that one is participating in the governance of something which is a collective possession: the city itself. In a general way, we understand civil to mean of or relating to a city or government, as in "civil action," a meaning not all that different from civic; however, I would like to consider it more in relation to *civility*⁴, in the same way that *political* is related to *polite* through *polis*. In so doing, I hope to emphasize the social root of civic/political formations. To connect politeness and civility to the political world, it is useful to recall the term social contract. Despite being called social, the contents of this sort of contract are political in nature and are related to collective governance of a given consenting group. But what brings about this political agreement, as the term "social contract" implies, is a coming

⁴ It is important to differentiate here between my understanding of civility and Daniel Coleman's excellent consideration of civility in 2008 book, *White Civility: The Literary Project in English Canada*. Coleman suggests that English Canada has used the concept of civility to entrench white English Canadian privilege, and that discourses of multiculturalism and cultural mosaics have contributed to this entrenchment. I am not thinking of civility in this project as "niceness" or "acceptance" Coleman's discussion of "the conflation of whiteness with civility" (5) would be particularly interesting in relation to Jodi Lundgren's critique of the novel's apparent linkage of liberation to "the shedding of coloured skin and/or the attaining of whiteness" (17), but I do not have space to explore this here.

together of people; the social connection precipitates the political one. To be civil is to enter willingly into social relations with other people. And, as these words suggest, to be social in this way is necessarily to become politically or ‘civically’ engaged. The extension of this logic, of course, is that the political presupposes the social; the former cannot operate properly without the existence of the latter. It is this connection between the social and the political, the civil and the civic, that I would like to focus on as important to my reading of *In the Skin of a Lion*: the novel’s vision of a more civic city is crucially linked to the expression of civic dissatisfaction on the part of the workers (a civil and therefore politically active group) and the development of the protagonist, Patrick’s, civility and thus civic engagement.

But what, exactly, is a more civic city? I would suggest that it is a city which better respects and accommodates its citizens, which more properly belongs to its citizens certainly, but one that is also just. But what does justice, or being just, mean in this context? Returning to Gilgamesh’s story as a guide, I would suggest that in *The Epic* being just is a mode of interaction between those in leadership positions and those consenting to be led, one which is paternalistic or stewardship-based. However, in a contemporary context—as well as the context of Ondaatje’s novel—this is not a particularly useful understanding of what constitutes a just leadership, as evidenced in Findley and King’s indictment of paternalistic, top-down government structures in Canada and the West generally. Instead, I would suggest that Ondaatje’s novel argues justice as a right to be counted, to be valued and heard upon an equal footing with one’s peers. All members of the civil community—the social contract—must have equal access and voice in civic participation. In this sense, for a city to become just, its civil members must be counted as politically equal. Thus, the civil community must be just in order for a

city to be properly civic; to be more civic is to be more civil, more just, and more thoroughly answerable to the citizenry. This is the by no means easily achieved sense of justice, civility, and civicness I will be working with in this chapter.

In order for Ondaatje's historical revisionist project to represent the workers' dissatisfaction, he must reinscribe the labourers into the building of monuments of municipal prestige. But Ondaatje does more than simply reinscribe: he represents these monuments as sites of contestation and struggle emphasizing both the injustice (the dangerous conditions under which these monuments were produced and the subsequent effacement of the workers in the official records) and the latent potential of these structures for the creation of a city "not only magnificent but just" (Manguel 30). This step beyond reinscription is what unlocks the latent potential here, allowing these buildings to serve as "stage[s] for human action, the deeds and speech through which human beings realize their potential for freedom and affirm their dignity in the radiance of the public sphere" (Harrison 9-10). That is, these places allow for expression of civic dissatisfaction. In demonstrating the cost of these monuments for those who built them as well as the ways in which the workers made use of these monuments, Ondaatje both renders the workers historical and, more importantly, acknowledges a political agency absent from official records. In this sense, he allows for the recuperation not only of the workers' contributions but also of their citizenship as active civic participants.

If the workers demonstrate the importance of equality in civic involvement, Patrick illustrates how meaningful civic action cannot take place without civility. The important similarities Wyile notes above between Patrick's story and Gilgamesh's highlight Patrick's struggle with civility—with being civil—and the importance of this in his quest for a politically viable humanism and the novel's vision of a more civic city. Patrick

must be civil in order to participate in the creation of a civic city, a just city which belongs to the citizens. Within Ondaatje's vision of a civic city, Patrick's struggles with civility and the workers' expressions of civic dissatisfaction are linked by a small yet pervasive element: water. Water occupies a curious place in capitalist Western cultures and within the novel as paradoxically both capitalist commodity and human right. The structures surrounding water, too—the pipes and filters and sewers—are also paradoxical, marks of both urbanization and of class struggle and exploitation. Yet despite this ambiguity, water remains a pervasive element in the novel's political vision. Patrick's civility can be gauged based on his interactions with water while, in the manifest purposes of the Viaduct and the Waterworks, water necessarily plays a key role in the spaces the novel seeks to politicize. Thus water and the structures that surround water constitute the unifying thread which connects the workers' civic struggles to Patrick's developing civility as key ingredients within the novel's broader vision for the creation of a more civic city.

2.1 Revising the Construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct & the Toronto Waterworks

One may be tempted to conclude, like Wyile, that using the myth of a king as a thematic backdrop “in a novel that deflects attention to a historically marginalized community and subverts the notion of history as a record of achievement of prominent public individuals” is paradoxical (192). However, *The Epic* is highly appropriate, especially if we consider the underlying imperative of Gilgamesh's quest and the impetus for telling his story: despite superficial appearances, it is the people of Uruk who drive this story. As Alberto Manguel notes, *The Epic* is fundamentally about Gilgamesh

becoming a better ruler and Uruk coming to flourish (30); naturally, then, the first conflict of the story is the people of Uruk crying out against Gilgamesh as a poor ruler, and all else that follows is to some extent dealing with the process of remedying this situation. So, despite Gilgamesh's griefs and failures, *The Epic* essentially has a happy ending insofar as the peoples' plight is alleviated (Manguel 45).

Thus, Ondaatje's novel is based upon a story that is fundamentally about the citizens of Uruk obtaining a civic city. In this sense, Ondaatje's revisionist project is prefigured within *In the Skin of a Lion*'s epigraphs: the first epigraph is taken from *The Epic* after Enkidu has died; Gilgamesh proclaims his grief, saying "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." The second epigraph comes from John Berger's novel, *G.*: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (*In the Skin of a Lion* n.pag.). Though richly resonant, the first epigraph most obviously alludes to the epic as a genre typically concerned with powerful individuals naturally included in the historical ledger. The second epigraph, on the other hand, suggests that every epic is in fact composed of a multitude of mostly unheard stories. In this sense, the former's concern is the historical and the latter's is the unhistorical. In working with *The Epic* as his thematic backdrop, then, Ondaatje is reconnecting the actions of the powerful to the involvement of the populace. The epic genre is undermined by Berger's quotation which emphasizes that there are not only great actors but also a multiplicity of other agents involved in any given event. This undermining positions the citizenry more equally with those in power, allowing for the possibility of a more just city in the acknowledgement of (always) only partially recognized contributions from many quarters.

To illustrate this, I will consider how Ondaatje juxtaposes what could be called the official history of the building of the Viaduct and the Waterworks with the immediate, tangible world of the labourers and their obvious yet officially absent contribution to both the bridges and the Waterworks. Following this, I will demonstrate how Ondaatje does more with these spaces than simply shift the credit for their construction to the builders themselves. While this is certainly an important part of the revisionist project, rehistoricizing the labourers is not necessarily an end in itself—it is the simultaneous reinsertion of labour *and* politicization of space that makes the narration of the Viaduct's and Waterworks' histories significant in Ondaatje's vision of a civic city. This radicalization of the Viaduct and the Waterworks allots agency and voice to the workers previously denied within official records.

In describing the building of the Viaduct, “The Bridge” section of the novel lays out a series of contrasts: the sensuous and visceral world of labour versus the lofty and visionary gaze of officials (and official records). For instance, the section begins with the workers hopping onto a tar truck en route to the construction site, the tar “truck roll[ing] burly under the arching trees, paus[ing] at certain intersections where more workers jump onto the flatbed” (25). The morning is cold, but “[l]ater they will remove coats and sweaters, then by eleven their shirts, bending over black rivers of tar in just their trousers, boots, and caps” (26). Both of these instances suggest the repetition of this dull routine from day-to-day, pointing to the ongoing and laborious process of raising the bridge. In a pointedly contradictory fashion, however, following this description of regular human activity on the bridge, we are told that “[t]he bridge goes up in a dream” (26) with men becoming “extension[s] of hammer, drill, flame” (26); the syntax here is important: it is not the tool becoming an extension of the human but the human disappearing into the

tool. Typically when one imagines a skilled craftsman, the tools seem in tune with the worker as a natural extension of his/her body. Here, however, the tools jar with and even consume the worker, eradicating any sense that the worker is in possession of the tool; instead, the tool dictates and controls the labourer. Back to back, these passages suggest that the bridge is both the product of immense human labour—the builders burnt and cut and bruised and poisoned by tar fumes—yet contains no human presence: the bridge is a dream, the builders extensions of their tools, the electricians simply referred to as the “electricals” (26). Here again the minutia of the phrase are important. To be an “electrical” is to be neither a thing nor an action, but an adjective. As with the workers becoming extensions of their tools rather than the other way around, the task—electrical work—comes to define the labourers’ selves. An electrician is a person, an electrical is a description that neither contains nor modifies a person. Like the men invisibly wielding hammers and drills, the electricians simply disappear.

The imbrication of the immaterial historical with the visceral unhistorical is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the contrast between Commissioner Rowland Harris’s vision of the bridge and Nicholas Temelcoff’s tangible experience of it, each perspective representing a different story of the bridge and what its construction means. Harris was the real-life Commissioner of Public Works responsible for legislating the Viaduct and Waterworks construction projects; Nicholas was a worker on the bridge who, in the surreal second section of the book, saves Patrick’s eventual lover, Alice Gull, when she falls off the Viaduct. Lee Spinks comments on the extent to which Harris’s “*idea of a city*” “evacuates lived experience from civic space” (138, 146) and affects the “subtraction of the human from the field of vision” (146). Thus, labour becomes “both economically indispensable and socially invisible: [as Harris] effortlessly transcend[s] the

world of physical toil, his monocular urban vision immobilizes labour by translating it into the physical fact of the monuments it leaves behind” (138). But, I would ask, how does Harris conceptualize the Viaduct if not as a product of labour? I would suggest that, for Harris, the building of the city is not in the efforts of the workers but in the combination of his imagination and his will. Harris was the one who had “envisioned” the lower trestle of the bridge for trains, water, and electricity. He would speak “of his plans to [Pomphrey, the future Waterworks’ architect], struggling his way into Pomphrey’s brain,” for “[b]efore the real city could be seen it had to be imagined” (29). And this transition from imagination to reality is, of course, also a result of Harris’s effort alone, as he recalls how “much of [the bridge was] planned before he took over but he had bullied it through” (29).

Of course, there is nothing inherently or necessarily wrong with a visionary. But, as Spinks suggests, such a perspective tends to see the product without the production. The irony, however, is that water is Harris’s “great passion” (29). Water, an element required first and foremost for human survival, is the passion of a man who is presented in the novel removed from people; indeed, as unable even to see them. For instance, he likes to visit the construction site of the Bloor Street Viaduct after dark because night “removed the limitations of detail and concentrated on form” (29); that is, night removed the workers and left the structure of the bridge for his “scopic drive” (Spinks 138). Patrick’s findings a number of years later in the newspaper holdings of the Riverdale Library mirror Harris’s brand of myopia and more clearly affiliate Harris’s perspective with that of official history, the “record of achievement of prominent public individuals” (Wylie 192). Patrick finds the “survey arguments, the scandals, the deaths of workers fleetingly mentioned, [...] the decision to use night crews and the night deaths that followed,” the

“articles and illustrations [...] [that] depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (143-44, 145).

Contrasting with Harris’s perspective is that of Nicholas Temelcoff, “famous on the bridge, a daredevil,” a man ungrudgingly paid more than the other workers who would never dream “of doing half the things he does” (34, 35). While Patrick did find an article on daredevils during his archival work (144), the immediate, visceral, and dangerous nature of Nicholas’s work could not have been done justice. Indeed, Ondaatje gives a good deal of space to descriptions of Nicholas’s skills, tasks, and history, among other things. For instance, consider what Nicholas goes through to attach a steel rib to the bridge:

He bolts them in, having to free-fall in order to use all of his weight for the final turns of the giant wrench. He allows ten feet of loose rope on the pulley, attaches the wrench, then drops on the two-foot handle, going down with it, and jars with the stiffening of the bolt, falling off into the air, and jars again when he reaches the end of the rope. He pulleys himself up and does it again. After ten minutes every bone feels broken—the air he stops in feels hard as concrete, his spine aching where the harness pulls him short. (40)

This instance is rich in its details of the physical toll of Nicholas’s work. What makes this passage particularly nerve-racking is Nicholas’s nonchalant observation that the fragile structure he is bouncing up and down underneath “could at any moment tip over” (39). He recalls that his predecessor was the victim of just such an accident: the traveller tipped over sending arm-thick wires uncoiling, “snaking powerfully in every direction through the air” which cut the man in half, “the upper half of his body found half an hour later,

still hanging in the halter” (41). The dangerous immediacy of Nicholas’s labour contrasts starkly with the dreamy but wilful Harris. This contrast serves to resituate the titanic labour of building the bridge not in the imagination of Harris but in the dangerous and intensive labour of Nicholas.

This pattern of juxtaposition continues in the “Palace of Purification” section of the novel, which is concerned with the construction of the Waterworks. The section opens with just such a contrast: first there is Arthur Goss, the city photographer, snapping a carefully posed shot of two men shaking hands on an incline of mud in the water intake tunnel burrowing under Lake Ontario. Although this photo was presumably staged to commemorate the completion of the tunnel, the tunnel is, in fact, far from done when the photo is taken. Thus, Goss’s photo symbolizes the partial and somewhat fictitious world of official history divorced from the materiality of the building process. Goss leaves the tunnel and “climbs back out into the sunlight,” and then “[w]ork continues” (105). As with Nicholas’s labour on the Viaduct, the descriptions of the tunnel construction are rife with the physical intensity and danger of the work:

Each blow against the shale wall jars up from the palms into the shoulders as if the body is hit. Exhaustion overpowers Patrick and the other tunnellers within twenty minutes [...]. All morning they slip in the wet clay unable to stand properly, pissing where they work, eating where someone else left shit. [...] And if they are digging incorrectly—just one degree up, burrowing too close to the weight of Lake Ontario during this mad scheme by Commissioner Harris to collect lake water 3,300 yards out in the lake? They have all imagined the water heaving in, shouldering them aside in a fast death. (105-06)

This passages leaves impressions predominantly of exhaustion, filth, danger and, significantly, the indictment of the “mad scheme[’s]” great orchestrator, Commissioner Harris.

For Harris, the Waterworks is “a palace for water” (109) built during a time of economic depression in spite of the public outcry (109). Whereas the building of the tunnel is characterized as hellish, under Harris’s gaze the construction of the Waterworks’ buildings is “like the blossoming of a tree” (108). The text provides a detailed list of the various suppliers and construction companies offering materials and services but, notably, without any mention of the labourers installing them—as with Harris’s dream vision of the Viaduct, we are again in the realm of Harris’s imagination. He “had dreamed the marble walls, the copper-banded roofs,” shaping the structure in the “image of the ideal city” (109). The workers are not physical entities, but spectres “in the foresection of the cortex, in the small world of Rowland Harris’ dream as he lies in bed on Neville Park Boulevard” (111). Turning the workers into figments of his imagination, Harris reflects on the work he needs to do to realize his “stray dream”:

first *he needed to finish* the spear of tunnel a mile out under the lake, and
organize the human digging and the human and mule dragging of pipes all
 the way out there for the intake of water (110, emphasis mine).

This instance encapsulates not only how Harris subtracts the labourers from the construction process—even to the extent of lumping together the human and the non-human as things to be managed—but also how he conceptualizes his dream-vision of the Waterworks as analogous to work itself. That is, Harris’s understanding of the contribution of his own work blinds him to the contributions made by others, making the

construction project a concrete manifestation of his will rather than the lived experience of the workers.

But what is the purpose of so thoroughly demonstrating the myopia of Harris's vision within the novel's articulation of a more civic city? If we recall that for my purposes justice is the equality of the citizenry, and that a civic city is a city belonging to those equally-respected citizens, then an important facet of conveying a vision of a more civic city is to illustrate how and why the official historical records are a hindrance to justice and civicness. That is, Harris's vision—presented as analogous to official histories—renders a large portion of the populace politically, economically, and socially invisible. Ondaatje's project, then, is to undo this effacement and illustrate that the working populations were in fact politically, economically, and socially active and influential. Thus, by reinserting the labourers into the building of the Viaduct and the Waterworks, these buildings become the platforms upon which the workers can assert themselves; the buildings *themselves* become the site of struggle. Furthermore, in transforming these spaces from embodiments of the “end result of exploitation” (Spinks 138) to sites of contestation, Ondaatje demonstrates the workers' agency beyond the context of their work within an exploitative capitalist system.

Consider, for instance, the brief passage describing the opening ceremonies on the Viaduct—and it is *ceremonies*, for there are in fact three ‘first’ crossings. There is “the first member of the public,” “the expected show car containing officials,” and “the workers [...] [who had] moved [...] like a wave of civilization” across the bridge. There are thus three official openings: the political, the public, and, for lack of a better term, the unpublic. This passage, in celebrating the cyclist's achievement and greeting him with “thunderous applause [...] at the far end” as “the first member of the public” (27),

emphasizes the exclusion of the labourers from the public sphere. Their very citizenship is questioned in this exclusion—their mourning ceremony and their labour doubly effaced, neither their crossing the night before nor their crossings throughout the building process counting as ‘official’ or ‘public’ in nature. And yet in the very narration of the workers’ crossing, Ondaatje is able to politicize the space. The narration of the workers’ official crossing gives them a political agency that would be absent from a narrative addressing only the construction, but not the use, of the monuments by the builders.

Similarly, the unfinished Waterworks’ buildings become the site of clandestine political meetings and a venue for the workers to come together to express their dissatisfaction and their aspirations while recognizing and affirming their strength and potential. Demonstrating the subversive gesture this “illegal gathering” represents, Ondaatje has the community of labourers “[e]merging from the darkness, mothlike, [...] a shadow of a cloud over the slope” (115). Yet once within the walls of the structure they themselves have built, the people “moved in noise and light.” Ironically, it is within the confines of the structure that the labourers are able to express themselves fully: the Waterworks—concrete manifestation of the oppressive regime the workers’ labour under—itsself is what enables the opportunity to speak. The meeting is “a party and a political meeting, [with] all of them trespassing” (115). And this gathering is not a one-time occurrence; the Waterworks has a sustained life in this capacity: “Because of its structure the main pumping station could be filled with lamps and no light would be betrayed to the outside world. The sounds of pumps churning drowned out the noise of their meetings” (158). The very structure of the Waterworks allows for the workers’ meetings, fulfilling a much needed but utterly unpredictable function.

But there is a further significance to this appropriation of the Waterworks. While the workers' use of the space is transgressive and illegal as an act of trespassing, there is another illegality here: as Ondaatje notes, at this time the municipal government "had imposed laws against public meetings by foreigners" speaking in "any language other than English [means] they will be jailed" (133). This law demonstrates both the inequality and therefore injustice within the civil body of the city at the time but also the absolute necessity for the workers' meetings to take place: this civil gathering represents the only venue for the workers to express their civic frustrations⁵. Thus, as with the Viaduct, the Waterworks are able to take on a new meaning in the context of the workers' lives—Ondaatje's rewriting of these buildings allows them to become stages for human action and for the assertion of human dignity and political agency by the workers in a way that the official histories could not encompass. But the Waterworks becomes a political venue in another way within Patrick's narrative as he navigates the distance between civility and the possibility of the civic.

2.2 Being Uncivil

I have demonstrated how Ondaatje both historicizes previously excluded workers as well as allots them agency by transforming the structures they built into clandestine political venues. In Patrick's case, it is not only that Ondaatje historicizes him—for he too is a worker and his labour is included in the construction of the Waterworks—but also

⁵ This sort of civil disobedience can be usefully linked Henry David Thoreau's to critique of undue respect for the law resulting in injustice; the gatherings of the workers in the novel represent the first step towards attaining justice for they have cultivated a respect not "for the law, so much as for the right" (3). That is, law is not necessarily synonymous with justice, and the workers' gatherings in *In the Skin of a Lion* are indicative of the need for citizens to act against the state when the state fails to act on their behalf. Thoreau's discussion of minority/majority relations in *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* is also pertinent here.

that he demonstrates Patrick's struggle with civility. If Patrick cannot be civil, he cannot productively participate in civic action; he cannot be political without first being polite (of the *polis*). Whereas Ondaatje's treatment of the workers and their usage of the Waterworks and the Viaduct suggest the importance of the equality of citizens, Patrick's personal struggles with being civil demonstrate the impotence, even danger, of political action affected outside of the *polis*. Thus, the narrative of the Viaduct and the Waterworks and Patrick's personal struggles are in fact two sides of the same coin, both necessary to the building of a more civic city. And, as with the Viaduct and the Waterworks, the underlying presence of water plays a crucial part in the realization of Ondaatje's project. In this section I will illustrate how Patrick's civility is closely linked to his relationship to water, both in his early life and, most significantly, in the events leading up to and following Patrick's violent activities at the Muskoka Hotel and the Waterworks.

Before coming to Patrick's struggles with civility, however, I would like first to layout more clearly Ondaatje's condemnation of political action disconnected from civility. For this, I turn to Patrick's father, Hazen Lewis, and how his example most clearly establishes Ondaatje's critique: Hazen represents a man who is interested in the development of a certain vision of a more civic world yet conspicuously lacks the requisite civil commitment to his peers. Hazen is a man described as "abashed, withdrawn from the world around him, [and] uninterested in the habits of civilization outside his focus" (15)—he could have "a river [explode] behind him" without "turning around to watch" (17). Such a description may initially seem innocuous. However, consider the implications: here is a man disconnected from all that is not within his immediate focus capable of coolly orchestrating violence: "Hazen read his pamphlets" and imagined fuses

running “up into someone’s pocket. [...] The fuse stitched into the cloth of the trouser leg. [...] [T]he fuse smouldering horizontal into his shirt pocket, blowing out the heart” (18). These are images that suggest a man with a violent sense of political action who is removed from his community. Furthermore, Hazen’s character suggests a peculiar hypocrisy as he is purportedly interested in ending worker exploitation yet he can also coldly take part in a different exploitation: that of the river, the woods, and the environment more generally.

Unlike his father, however, Patrick regularly oscillates between community/civility and isolation/anti-sociality. Indeed, for the majority of the novel, Patrick embraces hovering on the edges of other people’s lives, clinging “like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations” (156). While Patrick recognizes that he is a player in these stories, he neither acknowledges his central role fully nor takes responsibility for the other people he engages with. He sees himself as only “part of a mural,” the “alien, the third person in the picture” (145, 156). Realizing his own isolation, Patrick recalls a play Alice had described to him in which several actresses shared the role of the heroine as “[e]ach person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157). And yet, despite this recollection, Patrick allows himself to remain tangential, “a watcher, a corrector” (157). He aspires to be unhistorical (172) and, to Alice’s mind, he is “[l]ike water, [...] easily harnessed” (122) and put to the service of an ideology he does not believe in. Instead of understanding himself to be responsible for the story and as an actor rather than an alien, the narrator describes how Patrick relates to

Clara and Ambrose and Alice and Temelcoff and Cato—this cluster made up a drama without him. And he himself was nothing but a prism that refracted

their lives [...]. He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. [...] But what did the word mean? Something that suggested there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn't leap. Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another—whether it was Ambrose or Clara or Alice—he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love. (157)

This passage encapsulates Patrick's dangerous potential to veer from a responsible and civil understanding of his participatory and influential role not only in his own personal sphere but also, potentially, within a broader sociopolitical context.

Additionally, this instance suggests that Patrick's sense of responsibility for his own story is underdeveloped to the point that he in fact becomes dangerous when alone.

Unable to understand his own responsibilities to himself and the civil community “when not aligned with another,” he slips into incivility and therefore simultaneously withdraws from the *polis*. Indeed, when not dealing explicitly with the construction of the Viaduct and the Waterworks, the novel essentially tracks Patrick's progress towards a sustained recognition of *his* responsibility for the story and thus for the community itself. Water plays a key, if not obvious, role throughout this map of Patrick's civil development and consequent contribution to the creation of a civic community.

For instance, early in the novel Patrick comments on the annual influx of foreign-born loggers into his rural community of Bellrock and the role water plays both in their relationship with the town and among the logger-community itself. He notes that the “only connection the loggers [had] with the town [was] when they emerge[d] to skate along the line of river, on homemade skates, the blades made of old knives. For the boy the end of winter means a blue river, means the disappearance of these men” (8). There

are two points worthy of note in this instance. Firstly, it is the frozen river that provides the loggers' sole connection to the town, the only social bond with the people they are labouring amongst beyond the scope of the cash nexus. Secondly, Patrick links the change of seasons and the state of the river (i.e. the thaw) with the disintegration of the social connection the frozen river constituted. In this sense, it is water—not the logging season—that forms the linchpin of Patrick's social understanding of and relationship to the loggers.

Additionally, Patrick also understands the role water plays within the loggers' community and the possibility for his inclusion therein. Drawn by lights bouncing about in the woods near his childhood home, Patrick ventures unseen to the riverbank and watches the foreign-born loggers skating with flaming cattails in their hands. At first frightened, Patrick realizes that “this was obviously something benign. Something joyous” (21), a simple yet wondrous expression of community. Significantly, even though Patrick recognizes the beautiful and healthful nature of this communal skating game—both for its function within the logger-community and as the loggers' sole connection with the town itself—he does not engage with it, an action which foreshadows his later much more serious failures to engage with the needs of the immigrant working class community in Toronto.

Though changed, “on [that] night [Patrick] did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to be able to step forward and join them” (22), and he returns home. These instances demonstrate that Patrick sees and understands what constitutes community—an understanding mediated by water—yet fails to take his place among the people in a social and civil bond. This is the first instance in the novel when Ondaatje shows, through Patrick, how a civic collective—a community belonging to the

citizens—cannot come to be without civility; what can belong to Patrick if he does not belong to anything? It requires other characters—Clara Dickens and her friend Alice Gull—to push Patrick into a more potentially productive civility. It is Clara who first pulls Patrick back into the turbulent social world that will become the web Patrick describes above—Clara, Ambrose, Alice, Cato, and Temelcoff—but it is not until after Alice’s death that Patrick begins to comprehend that he has some responsibility to these people as a member of the civil and therefore civic community. And, consistent with Ondaatje’s recapitulation of the workers’ involvement with the Viaduct and the Waterworks, water is pervasive throughout the more significant of Patrick’s encounters with Clara and Alice.

As the loggers are linked to the river, so Patrick is attuned to water in his encounters with Clara at the same moment that he is also more vulnerable socially. Patrick’s initial encounters with Clara are, indeed, full of subtle traces of water: a “sun tear” (62) in her eye, the Grand River and rain (63) the day after he meets her, to name just two. Arguably the first person Patrick really gets to know after leaving Bellrock, Clara facilitates his entrance into the mural and places him among this “falling together of accomplices” (157). Where previously he felt lost and disconnected, Clara gives Patrick something to cleave to, and water plays an important role in the development of their relationship. And, just as when his turning away from the loggers on the river was a rejection of civility, after Clara leaves Patrick for Ambrose Small, he drops out of his burgeoning social network and correspondingly works his way into a “dry corner” (82) as he obsessively cleans his apartment. His cleaning—a purging activity of sorts—literally leaves him high and dry, stuck in a corner with himself. Isolated in his dryness, Patrick retreats into incivility. He remains a labourer yet has no bond with the community he

labours with nor with the structures he creates; he remains outside the community's civil relations and consequently outside the community's civic aspirations.

It takes an intervention from Alice—a woman who also needed to be saved when blown of the Bloor Street Viaduct (30-32)—to “save him, to veer him to some reality” (88); indeed, he states that she “delivered him out of nothing” and helped him “come back to the world” (152, 70). And, repeating the pattern set with the loggers and Clara of Patrick's sociality being linked to his awareness of water, Patrick unexpectedly runs into Alice in the politically charged venue of the Waterworks—“a palace for water” (109)—stooped over a basin of water, bathing. At the time of this encounter, Patrick notes that “he had reduced himself to almost nothing” (113), that he had “felt utterly alone” in the Waterworks among the “laughing crowd that traded information back and forth, held children on their laps” (115). Patrick finds Alice back stage when he hears “[a] *splash*” (120). Patrick's re-entry into the civil—already begun by his encounter with Kosta and Elena (112-14)—culminates in helping Alice remove her stage makeup. He carefully removes the makeup from her neck, her face, her lips, her eyes, “squeezing out a cloth in the basin” (121).

There is more to Patrick's encounter with Alice here than bathing. Consider the content of her performance, enacted within the politicized space of the Waterworks: an ambitious immigrant, played by Alice, steps out of place and is literally beaten down by the authorities, “a damaged gaze in the context of those flailing arms” (117). Unable to speak the language of the authorities, the character could only kneel and hit the stage “as if pleading for help” (117). Patrick is deeply moved by the pain and helplessness of the character, to the point that he is unable to endure it and despite the fact that “[h]e wanted to be out of [there], out of [the] building” (117), Patrick instead stops the performance:

“He knelt and held [Alice’s] shoulders, his arm on her damp back. He leaned forward, caught the hand still trying to smash down again [...]. He swerved the palm from the floor and brought it slowly down to her thigh” (118). The character’s individual suffering stopped—which, as we learn shortly, is in fact part of Alice’s performance (127)—she then begins to clap in unison with the audience. The play’s message, then, is that the community is stronger together than individually—the single fist cannot do as much as the community’s literally joined hands. It is particularly pertinent, then, that this is the context in which Patrick regains his civility: at the very moment he engages with civic expression, he re-enters the civil world, and vice versa.

As when he first meets Clara, this civil/civic reengagement is marked by the presence of water as Alice takes Patrick into the small space of her apartment during a rainstorm. That being said, Alice’s re-civilizing of Patrick is not *necessarily* a good thing. Indeed, the novel emphasizes regularly that there are many competing visions of what a civic city would look like, and this rainy encounter punctuated by Alice’s politics, her vision of a workers’ revolution, is but one vision among many. I would suggest that Alice’s vision of the city, like Harris’s vision discussed above, is criticized in the novel: when Patrick looks out her window and sees the workers off to their various jobs, he says to Alice, “They don’t want your revolution.” She retorts, “No, they won’t be involved” (127). The implication of Alice’s words is that the workers need not be part of a workers’ revolution, that their aspirations and even lives are not included in the calculus underlying Alice’s vision, her particular narrative of the workers’ world. Alice creates “a world where the pursuit of ‘truth’ and justice’ means nothing more than to ‘name the enemy and destroy their power’” and thus makes “politics, rather than ethics or aesthetics, [...] the determining ground for every genuine human value” (Spinks 157).

Implied shortcomings of Alice's vision aside, after her accidental death caused by a suitcase bomb (239-41), Patrick repeats and escalates the behaviour that occurs after Clara's departure. Telling Hana that "Each of us is on our own for a while now" (211), Patrick slips into "remorse in its most pernicious form: a violent turning against the self" (Spinks 163) and withdraws from his tenuous social world and the civil community of the workers to take up the activities he previously indicted (discussed above in relation to Alice's political vision). Forgetting his own comments about the workers not wanting Alice's revolution (127), after Alice's death Patrick recalls the "cause in her eye about wealth and power, forever and ever" (165), the way she "pushed her hands up against the slope of a ceiling and spoke of a grand cause." What he fails to acknowledge here is that when Alice "died later on a bloody pavement, ruined in his arms" (171), she was herself the "unintended victim of an act of political violence that left only ruin and desolation in its wake" (Spinks 168). Patrick then, out of remorse and a poorly conceived sense of justice, takes up this violent and depopulated vision of political change, severing his civil ties and thus necessarily compromising his political actions in his descent into a Gilgamesh-like wildness.

Exemplifying his rejection of society en route to the Muskoka Hotel, site of his first arson attempt, Patrick stands on a dark train platform at four in the morning musing that "Civilization now, on this August night, is two men cleaning shoes as they sit on the steps of a train." Patrick, however, stands apart, looking "at them from the darkness" (166). As with Gilgamesh stepping away from his civil connections and therefore his civic potential, here we have Patrick conceptualizing two men polishing shoes in a circle of light as civilization, as tableau which he stands outside of, in the darkness. He reflects further on the pools of light on the platform that have

not attached [themselves] to him. Walking through rain would have left him wet. But light, or a man polishing one tan shoe at four A.M., is only an idea. And this will not convert Patrick, whose loss creates venom. At times like this he could put his hand under the wheel of a train to spite the driver. He could pick up a porcupine and thrash it against the fence not caring how many quills were flung into his hands and neck in retaliation. (166)

There are a number of things to unpack here but I would remark first upon the sinister tone of this passage. Light, as mentioned, is affiliated with civilization and here juxtaposed with rain. Rain is tangible and leaves a mark, whereas light/civilization is, the narrator suggests, an ideological construct—and, as when Patrick refuses to be persuaded by Alice’s politics, Patrick here rejects the idea of civilization entirely. Rain, present in his early encounters with both Clara and Alice, here is only a metaphor: the “yellow spray of the station lamp,” the “pools of light” (166). The light of civilization leaves him untouched where rain—life-affirming, universal, tangible—could have reconnected him with the world he was then about to harm. Additionally, it is important to note the simultaneously inwardly and outwardly directed violence of his incivility: derailing a train with his hand, thrashing a porcupine. In both cases, Patrick would be harmed, but he would also be harming other living things in the same moment. In this sense, Patrick’s withdrawal from society not only damages him but poses a significant threat to society itself.

Patrick’s incivility carries on while he is in prison for his arson attempt, as he recalls later that he envisioned freedom as solitary, “nothing to carry, nothing to fall back into the arms of. This was the image he luxuriated in” (212). He escapes into silence “as if any sentence would be unsafe territory, as if saying even one word would begin a

release of Alice out of his body” (212). The radical incivility expressed in such silence effectively blocks any meaningful possibility for Patrick to be civically engaged.

Unsurprisingly then, after prison Patrick continues on his civilly- and civically-disconnected path to the Waterworks.

Patrick’s attempt to blow up the Toronto Waterworks represents the height of his uncivil and thus ultimately uncivic behaviour after Alice’s death. While his attempt to burn down the Muskoka Hotel certainly represents a violent incivility, destroying the Waterworks would constitute an act of violence against an entire city and, curiously, the very people his borrowed ideology claimed to speak for. We saw earlier how Ondaatje’s politicization of the space of the Waterworks gives the workers an agency that simply retelling the building of the Waterworks could not and thus plays a crucial role in his historical revisionist project. Patrick’s attempt to blow up the Waterworks, then, destroys the space that allowed for the housing of the workers’ civil and civic community. In this sense, if the Waterworks symbolize Harris’s vision of excess and grandeur and the embodiment of an unjust capitalist regime, it also represents a space of contestation as well as transgression wherein the workers could express their dissatisfaction and imagine change. Thus, in attempting to destroy the Waterworks, Patrick is trying to destroy an important civil and civic space for the people his ideological agenda—borrowed from Alice— claims to speak for.

Along with representing this violence against the civil/civic space of the workers, blowing up the Waterworks is also a more broad action against life itself. Though ostensibly acting under the auspices of Alice’s political vision, Patrick’s rejection of civil bonds means that he is even further depopulating Alice’s already problematic vision of a more civic city. If Alice’s politics seem to have a dubious relation to the lived experience

of the workers, Patrick's attempt to blow up the Waterworks eradicates any trace of a human-centred vision of change. As Harris notes, cutting off Toronto's water supply would bring the city to its knees (220). Patrick's indiscriminate, unfocused, and uncivil violence would thus hurt more than help the people he claims to act for. But, as we saw earlier with his dangerously careless behaviour before arriving at the Muskoka Hotel, Patrick shies away from light, telling Harris to turn off his desk lamp (236) in a final step away from civility as he contemplates an action that would kill himself and Harris and also endanger the water supply—and therefore life—of an entire city.

But Patrick does not blow up the Waterworks. This inaction, however, is not the most important part of the Waterworks episode; it is Patrick's encounter with Harris that dominates this passage, functioning importantly as a catalyst for Patrick's return to the civil and consequently the civic. In Patrick and Harris's meeting, we have not a hero trapping his nemesis nor a villain meeting his match, but rather two figures representing their own world-views and articulating competing definitions of the common good and visions of what a better future looks like. As Spinks suggests, the "dialogical form" (169) the exchange takes ensures that both characters encounter "a challenge that casts doubt upon [their] authenticating claims." Both Harris and Patrick call attention to the depopulated aspects of their respective political visions and are able to, if not arrive at a consensus, at least see the unproductive and harmful facets of their actions. Indeed, Spinks summarizes this realization, noting that "if, as Patrick maintains, political power inevitably corrupts the social bond for selfish ends, the blithe renunciation of authority, Harris rejoins, is a solipsistic gesture that has pernicious political consequences" (169). This exchange, then, illuminates the shortcomings of both characters' visions and demonstrates how they suffer from the same problem: an imagining of a more civic world

which fails to acknowledge civil bonds and responsibilities that must prefigure civic development.

After Patrick has fallen asleep, Harris looks down on his prone form and quotes from *The Epic*: “[Gilgamesh] lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw the lions around him glorying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt, and he fell upon them like an arrow from a string” (242). This quotation, in the context of Gilgamesh’s story, marks the height of his wildness, a point at which Gilgamesh resents the life around him and strikes out violently. Gilgamesh sees life—simple, everyday life—being lived around him, and his grief over Enkidu’s death drives him away from his civil and civic responsibilities and into random acts of violence against creatures utterly unrelated to his pain. Similarly, Patrick’s attempt to blow up the Waterworks also marks a point of such wildness where “[s]omething alive, just one small grey bird on a branch, will break his heart” (165). As with Gilgamesh and the lions, Patrick’s attempt to blow up the Waterworks constitutes an act of violence directed everywhere at once and thus nowhere; it is an uncomplicated abhorrence and resentment of life—and Harris recognizes this in Patrick. Harris’s decision to allow Patrick to go free—if only temporarily—is thus a gift and an opportunity to turn away from “emotional self-enclosure [...] [,] the prospect of a political dead end [...] [and] an apocalyptic vision of history” and politics (Spinks 168-69) and to return to the social world and embrace his civil and civic responsibilities in a more productive way.

2.3 Being Civil & the Possibility of the Civic

I would now like to turn to the role of water in Patrick’s return to the civil/civic. To illustrate this, I will focus on two crucial passages: Patrick’s time in the Garden of the

Blind and his stroll down Albany Street. Notably, his attempts to burn down the Muskoka Hotel and to blow up the Waterworks are conspicuously followed by reference to these garden spaces, respectively. The gardens, as Harrison discusses, represent the culmination of human care and labour in their most healthful forms (x). In these passages, then, there is a natural connection between civil communities and life itself. That is, as we saw above, the central point of Patrick and Harris's exchange resides in the movement from a mindset which rejects the civil bond and thus life itself to one that embraces life and consequently the possibility of the civic. The woman Patrick encounters in the Garden, Elizabeth, urges Patrick to embrace the sensuous, vivacious world of the Garden and the civil and civic possibility embedded therein, but this advice falls upon deaf ears. However, by the time we arrive on Albany Street after the episode at the Waterworks, Patrick is able to appreciate the importance of a life-affirming civility within any vision of a more civic city.

With this in mind, I would like to look in detail at Patrick's encounter with Elizabeth in the Garden of the Blind to show how sensuousness—here manifest as an attentiveness to life—is an important step towards seeing the necessity of civil relations. Elizabeth leads Patrick through the Garden, “her relaxed body drift[ing] in the world, moving surely towards the basil and broadleaf sorrel” (169). She introduces Patrick “to the intimacies of dill and caraway [...]; she advises him to bend down and bruise certain leaves which are too subtle for him to appreciate untouched” (169). Their walk concludes with her telling Patrick, “Don't resent your life” (170), calling him on his isolation from the world around him. Driving the passage's life-affirming message home, Elizabeth's eye reminds Patrick of the lunar moth. His childhood love of this tiny insect is recalled in precise detail: “its flare of the lower wing like a signature, a papyrus textured object

whose small furred body he used to see pulsing on a branch or rock within his lantern light” (170). This remembrance, along with their tour of the Garden, is rich with the sensuous details of life that Patrick needs to respond to in order to regain his civility. That is, if life—such as the small bird that will break his heart (165) mentioned above—still sickens Patrick, he is hardly likely to be civil; to be civil is to see the value of forming bonds with the living. Patrick, when he leaves the Garden of the Blind, is not prepared for such appreciation.

Yet despite Patrick’s still apparent bitterness, this passage contains the same sort of potential seen in his early meetings with Clara and Alice: water imagery percolates throughout this section. For instance, the first image we are given of the Garden is the stone cherub, holding “out a hand from which water leaps up into the air”; there is a “falling of sounds—bird-calls like drops of water,” all located on an island (167). The lushness of the Garden and its rich variety of vegetation also points to water’s pervasiveness. The passage’s underlying emphasis on water is linked to Elizabeth’s life-affirming message; the vivacity of the Garden’s life cannot be divorced from water’s role in life. Thus, the Garden’s dense life is presented as a key ingredient to Patrick’s return to civility and the potential of the civic. However, Patrick neither follows Elizabeth’s advice nor fully appreciates the rich life around him. He remains isolated and spiteful of life and continues on his destructive path, appearing like a wild beast in the kitchens of *The Cherokee* (172-3): naked, bleeding, crouched, with a slab of raw meat that “[h]e cuts into strips with a sharp knife and eats [...], licking the juice that dribbles down his arm” (173).

As mentioned, it is not until after he returns from the Waterworks to Albany Street that Patrick is able to recognize how an appreciation of life is fundamental to the development of civility, itself a necessary precursor to the civic. Having fully assumed his

responsibility as surrogate father to Hana (218), Patrick prepares to take her to Marmora to retrieve Clara after Ambrose's death. The first thing Patrick does when Hana wakes him for the trip is peer "down into the landlord's long green garden." He sees the houses and revels in their exposed humanity, "their faint interiors, their privacy and character revealed," (243) describing them as subplots, a term affiliated with gardens and cultivation of the land, and also denoting a section of earth delineated from but still connected to a larger formation. Furthermore, subplots are also associated with stories, evoking the various narrative threads Patrick found himself a part of (such as those of Ambrose, Clara, and others) and his recognition of these plots' interconnections as well as his particular place therein. His "good arm [...] around Hana's shoulder" (243), Patrick notices the "[o]dours from each hedge," "Mr. Rivera hosing his garden at three A.M. Having just returned from a night shift," and a "dog's chain hung off a step railing" (244). As with the descriptions of the Garden of the Blind, water pervades these images—gardens, hedges, humans; each points to the key place of water in the community, a linchpin Patrick had been on the brink of destroying. Here, finally, Patrick comes to appreciate the value of life and the joy of being a member of such a community. Hana at his side, Clara re-entering his life, Patrick finds the simple, vivacious domesticity of the street "most beautiful, [...] most comfortable" (244). Closing the novel, Patrick's final words neatly sum up his momentum in these last pages: "Lights" (244). Harkening back to his trip to the Muskokas and his encounter with Harris, Patrick does not shirk the light but asks for it, fully and willingly calling for that marker of civilization in the novel, light.

To conclude, I would like to return Alice's remark that Patrick is "[l]ike water, [and] can be easily harnessed" (122) which, in light of Alice's critiqued ideological positions, I feel takes on a new meaning. Alice tells Patrick that, "[l]ike water, [he] can be

easily harnessed” (122). When Alice first says this, it appears to be meant as a critique. But surely, given the important life-affirming role water plays throughout the novel and the dubious status of Alice’s judgement by the end of the text, being like water now means something else. Indeed, I would suggest that being like water is not an uncomplicated good or bad thing. Water is anything but easy to harness. Water can leak, flood, nourish, drown, rot, rust, evaporate, freeze, poison—and that is just water itself. The structures around water are also no easy matter: the building of the intake tunnel for the Waterworks was hardly effortless; the pumps, however absurdly, were “more valuable than life” (108); as Maude Barlow argues in *Blue Gold*, wars are fought over and governments are brought down by water infrastructure management. In this sense, water is contested, resilient, and, above all, active, not passive. Being a force to be reckoned with—albeit sometimes volatile and vulnerable—and at the same time fundamentally life-affirming is no small thing.

In this sense, then, water’s pervasiveness is a highly self-conscious move on Ondaatje’s part. In the workers’ involvement in two massive structures for the management of water (in the case of the Viaduct, electricity, trains, and people) and in Patrick’s struggles with civility, water represents something of a brink: a power which is just being tapped into in its potentially revolutionary impact on city infrastructure. In both cases, water is a key marker of the potential for collective power. For the workers, water is present within their work and their venues for dissent; additionally, their clandestine meetings despite legislation against them is analogous to water’s capacity to find a way through even the most concrete of barriers. And, as we have seen, for Patrick, civility is heralded by the presence of water; if water is in fact active, not passive, then linking Patrick’s attempts to be civil with water suggests his movement from passivity to activity.

This makes particular sense when we recall that Ondaatje has made it clear throughout that civic action cannot occur without civil commitment, indeed, that a vision of a more just and civic city must first be a vision for a more civil one.

Chapter 3 The Idea of a Dam:

Rationalism, Development, and the Common Good in *Green Grass, Running Water*

Towards the beginning of Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, the "four old Indians" (97), Robinson Crusoe, Ishmael, the Lone Ranger, and Hawkeye, argue over how to start a story. The Lone Ranger is telling the wrong story and apologizes, saying, "[e]verybody makes mistakes"; Ishmael responds, "[b]est not to make them with stories" (14). This statement leads us to wonder what exactly is at stake in the telling of a story, a question of central importance to King's novel and his work more generally. As King suggests in *The Truth About Stories*, the stories a culture tells about itself contain "relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and [explain] how cultures understand the world in which they exist" (10). Ben Okri encapsulates King's conceptualization of the power of stories, noting that "we live by stories, [and] we also live in them"; "[w]e live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (qtd. in *Stories* 153). In this sense, what is at stake in a story is nothing less than our understanding of the world itself and consequently the values and ideas that form the basis of our actions.

Contained within stories are the ideas and perspectives and attitudes we live by. It makes sense, then, that during King's story of the Grand Baleen Dam near the Blackfoot reserve outside of Blossom, Alberta, Eli Stands Alone tells dam-builder Clifford Sifton that "[i]t's the *idea* of a dam that's dangerous" (260; emphasis mine). While the dam itself undoubtedly has demonstrable physical effects, the idea of a dam poses a more

insidious problem insofar as it a manifestation of a broader world-view characterized by potentially harmful and utilitarian attitudes towards development and the common good generally. For King, the dam and its roles—as a physical entity and the embodiment of a set of “ideas”—represent a certain world-view I will be referring to as hierarchical rationalism. Yet King’s project goes beyond critique; in his reflections on the ideological underpinnings of the dam, he suggests that within resistance to the dam and to hierarchical rationalism there lies another, alternative world-view I will refer to a holistic rationalism⁶.

In this chapter, I will argue that King critiques a hierarchical rationalist world-view while advocating a holistic rationalist one in order to demonstrate a potentially more healthful sense of development and progress⁷. Most concretely expressed in the Grand Baleen Dam, a structure that embodies utilitarian, myopic and even irrational values, the hierarchical rationalist world-view is also exemplified in the objectifying cultural scripting practices of characters such as television salesman Bill Bursum, dam-builder Clifford Sifton, Blackfoot lawyer Charlie Looking Bear, and asylum administrator Dr. Hovaugh, among others. King presents different stories, however, in the Sun Dance, the bursting of the dam, and the rebuilding of Eli’s cabin, which constitute alternative, holistic rationalist world-views. The Grand Baleen Dam, then, forms the linchpin of my

⁶ While in the novel these two world-views could loosely be mapped onto a non-Native and Native dichotomy, the diversity of non-Native/Native opinions prevents me from practising such a simplifying/reductive gesture.

⁷ Arturo Escobar (1995) provides a compelling and thorough history of development discourse in relation to the creation of the Third World.

discussion of King by embodying a hierarchical rationalist world-view and facilitating a holistic rationalist critique.

Defining hierarchical and holistic rationalisms could, truly, be another chapter unto itself. In the interest of brevity, I will focus on how these two differing conceptualizations of rationalism comprehend relations between people as well as between people and their environments. Following this, I consider how these rationalisms produce versions of the common good that have material consequences in a given culture's conceptions of projects for change and/or development such as the Grand Baleen Dam⁸. In doing so, I draw on Val Plumwood's *The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002) Tariq Banuri's "Modernization and its Discontents: A Cultural Perspective on the Theories of Development" (1990) and Mary M. Keys *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good* (2006). I understand these definitions of hierarchical and holistic rationalism to represent dialectical ideals rather than practicable realities. That is, I am not suggesting that King has a textbook case of either world-view embodied in any of his characters or events; rather, his novel contains an array of negotiations of the

⁸ Here I understand "development" to be "a multidimensional process of directed change that coincides with or implies progress, not only in terms of economic growth but also within the context of improving the quality of life" (Fahim 118) and "development theory" to be an umbrella term for the various theoretical discourses surrounding the practice of development in more or less successful incarnations. Similarly, I understand "common goods discourse" to be discursive formation dealing with various modes and models for delineating and applying manifold formulations of the "common good."

hierarchical/holistic rationalist dialectic. And within this diverse array of responses to the rationalist dialectic, some fall closer to one pole than the other.

Put simply, the primary difference between hierarchical and holistic rationalism is that each produces and operates upon different “doctrine[s] about reason” (Plumwood 18); that is, each has a different understandings of the human faculty of reason. For hierarchical rationalism, reason is an exclusively human possession that allows for the creation of a human/nature hierarchical dualism. This dualism positions “non-humans [as] passive, tradeable bodies” and allows for “ideals of culture and human identity that promote human distance from, control of, and ruthlessness towards the sphere of nature as the Other” (Plumwood 4). Beyond a hierarchical relationship with the non-human world, hierarchical rationalism is characterized by a desire for “organization, [...] linearity, and control,” an understanding of time “as discrete rather than continuous,” a belief in humans as “separable or detached from the social, physical, or intellectual environment,” and, above all, an image of the world as fitting into a “conceptual grid” (Banuri 78-79). The majority of these traits are linked by labelling activities that allow for the categorization, objectification, and manipulation of the labelled person/place/animal.

Holistic rationalism, on the other hand, does not suggest that reason—solely a human faculty or not—is grounds for the devaluation and instrumentalization of the non-human world. Indeed, holistic rationalism advocates a continuous and interconnected relationship between humans and the world around them. In this world-view, human identity is “created through identification rather than separation” with the “individual see[ing] herself or himself simply as the nexus of a web of relationships” (Banuri 78, 79-80). Whereas hierarchical rationalism privileges hyperseparation and individuality, holistic rationalism suggests that one is inextricable from one’s social, economic, and

ecological relations. Holistic rationalism, then, values “spontaneity [and] fluidity” and, since it is based more on subjectivity than objectivity, it must “evolve dynamically” and flexibly and see time as continuous (Banuri 79). In this sense, it seeks co-operation rather than control and continuity rather than separation.

Given the radical differences between these world-views, it makes sense that they would produce different understandings of the common good. Predictably, a hierarchical rationalist world-view advocates an understanding of the common good based on individual rights and “separate selves” (Keys 9). Keys describes this stance as “rights talk,” a position that highlights “the particular, irreducible claims of individuals over and against one another and against unjustifiable encroachment from society as a whole or its government” (9). Conversely, holistic rationalism envisions the common good as related to the etymological roots of the word “common.” Common is associated with communion, community, commonality, and so on (Carey 15), and “an ethos of communicability, relation, shared practices and benefits, and responsibility” (Keys 5). In this sense, a holistic understanding of the common good privileges “the claims of the ties that bind as well as the importance of moral and civic virtue for personal flourishing and societal welfare” (5). In this assertion, Keys’ articulation of the common good falls in line with that of Ondaatje’s discussed in the previous chapter; civility prefigures civicness and vice versa. Keys summarizes these competing versions of the common good in two American political mantras: a hierarchical rationalist rights-based idea of the common good would ask whether citizens “are better off today than [they] were four years ago;” a holistic rationalist community-based common good would say, “ask not what your country can do for you, [but] what you can do for your country” (9). For King, these competing understandings of the common good and the world-views they are grounded in

are central to explaining aspects of the world in its current state. Insofar as they form the basis of a culture's values and actions, there is in fact nothing more fundamental to changing the shape of the world than changing the stories it operates by. In this sense, the ways these divergent conceptions of the common good and the world-views they represent—the particular stories they tell—intersect in the Grand Baleen Dam plays a crucial role in *Green Grass, Running Water's* politics.

The first section of this chapter will consider how the dam represents a hierarchical world-view in its underlying ecological, political, economic, and social rationalizations as well as how King demonstrates the harmful consequences of this world-view for the lives of the Native populations around Blossom. The second section will look at how King's critique of the idea of the dam opens up a space for an alternative world-view in the holistically rationalized bursting of the dam, the Sun Dance, and the reconstruction of Eli's cabin. By way of conclusion, I will argue that King advocates a way of approaching development and progress which may allow humans to live in ecologically and ethically healthful ways.

3.1 Native Rights, Dams and the Common Good

How does a dam represent a negotiation of the hierarchical/holistic rationalist dialectic? Dams typically exemplify a world-view based upon hierarchical rationalist values insofar as they operate upon certain types of abstraction and attitudes towards resource exploitation. That is, dams follow the patterns of “modern technology and development [that] have ignored the contours and rhythms of nature, placing their faith in linear, abstract method over local adaptation and experience” (Lousley 24). They are based upon “abstract rules of equivalence and replacability [*sic*]” that do not fit the

infinitely complex interrelations between humans, non-humans, and the environment and are symptoms of hierarchical rationalism that privilege the “abstract over the contextual and experiential, [imposes] the formula on the local, and everywhere [exhibits] the typical [hierarchical] rationalist desire for the permanence and purity of abstraction and mathematization” (Plumwood 14; 23). Arundhati Roy goes further, describing dams as “emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival [...] [,] malignant indications of a civilization turning upon itself” (80)⁹. The problems dams cause regularly outweigh their benefits, such as those outlined by Michaels in *The Winter Vault* (pollution, disease, decreases in fish populations, erosion problems in river deltas, nutrient deprivation downstream, and others) and thus represent a point at which rationalism fails to give primacy to planetary survival and human life among its goals.

In this sense, dams represent a particularly uneasy negotiation of the hierarchical/holistic rationalist dialectic and, for many individuals and communities produce a radically different story than the one the dam-builders and supporters tell. Indeed, as postcolonial and cultural studies show, the fruits of progress and development are not enjoyed everywhere equally and, typically, vulnerable or marginalized groups and locales bear the brunt of the cost of progress while receiving a minimum of its dividends. Roy describes this as the illusion of “Local Pain for National Gain,” a justification which frequently produces a pattern whereby a region’s poorest constituencies subsidize the

⁹ On water management/damming and diverging projects, see Roy (1999) for a consideration of sociopolitical factors of dam-building; Waldram (1998, 1993) for a discussion of damming and diversion projects on Native land in Canada; Bakker (2007) for water management issues in Canada more generally; Fahim (1981) for the relationship between sociopolitical effects of damming projects and development more generally; and Vandergeest, Idahosa, and Bose (2007) for an evaluation of water management projects and resultant waves of human displacement and ecological problems.

lifestyles of its richest (15; 19), with “developments, technologies and hazards with significant environmental impacts or risks tend[ing] to be located where the most socially marginalized people live” (Lousley 28). As Roy’s comment suggest, such patterns of developmental inequality are frequently justified as a localized sacrifice for a general gain, as part of a project geared towards the so-called “common good.”

With this particular understanding of dams in mind, I would now like to turn to the issue of dam-building on Native land. James Waldram’s *As Long as the Rivers Run* (1993) explores the correlations between water management and violence towards Native populations¹⁰, noting the pattern of development which displaces the unpleasant facets of progress onto remote, in this case Native, populations that do not share the benefits of that progress. Echoing the fallacy Roy points out in the development mantra, “Local Pain for National Gain,” Waldram argues that for the indigenous communities of Northern Canada, “there has been, and remains, nothing common about the ‘common good’” (173), and that non-Native interests have taken precedence over those of Natives (172). Indeed, Waldram’s central thesis in *As Long as the Rivers Run* is that water damming and diversion projects on Native land represent “the re-emergence of the treaty and scrip processes which once again have allowed governments to exploit Native resources for the ‘common good’” (xv).

Similarly, J.E. Chamberlin forcefully comments on how consistently such rhetoric has been deployed against Native peoples with disastrous results, arguing that

It was for the common good that treaties were signed, and often broken [...];

it was for the common good that Indian hunting and fishing rights, guaranteed

¹⁰ See also Kenichi Matsui (1999) for a discussion of water management and Native rights and J.E. Chamberlin (1975) for a very readable look at the history of the treatment of Natives in Canada.

by treaty or solemn promise, were revoked [...]; it was for the common good that the Indians were herded like cattle, treated like children, swatted like flies and quarantined like animals suspected of having rabies. (8-9)

As a symbol of progress, the power of the nation-state, and the so-called common good, *Green Grass, Running Water's* Grand Baleen Dam embodies a powerful critique of the hierarchical rationalist world-view which positions nature exclusively in terms of use-value and resource management and understands humans as calculable entities weighed in cost/benefit ratios. The Grand Baleen Dam is produced and sanctioned through hierarchical rationalist narratives which instrumentalize and objectify not only nature, but also Natives in the service of a demonstrably asymmetrical conception of the “common good.”

Predictably, then, King’s treatment of the Grand Baleen Dam—built like so many others, as Waldram reminds, on Native land—points to the weak justifications regarding the dam’s location and benefits. An exchange between Alberta Frank and Charlie Looking Bear encapsulates several key facets of King’s critique of the dam’s justifications. Alberta is a professor of Native history at the University of Calgary while Charlie is the Blackfoot lawyer working with the dam-building company, Duplessis International, on the case to remove his uncle Eli from his cabin in the dam’s spillway. When Alberta asks Charlie about “all those lots the band was supposed to get” along the newly created Parliament Lake behind the dam, he responds “[t]he government made some changes” (116). This somewhat sheepish response demonstrates Chamberlin’s assertion that the modern government is one of the “most misunderstood engines of progress” owing to its “righteous conviction and inordinate power to do anything at all, to anybody, if it is convinced or convinces itself that it is for the common good” (8). Alberta

promptly punctures Charlie's rationale, saying, "That's a new way to describe greed" (117). Charlie subsequently muses on the irony of the dam, stating that once construction started, "nothing stopped it. Environmental concerns were set aside. Questions about possible fault lines that ran under the dam were dismissed. Native land claims that had been in the courts for over fifty years were shelved" (118). Taken together, this exchange and Charlie's subsequent thoughts on the unstoppable of the dam point to the ways in which Duplessis—along with the Alberta government—justify the dam upon poor economic, ecological, and cultural valuations and thus illustrate the determined blindness and myopia underlying the hierarchical rationalist approach to the dam-building process.

Yet despite the obvious political entanglements of deciding to build the dam on Native land, this political facet of the dam's narrative is obscured in the apparently apolitical nature of dams, a characteristic emerging from a blind faith in technological development and progress and justified by the seeming impartiality of the national interest and the common good. During one of Sifton's daily visits to Eli's cabin, he comments "That's the beauty of dams. They don't have personalities, and they don't have politics. They store water, and they create electricity. That's it." Eli abruptly deflates Sifton's naive appraisal of the dam's pragmatic value, asking "So how come so many of them are built on Indian land? [...] Provincial report recommended three possible sites. [...] This wasn't one of them. [...] None of the recommended sites was on Indian land" (111). Eli's analysis—his reading of the story—points to Plumwood's comment on the tendency of developmental projects, especially those that are potentially hazardous, to be located far from the site which they most benefit (61). Waldram's confirms this observation, noting that "Hydro projects designed to serve southern provincial interests [...] have largely failed to serve the interests of northern Native people" (173) who have

suffered to attain but have not been party to the benefits created by damming projects. Instead, these projects tend to contribute to their impoverishment “through the destruction of local resources and economic opportunities” (8).

It is unsurprising, given the historical examples, that the Native community around Blossom—affiliated with a holistic rationalist world-view, as I will discuss in section two—are not persuaded by Charlie and Duplessis’s arguments. Indeed, Charlie notes the difficulties Duplessis International faced in trying to “convince the Indians that the dam was in their best interest” (117), or rather, that Native interests and national interests coincided. That is, Duplessis had to convince the Native community that their (historically consistent) “Local Pain for National Gain” (Roy, *Cost of Living* 15) would pay off in the end. The company even launched a press campaign that tried to demonstrate how “after only one year of the dam operating at full efficiency, the tribe would make in excess of two million dollars” (117). Rather than believing such hyperbole, the Native community points out two important counter facts: first, that, as the Native community is well aware, “about all the Indians ever got from the government [was] a goose” (117); and second, that the damming of the river would mean, “No flood. No nutrients. No cottonwoods. [...] [And if] the cottonwoods die, where [is the Native community] going to get the Sun Dance tree” (376)? The community not only disbelieves Duplessis’s promises that the dam would produce great profits for them, but they also recognize that the substantial cultural, social and ecological trade-off the loss of the cottonwood tree would mean is simply not worth it. This instance is also noteworthy insofar as it demonstrates that flooding is not necessarily a bad thing. As with Michaels’ characterization of the life-sustaining flood plains along the Nile in *The Winter Vault*,

King here points to the ways in which the flood helps support the Blackfoot's community and culture.

For King, then, it is not a lack of savvy on the part of the Native community that allows a project like the Grand Baleen Dam to go through. Indeed, with the Native community's scepticism towards the project so apparent, we may wonder how the dam came to be on Native land in the first place. I stated earlier that I would demonstrate how King's critique of the Grand Baleen Dam opened up a space to critique a hierarchical rationalist world-view which had damaging effects upon Native communities: this space is opened by the connection between the ways in which hierarchical rationalism subjugates non-humans *in addition to* its objectification and subjugation of humans as well. That is, King demonstrates how a hierarchical rationalist world-view subjugates and objectifies not only nature but also Natives in the service of the Grand Baleen Dam's hydroelectric project under the rubric of a questionably conceived common good.

A large part of this objectification is accomplished via what Derek Gregory refers to as cultural scripting. Gregory describes this process as the "production (and consumption)" of people, things, and places, that is both performative and proscribed within "a narrativized sequence of interactions through which roles are made and remade" (116) and in which the narrativizing subject has meaning-producing power over the narrativized object. Gregory suggests that some agents have more storytelling power than others—those who narrate have more control over the story, naturally, than those who are narrated. The scripting practices in the novel tend to be hierarchical rationalist in inclination and seek to define and police what constitutes 'Nativity,' what makes a person Native, or more often than not, what makes a person not Native. The ways in which Native characters in the novel are scripted into someone else's idea of a Native

resembles the hierarchical rationalist project which objectifies Others for the purposes of domination, manipulation, and, in this case, inflexible and oppressive definitions that circumscribe the possibilities of identity. The policing of Native identities plays an important role in the disavowal of Native rights, for deciding that an individual or community is not Native enough becomes a justification for waiving treaties and other legal rights.

I do not mean to suggest that holistic rationalism is innocent of scripting practices, but rather that the types and ramifications of such practices differ. This is most definitely a two-way process, yet hegemonic cultural understandings tend to take precedence over counter-hegemonic scripting practices (otherwise the former would not be hegemonic and the latter not counter-hegemonic). In practice, cultural scripting manifests itself as one character imposing an interpretation or identity onto another character or event and thereby establishing authority from the silencing of the latter. This objectification and subjugation is particularly effective when the script contains derogatory insinuations that limit the scripted object's ability to retort, further disempowering him/her/it.

Old Woman, for instance, is scripted/narrated into a hierarchical rationalist narrative based upon a hegemonic construction of what a Native can/should be. Old Woman appears first within the narrative of Young Man Walking On Water (349-52)—the story of Jesus saving a group of mariners from a storm—before landing in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Saga* (Flick 141) and being mistaken for Chingachgook (392). It is worth noting that Cooper's representations of Native peoples in *The Leatherstocking Saga* are not particularly sanguine, with Natives primarily being represented as savage, subservient, or near extinction. Nasty Bumppo, also known as Hawkeye (Flick 142), concludes that Old Woman must be Chingachgook because

“Chingachgook is an Indian. [She’s] an Indian. Case closed” (392). Old Woman responds that “[she’s] sure this is embarrassing” for Nasty, yet he persists in his error even though she may “not [be] the Indian [he] had in mind” (King, *Stories* 31). Ondaatje’s Commissioner Harris suggests a similar rigidity in his view of the workers as at best ghosts or spectres and at worst not even there; the workers, like Natives in Nasty’s view, become ideas rather than people. Both perspectives represent a distinctively inflexible way of thinking in contrast to more fluid, hospitable understandings of others such as those exemplified by Old Woman or First Woman, for instance.

Nasty goes on to describe what he calls “white gifts” and “Indian gifts,” traits that he ascribes to Natives (such as Old Woman) based on the rationalist construction of the self through opposition (Plumwood 18). Similarly, Old Woman sums up these gifts, saying “So [...] Whites are superior, and Indians are inferior” (393); this passage’s enumeration of what constitutes a Native as well as its subsequent value judgement point to the ways in which hierarchical rationalist attitudes seek to define for the purposes of valuation and control. This passage is especially rich with examples of scripting as the soldiers, upon finding Nasty shot, “all take out a book from their packs” to find appropriate names in Cooper’s novel (396) for Old Woman and Chingachgook, who has recently joined her. In this instance, the possibilities for Old Woman’s identity are circumscribed and dictated by a written document notorious for its unfavourable representation of indigenous peoples as inferior and near extinction. In effect, this passage creates an insurmountable paradox for Old Woman: at the same moment that any Indian will do for Nasty’s purposes, only a very few specifically defined identities will suffice for the soldiers. In neither instance does she have control over the definition of her own identity; rather, she is continually scripted into others’ narratives of what a Native is

and what Natives are worth. The lack of control over how her image-as-Indian is read by others leads to a lack of control over her life while others accrue power and authority at her expense.

Eli also struggles with other people's expectations of his "Indianness" as the policing of what constitutes Native-enough becomes grounds for disavowing treaty rights and legal protections. Clifford Sifton states that the Blackfoot community around Blossom "aren't real Indians anyway. I mean, you drive cars, watch television, go to hockey games. Look at you. You're a university professor. [...] Latisha runs a restaurant and Lionel sells televisions. Not exactly traditionalists, are they?" (141). Despite Eli's comment that "Being Indian isn't a profession," Sifton persists in his limiting narrative construction of Natives, denying the possibility of agency, growth, and cultural development. Eli counters Sifton's next narrative move—his associating Eli with Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"¹¹—by saying, "It's fiction, Cliff" (142). This statement is applicable as much to King's and Melville's stories as to Sifton's construction of Eli as not Native enough (or rather, his narrative of what a Native should be). It also demonstrates how stories and scripting practices can be used to manipulate and pigeon-hole others as Sifton utilizes Melville's text to criticize Eli's behaviour. Additionally, however, the passage is also evocative of Patrick Lewis and Commissioner Harris's encounter in the Waterworks at the end of *In the Skin of a Lion*. Pitting their respective world-views against one another, Patrick and Harris are able to see the common weaknesses of both of their visions for the city of Toronto and begin to learn

¹¹ Melville's story culminates with Bartleby—a man "who didn't want to do anything to improve his life" (King, *Green Grass, Running Water* 142)—loosing touch with reality and dying. In comparing Eli to Bartleby, Sifton erroneously suggests that Eli's choice to stay in the cabin, rather than being the political act that it is, is a failure to act for the improvement of his life.

from them. Sifton, however, has no such openness, and while Eli responds to Sifton's comments, Sifton is oblivious to Eli's reasoning and therefore can see no weaknesses in his own.

Sifton's narrative of Eli's life culminates in deciding that Eli's cabin is not a home but rather "a pile of logs in the middle a spillway" and that he should "go on back to Toronto and live like a king" (142). In this instance Sifton simultaneously decides what a Native is and is not, what a home is and is not, all according to a particular narrative frame which denies its status as one fiction among many. Eli himself comments on the ways Native life is scripted, noting the theme of "The Indian who couldn't go home" and its various manifestations as "Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, goes to the city, and is destroyed. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, is exposed to white culture, and becomes trapped between two worlds," and so on (286). These cultural scripts decide what constitutes a Native and, similarly, what destroys a Native, which, as Eli points out, is any kind of professional development unrelated to the supposedly "traditional world of the reserve."

This scripting process circumscribes the possibilities of Native identities and becomes grounds for the waiving of treaties and other legal rights. For instance, consider the attitudes expressed by Clifford Sifton and Bill Bursum towards Native and treaty rights (bearing in mind Sifton's previous comments about Eli's inadequate 'Indianness'). Sifton apologizes to Eli for having to repeat the process of reading out legal documents in regards to vacating the cabin everyday by saying,

Look, it's not my idea [...] It's all those lawyers and injunctions and that barrel load of crap about Native rights. [...] And so because the government felt generous back in the last ice age, and made promises it never intended to

keep, I have to come by every morning and ask the same stupid question.

(138)

Sifton goes further in his disavowal of treaty rights, saying, “Hell, Eli, those treaties aren’t worth a damn. Government only made them for convenience” (141). In this instance, Sifton equates Natives with naïveté and greed and the government and treaties with outdated generosity and insincerity; additionally, it is worth remarking upon King’s pun on ‘damn.’ In effect, Sifton is saying that the treaties are of less worth than a ‘dam,’ that the government would rather build a dam than honour the treaties.

This question of whether or not the treaties are worth a dam/damn is asked—in slightly different ways—across all three novels I am looking at. In Ondaatje, it was a question of the value of life (particularly lower class, immigrant labourers) versus the need to quickly produce mammoth structures of civic prestige (the Viaduct and the Waterworks). Similarly, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Michaels asks what the cost of the Aswan High Dam and the St. Lawrence Seaway are in human and ecological terms and questions this calculus. In all three cases, deciding if a given region and its human and non-human residents are or not worth a dam (or other water management utility) is a fraught question. Among other things, it comes down to what the state owes the people—especially consistently disadvantaged populations—and how it will decide to honour those obligations.

In both cases, Sifton seeks to invalidate Native claims to the land, demonstrating both Lousley and Waldram’s arguments about the parallels between ecological destruction, development and the assimilationist policies of nineteenth and twentieth century treaty and scrip practices. These parallels are particularly apposite King’s demonstration of scripting practices, as the treaty processes was about not only the

carving up of the land but the also the legal delineation of what constitutes a ‘Native’ in documents such as the Indian Act¹². Thus, in seeking both to define ‘Nativeness’ and disregard the treaties, Sifton is adding insult to injury in a profoundly disempowering way. That is, by defining what is sufficiently ‘Native’ and what is not in tandem with devaluing the treaties, Eli is left without recourse—he can never meet Sifton’s expectations of ‘Indianness,’ and if he does, it means nothing because the treaties mean nothing.

Television salesman Bill Bursum strikes a similar tone, mocking Eli’s comment that the cabin will stay where it is “As long as the grass is green and the waters run” (267). Bursum muses, “It was a nice phrase, all right. But it didn’t mean anything. It was a metaphor. [...] Treaties [...] were contracts, and no one signed a contract for eternity” (267). The troublesome thing is, of course, that “[a]s long as the grass is green and the waters run” *is* a metaphor for eternity. The rhetoric of the treaties was based upon Native ideas about the eternalness of landscapes and the cyclical and consistent rhythms of nature, thus the phrase is a metaphor for a contract signed in perpetuity. Bursum’s comments suggest that the treaties were more about temporary appeasement than enduring legal obligation and, indeed, that seems to be the way the government of Canada views them for, with the dams stopping of the river, the very foundations of the treaty become questionable. If the treaty is based upon the eternalness of landscapes, what happens when that landscape is changed? The dam suddenly becomes not only a substantial inconvenience for the Blackfoot community, but also a veritable assault on the very foundations of the community’s claims to the land.

¹² For a thorough list of work related to the Indian Act since its inception, see *A Select and Annotated Bibliography Regarding Bill C-31, Indian Registration and Band Membership, Aboriginal Identity, Women and Gender Issues* (2005).

The Grand Baleen Dam, then, is the centre of King's critique of a hierarchical rationalist world-view, demonstrating the faulty underpinnings of the dam itself as well as the damaging effects of hierarchical rationalist scripting practices which objectify both non-humans and humans.

3.2 A Different Story: A Dam, A Dance, & A Cabin

King critiques hierarchical rationalism throughout the novel, demonstrating both its effectiveness and absurdity. The critiques vocalized or demonstrated by Eli and others, as well as the Grand Baleen Dam itself, are an important facet of this, yet I would suggest that the bursting of the dam, the organization and symbolic function of the Sun Dance, and the rebuilding of Eli's cabin constitute a much more useful comment insofar as they also proffer an alternative, holistic rationalist world-view. What I find most interesting about these latter elements is how they demonstrate a holistic rationalist interaction with and mapping of space. This builds upon Marlene Goldman's argument that the structure and narrative variability of the novel, among other things, mimics the organization of the Sun Dance and thus illustrates a map of the world, a particular articulation of a world-view, based more on tradition, community, and family than with the naming, claiming, and taming activities of Western forms of mapmaking. The rupture of the dam and, more particularly, the symbolic value of the Sun Dance and the rebuilding of Eli's cabin operate in a similar way, constituting a cyclical, familial activity grounded in co-operation rather than co-option, thus representing a negotiation of the hierarchical/holistic rationalist dialectic that leans more towards the latter pole.

My reading, however, complicates Goldman's designation of 'Native' and 'non-Native' "story-mapping" practices (27) by exploring the broader world-views they can be

affiliated with, what I have been referring to as holistic and hierarchical rationalism. Their different conceptualizations of progress, change, and the common good speak to differing negotiations of the hierarchical/holistic rationalist dialectic. I will consider how, in addition the Sun Dance, the bursting of the dam and the rebuilding of Eli's cabin also represent alternative mapping processes. In so doing I do not wish to romanticize Native ways of life or associate them with some purer and more salutary relation with nature. Rather, I wish to emphasize the values and priorities the Native world-view articulates in *Green Grass, Running Water* in relation to the world-view the dam represents and how the Native world-view, perhaps, more ethically and ecologically situates humans in and with the non-human world.

If the dam represents the hierarchical rationalist abstraction and objectification of the land and its human and non-human inhabitants, the bursting of the dam comments upon the relativity of maps: in the scenes surrounding the bursting of the dam, King demonstrates numerous different mappings of the world and demonstrates their temporariness and subjective construction, as well as their need for constant revision and maintenance. In so doing, King illustrates the fallacy of the hierarchical rationalist project of categorizing and control. For instance, consider Dr. Hovaugh's mapping of the dam and his concordant understanding of its destruction. Having meticulously (even obsessively) drawn up a hypothesis about correlations between the disappearances of the four old Indians—Hawkeye, the Lone Ranger, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael—and various natural disasters, Dr. Hovaugh sits in a “sea of maps and brochures and travel guides” (389) attempting to deduce the whereabouts of the Indians. His activities are conspicuously textual ones as he attempts to anticipate and calculate all possible variables (in a decidedly omniscient-like way), “plott[ing] occurrences and probabilities and

directions and deviations on a pad of graph paper” (389). In this instance, Dr. Hovaugh is concerned with an abstraction of space—he seeks to break down the possibilities of movement for the Indians into quantifiable probabilities, literally converting the Indians and the space they move through into variables and equations. This represents Plumwood’s critique of hierarchical rationalist abstraction *par excellence*; he does not see people or places, but instead abstracts them into numerical values and geographic coordinates.

The culmination of Dr. Hovaugh’s labours and calculations is a mark upon another abstraction, a map: “Slowly and with a great deal of assurance, Dr. Hovaugh took out a purple marker and drew a deliberate circle around Parliament Lake. [...] And he drew a second circle around the lake. And a third” (389). Dr. Hovaugh’s map of Parliament Lake and the Grand Baleen Dam represents a nexus of, for him, dangerous coincidences between the four old Indians’ escapes and natural disasters; the dam represents imminent catastrophe, an abstract circle on a map. This instance points to the separation created between the intent of the mapper and the material consequences of their mapping. That is, Dr. Hovaugh’s perverse obsession with locating the Indians means that he does not really *see* what is around him, what his mapping and calculations in fact represent (which is, in this case, a dam that is displacing and violating the rights of an entire community). This myopia represents a microcosmic version of what hierarchical rationalism means on a macrocosmic level. Dr. Hovaugh’s excessive abstraction of the physical world leaves him unable to comprehend the actual effects of what he purportedly attempting to prevent: the destruction of the dam.

Babo, on the other hand, decides that a bus tour would be a good way to get way to get Dr. Hovaugh’s mind off the Indians because, first, one must relinquish a certain

amount of control upon boarding the bus; Dr. Hovaugh would no longer be the driver-cum-de-facto-dictator, but would have to “sit back and relax and enjoy the view” (399). Secondly, Babo hopes to get Dr. Hovaugh’s mind off the Indians by drawing his attention to the “other points of interest” in the area (399) and to the world around him beyond the scope of his maps and calculations. That said, the mode Babo chooses is, admittedly, a tourist-gear-ed bus tour which will indeed be following a carefully scripted version of the points of interest in the area. However, her focus nonetheless constitutes an alternative mapping to Dr. Hovaugh’s obsessive imposition of calculation and probability upon a landscape and area that are utterly ignored under his gaze. Even when the dam bursts, Dr. Hovaugh’s eyes are glued to his abstractions of the very space he is in, pointing lamely at his book, saying, “It’s all here, [...] I was right after all” (415).

Similarly, Bill Bursum has his own map/understanding of the dam and its destruction. Bursum, notable for his frequent espousal of Machiavellian understandings of power and control (128-9; 298), views maps as tools that solidify knowledge and possession. The television Map at his store is the culmination of Bursum’s mapping practice, as he thinks of The Map as analogous to “having the universe there on the wall, being able to see everything, being in control” (128), as though the power of sight were enough. Like Dr. Hovaugh in his pension for becoming reflective (16 [Hovaugh], 268 [Bursum]), Bursum also aspires to omniscience for the purposes of control; both Bursum and Dr. Hovaugh are affiliated with a hierarchical rationalist world-view in their will to power through greater knowledge. To borrow a phrase from Tzvetan Todorov, both aspire to the type of understanding that kills, or in this case, controls and claims (127).

Unlike Dr. Hovaugh, however, Bursum only sees the dam for its lake: “Even before the dam had been started, before the contours of the lake were actually realized, Bursum

had looked at the topographical map that Duplessis provided and picked out the best piece of property on the lake” (266). For him, the Grand Baleen Dam is really Parliament Lake, and that Lake is a picture on his wall with a “red circle around the piece of lakefront property that [he] had bought just after the dam was announced” (266).

Bursum’s vision of the dam is as abstract as Dr. Hovaugh’s, only rather than being the centre of a series of anxieties, for Bursum the dam is a source of wealth and potential status. Echoing Sifton’s declaration about Eli’s cabin as a pile of logs, Bursum disregards Eli’s right to live where he does, thinking instead that Eli’s cabin “was in the wrong place. It was too small. There were no utilities” (267). By Bursum’s standards, it barely even counts as a home.

Bursum intends to capitalize upon the property the dam creates, valuing it as “Secluded. Exclusive. Valuable.” (266) rather than condemning its massive social and ecological costs. Bursum’s attitude also exhibits a hierarchical rationalist attitude in his positioning of nature in terms of use-value as an exploitable, manipulatable resource. When the dam bursts, Bursum has own unique experience and understanding of the event; King writes that, “From the vantage point of *his* lot, Bill Bursum watched *his* shoreline disappear” (415; emphasis mine). Bursum sees the event of the dam bursting strictly from the perspective of his property. In this sense, it is indeed particularly *his* shoreline that disappears as it exists as such only for him in particular. His map is a relative, individual one; a particular vision of the world. The map he had in his mind, the one tacked above his desk with a red circle around his lot, now means nothing because the world changed.

King further emphasizes his point about the relativity of maps, of their mutability and fragility, in the way he figures the destruction of the dam. Not only is it, as Lousley

notes, the reattribution of agency to the supposedly passive non-human or ambiguously human world mentioned above, it is also the literal enactment of a faulty map. That is, the three cars that hit the dam are puns on the names of Christopher Columbus's ships—the Nissan, the Pinto and the Karmann-Ghia corresponding to the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* (Flick 146)—and when the dam bursts they “[tumble] over the edge of the world” (King 414). This instance constitutes a literal re-enactment of what should have happened if all maps were necessarily and unequivocally true; according to earlier maps, the world had definitive edges that one could fall off, yet we now know that this is not the case and our maps have been revised accordingly. However, we have, to a certain extent, obfuscated such changes to our earlier maps, failing to acknowledge that a change in a map changed the perceivable shape of the world (literally, in this case).

In having the cars appear to tumble over the edge of the world, King is pointing to the necessary on-going evolutions inherent in the mapmaking process, illustrating that no one map can be made too solidly or maintained too zealously, especially in light of concrete evidence that that model of the world *does not work*. This comment is especially important when we consider Roy, Waldram, and Bakker's argument that dams represent a point at which human ingenuity is in fact threatening human (and non-human) survival. A dam is a mapping of the world which no longer makes sense given our knowledge and evolving priorities of the damaging effects of dams on both upstream and downstream communities, landscapes, and wildlife; as such, damming practices should be decommissioned or, better yet, remapped, to more suitably serve human and non-human entities. That is, dams must be understood as potentially destructive and dangerous projects, and as such should be undertaken with great care. In this sense, the cars tumbling over the edge of the world is doubly powerful: not only is it a reference to an

older, now defunct mapping of the world, it also suggests that a dam is the *end* of the world. That is, the dam is figured as both the edge and the end of the world—it is a mapping which is both ineffective and, at its root, fundamentally life-threatening.

King critiques certain hierarchical rationalist mapping practices in the problematization of the maps of Dr. Hovaugh, Bill Bursum, and the dam itself; alongside these he offers the Sun Dance and the rebuilding of Eli's cabin as alternative holistic rationalist maps. In relation to the Sun Dance, I would like to borrow a phrase from Goldman as a point of departure: when Eli and Lionel are driving to the Sun Dance, their journey "entails a move away from the predictable non-Native trajectory to a non-domesticated, vital path that virtually fuses with the natural world" (33). In other words, they take the lease road across the plains rather than the highway. While I agree that the journey to the Sun Dance is a divergence from non-Native linearity, I would not suggest that the Sun Dance is necessarily somehow less predictable. Indeed, the Sun Dance is premised upon tradition and a profound belief in nature and life's cyclical rhythms; it is not so much that the world is less predictable, it is that in the world-view the Sun Dance represents, the world is in fact a different shape. Indeed, as Goldman states, if the hierarchical rationalist world-view is a line representing the "Genesis to Revelations line: progress, progress, progress from point A to point B, until the apocalypse comes" (Highway qtd. in Goldman 29), then the holistic rationalist world-view is a circle. This circle, unlike Dr. Hovaugh's, is not about delineating a certain place/thing or creating an excluding inside and outside; instead, it is about emphasizing continuity and connection. Whereas Dr. Hovaugh's circle served narrow his focus, the circles within the Sun Dance serve to expand one's understanding of place and belonging in the world.

The Sun Dance is “a land-based, communal, and non-hierarchical spiritual practice that involves both body and soul” (Goldman 20), but is also premised upon continuity insofar as it is based on tradition and the eternalness of nature’s cycles. King emphasizes several times the predictability and timelessness of the Sun Dance, as when he comments on the position of each family’s tepee, for instance, or when Eli’s reminisces that “Every July, [...] his mother would close up the cabin and move the family to the Sun Dance” (137), where the dances coincide with the movement of the sun and that “each morning, because the sun returned and the people remembered, it would begin again” (138). The Sun Dance here is, naturally, equated with the cycles of night and day, but also with memory and the continuation of tradition. After bringing Karen to the Sun Dance, Eli recalls that what stuck most in his mind “were the people. Aunties, uncles, cousins, in-laws, friends. [...] People who greeted him as if he had never left” (260). This remembrance suggests that the primary function of the Sun Dance is to perpetuate community and tradition and fortify social bonds, a focus which differs greatly from the sense of change and progress advocated by the hierarchical rationalist narrative of the dam (exemplified, for instance, by the discussion of Dr. Hovaugh’s and Bursum’s respective maps). Additionally, the idea of beginning again is an important distinction between hierarchical/holistic rationalist world-views; as Banuri notes, in hierarchical rationalism, time is discrete, as with the Genesis to Revelation line, while in holistic rationalism, time is circular and continuous. Thus, to “begin again” each day suggests that progress through time is not necessarily based on ‘progress’ in the sense of forward or upward motion, but rather is about recognizing each day as a new beginning, as, in some sense, starting over.

The Sun Dance, then, constitutes a holistic rationalist map insofar as it privileges an entirely different set of values than hierarchical rationalism. Rather than focusing on better utilizing or manipulating the environment, the Sun Dance seeks to actively express the nature of a given environment. Similarly, rather than exemplifying the atomistic understanding of individuals found in hierarchical rationalism, individuals at the Sun Dance are thought of in a holistic way; that is, when Eli thinks of the people and specifies his bonds to them, he is seeing both himself and them as a nexus of connections. Additionally, the very formation of the camp—the circles of tepees—is based upon an egalitarian understanding of each individual's status, as well as a sense of mutual dependence. The mutual dependence is also exemplified in the tradition of, when the men have completed their dancing for a day, passing out the food that was “piled up around the flagpole—bread, macaroni, canned soup, sardines, coffee” (138). In this instance, the sharing of resources is intimately connected to the Sun Dance itself, further pointing out the egalitarian nature of the ceremony. It also suggests a way of life which recognizes the value, both individually and communally, of generosity, sharing, and mutual benefit—all traits associated with holistic rationalism.

In a similar way, the rebuilding of Eli's cabin after the bursting of the dam is also premised upon community, continuity, tradition, and a non-hierarchical understanding of rights. Standing in the middle of the barren mud flat that once was Eli's home, his sister Norma says, “Everything's still here” (420). She looks out on the waste left after the dam bursts and recognizes not only the loss of her brother but also the continuation of the rhythms of life. This comment echoes Dr. Hovaugh's appraisal of the dam bursting—he looks at the dam's destruction and says “It's all here” (415), meaning all there is in the dam is a pattern of destruction. Norma, on the other hand, looks out on the waste left after

the dam bursts and recognizes not only the loss of her brother but also the continuation of the rhythms of life. Where Dr. Hovaugh sees that Genesis to Revelation line, Norma sees a circle. Shortly after this comment, Lionel notices that the “river [was] slowly coming back to life” while Norma finds the porch post where Eli, she, and her sister carved their names in the wood as children (421-2). These instances, as with Norma’s recognition that nothing has been lost, draw attention to the importance of family as a crucial site of interconnection.

These observations point to the way that the new cabin constitutes not only a continuation of a previous familial map but also the creation of a new map of the world which does not, and never did, acknowledge the ideologies of hierarchical rationalism represented by the dam, exemplified when Latisha says “Never needed a dam [...] And it never worked, anyway” (420). Similarly, when Lionel muses that he might live in the cabin like his uncle after it is rebuilt, Norma responds, “Not your turn. [...] It’s my turn. Your turn will come soon enough” (423). This instance posits a different kind of hierarchy which is based on turn-taking and mutability rather than fixity and absolute authority. Finally, Norma puts a “stick in the earth” and says “We’ll start here. [...] So we can see the sun in the morning” (424). This represents another form of mapping which is based on attentiveness to the earth’s natural cycles and rhythms, a development which stands in contrast to the dam which is characterized as “cold and ponderous, clinging to the geometry of the land” (408).

I do not mean to wax lyrical about the salutary nature of this communal effort, but I do want to suggest that the rebuilding of the cabin indicates that the power of objectifying narratives is never absolute and that there are always alternative ways of mapping and viewing the world—in this case, a holistic rationalist alternative. That is, while the cabin

was a mark of resistance in the face of the dam, the rebuilding of the cabin points to the efficacy of other narratives which advocate continuance, co-operation, and community beyond the scope of the legal and governmental world that Eli wrestles with.

Additionally, the rebuilding effort points to the ways in which development—the creation of a living space—can be an activity which fortifies communities rather than weakens them. Similarly, Latisha’s comments above about the non-necessity of the dam suggests that development should be a product of necessity only and should thus be planned and executed with the utmost care (not the flippancy and myopia we see in Charlie’s comments about the unstoppable of the dam). In this sense, the rebuilding of Eli’s cabin acts as the culmination of a holistic rationalist approach to development, one that is in tune with the needs and desires of the community, that respects environmental circumstances, and that ultimately privileges a co-operative approach to construction.

But the holistic rationalist mapping/narrative the rebuilding of Eli’s cabin represents also speaks to King’s frequent emphasis on the power of storytelling to shape the world we live in and how we can live in it. He does not allow the responsibility for these stories to remain displaced, floating about in an immaterial cultural sphere. Indeed, he states that “Perhaps we shouldn’t be displeased with” the ethics “suggested by our actions. [...] We’ve created the stories that allow them to exist and flourish. [...] Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (*Stories* 164). The relationship between storytelling and political action is not a straightforward one, yet King makes it clear that responsibility for our culture’s stories lies squarely upon our collective shoulders. That being said, *Green Grass, Running Water*, suggests what such a taking of responsibility might look like: in the critiques of the hierarchical rationalist ideologies underpinning the Grand Baleen Dam, the sites of resistance presented in the dam’s destruction, and the proffering of

holistic rationalist mappings and narrative possibilities in the Sun Dance and the rebuilding of the cabin, *Green Grass, Running Water* strives to tell a different story.

Chapter 4 On Loss: Grief and the Future in *The Winter Vault*

At the end of Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Mrs. Noyes reflects on the way Noah blinded her cat, Mottyl, and on the world "that had been destroyed by Doctor Noyes" and realizes that "now, Noah want[s] another world and more cats to blind" (352). Mrs. Noyes sees that Noah does not appreciate the losses he has caused and knows he is unlikely to prevent such disasters from happening again. So, Mrs. Noyes prays for the continuation of the voyage until such time as Noah better comprehends the value of what has been lost. The need to ensure that loss is appreciated and incorporated into the foundations of the future is also central to Anne Michaels's *The Winter Vault*, which is named for a place where the deceased are kept during the winter until the ground is thawed enough for the digging of graves. As with Findley's novel, *The Winter Vault* suggests that one must wait for grief to mellow enough to become the basis for something productive rather than crippling; the earth must thaw in order to receive the bodies of the dead in the same way that the body, the heart, must be open to remembering and in a sense interring the memory of those lost within our very being. And, in the same way that a body in the earth becomes part of what grows upon it, so too does the mental internalization of the lost create the possibility that losses can become the foundations and sustenance for growth.

To illustrate how loss can become something that can be meaningfully learned from—despite being painful—I would like to consider a passage from Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* which she paraphrases during an interview with Branko Gorjup (1999):

a man on a train who was dressed in shabby clothes. The other passengers take him for a peasant and treat him disrespectfully. When they arrive at the

station, they realize that the old man is not a peasant but, in fact, quite an esteemed member of society. When they ask his forgiveness, eventually he answers that they are asking the wrong man: they must ask the man on the train to forgive them. That is, it is not the forgiveness of the man of stature they should be seeking, but the forgiveness of the peasant they thought he was. (n.pag.)

The passengers are, of course, grieved by such an answer because apologizing to the “peasant they thought he was” is an impossibility—that particular peasant is gone. This passage perfectly illustrates that while grief cannot be undone, it can become something we learn from and incorporate into our future actions. This error and the grief it causes becomes a site for change and growth.

It is this idea—the transition from loss and grief to growth and change—that forms the central concern of *The Winter Vault*. For Michaels, on a broad scale, this process is a transition from history as an “essentially amoral” perspective to memory, which “is inextricably linked with morality: history’s source is event, but memory’s source is meaning” (“Cleopatra’s Love” n.pag.). Thus, as with *In the Skin of a Lion*, the narrative project for *The Winter Vault* is not exclusively historicization but also moralization as a way of relating to the past, a task Michaels links crucially to memorialization. The need to *transform* an amended history, to give it ethical and moral dimensions, is the real goal of the novel. For Michaels, as for Ondaatje and King, narrative is an essential tool for this transformation, as narrative has the potential to arrest time, to capture the moment “just before the glass falls off the table and shatters,” giving us the opportunity “to contemplate fully both the moment before an action becomes irrevocable, and an alternative outcome” (Michaels, “Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.). However, the fact is that “the glass has shattered.

In a real sense, grief cannot be mended, just as past events cannot be altered” (“Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.). The past already irrevocable, the goal of the writer then is to witness. It is this witnessing and contemplation that transforms the amoral historical event into the meaningful, moral memory; this is what contributes to a potential amelioration of the future insofar as the particular “moral muscle” that the narrated memory created “will be in shape” (“Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.) when the time comes. As with Ondaatje’s retelling of the Viaduct and the Waterworks and King’s reimagining of Christian narratives and the Grand Baleen Dam, the point of the exercise is to allow for that moment of contemplation, not to mend that grief or loss or pain, but to let it stand, be remembered and gain new meaning and, in so doing, help ensure that this event/action/disaster need not be repeated.

This understanding of the generative purpose of narrative is reflected in both Ondaatje and King; for both writers, it is not what is done but what can be done in the future that is of central importance. Indeed, *In the Skin of a Lion*’s Viaduct and Waterworks are already built by the time protagonist Patrick Lewis learns the value of civility and thus can engage in meaningful civic action and *Green Grass, Running Water*’s Grand Baleen Dam is already standing before King’s narration even begins. These structures—central to each novel—are sites of contemplation, what Michaels describes as the already shattered glass. It is what comes after these structures, what is provoked by them, that shapes each novel’s vision of the future. The actions that come after can come in many forms, be it the growth of single individuals such as Patrick and Harris in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the destruction of a dam and the rebuilding of a cabin in *Green Grass, Running Water*, or Jean’s guerrilla-gardening, Lucjan’s Lascaux-inspired vandalism, or Avery’s humanist architecture in *The Winter Vault*.

The Winter Vault is rife with instances of loss that have this potential to be transformed, but I would like to focus specifically on the Nile, the St. Lawrence, and the Vistula rivers as organizing elements for both the novel and my argument. Each location—as with Ondaatje’s Viaduct and Waterworks and King’s Grand Baleen Dam—is associated with contentious attitudes towards water management. And, as with the Viaduct and the Waterworks in *In the Skin of a Lion* and the Grand Baleen Dam in *Green Grass, Running Water*, the construction projects along *The Winter Vault*’s three rivers suggest particular visions of and underpinning values for development, ranging from small scale familial industries to multinational damming and irrigation projects to politicized post-war urban renewal. Beginning with the building of the Aswan High Dam and consequent relocation of the Abu Simbel temples (overseen by protagonist Avery Escher accompanied by his wife, Jean Shaw) and the villagers along the Nile, Michaels thinks about the way a river can retain a memory of human endeavour and she asks what happens when the river itself drowns under the newly created Lake Nasser. She then looks at the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway (an event which, chronologically, occurs before the project in Nubia) to investigate the ramifications of moving homes and graves (rather than drowning them) before shifting to a narrative delivered by Jean’s brief lover, Lucjan, of Warsaw’s rebuilding after the German retreat during World War Two. In this section of the novel, Michaels’s thinks about what it means to build a city upon the ruins of another and this speaks to the ultimate, crushing impossibility of undoing loss. The repeated pattern throughout the novel is a characterization of life upon a river congenial to human life and endeavour followed by an apocalyptic flood that eradicates these efforts and a consideration of how one memorializes such a loss. Accordingly then, in this chapter I will focus on how officialdom’s amoral historical awareness of rivers and

floods can be transformed into moral memorializations on the part of individuals and communities and therefore contribute to what Michaels describes as the “mending of the future” (“Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.). In this sense, *The Winter Vault* is about how we remember and how this becomes a foundation for change—for Michaels, to look forward, one must be facing backwards.

Organizing my argument into three sections, I will consider first how Michaels conceives of human relationships with rivers as centres of commerce and ritual and how this representation colours the development projects the novel addresses. The second part of my argument will look at Michaels’s critique of the relocation, destruction, and rebuilding activities along the Nile, the St. Lawrence, and the Vistula and how this exposes a loss—a right to grieve, memorialize and incorporate into the future—which has been denied. Put differently, I will consider how Michaels critiques the ethical and human failure of the historical understanding of these building projects by exposing—as do Ondaatje and King—the myopia or tunnel vision of official narratives. My third section will consider her two protagonists—the married couple, Avery and Jean—and their encounter with these losses and how they begin to consider the ethical imperatives of the built world around them and the ways in which these spaces have a propensity to deny or efface the tremendous cost of the world in its present shape. Seeing the ways their world is in many ways like a winter vault, their task becomes the imagining of a built world which could help prepare the human heart, like the earth, to receive what has been lost and incorporate these losses into the foundations of life. I argue that Michaels’s critique of the construction projects along the Nile, the St. Lawrence, and the Vistula affects their transformation from amoral historical events to moral memorials and thus demonstrates

how loss can and must become a productive catalyst for genuine change as opposed to a destructive mortal inevitability shunted to one side as soon as possible.

4.1 The Meaning of a River in *The Winter Vault*

In *The Winter Vault* rivers are not only the sites where loss is made apparent, for the visibility of loss is only a later part of the story. In this section, I will explore how Michaels fills in earlier parts of the rivers' stories, setting up the Nile and the St. Lawrence¹³ as crucial sites of a human history of endeavour. For this, I will turn to Robert Pogue Harrison's 2003 book, *Dominion of the Dead*. As Harrison argues in relation to Wallace Stevens's poem, "Anecdote of the Jar," any act of building, of marking—be it paintings, homes, or graves—establishes "a horizon of reference," bringing "about the domestication of space." The previously endless span of geologic time and place is given "a measure of containment—of *human* containment." This measure of containment means that the landscape is given both a spatially and temporally human scale; 'the orchard is east of the house,' 'the river is far from the house,' or 'before the house was built there was a forest fire' are banal examples of this scale. As a sign of a human being's presence at a particular spot, the jar in Stevens's poem, the houses along a river, the graves abounding in the earth, effect an "entire transfiguration of the scene of nature [...] due to the introduction of this sign of human worldhood" (*Dominion* 19).

If for Harrison the first such transition from geologic or natural time to human time was a grave, for Michaels, it is also the river. In *The Winter Vault*, the Nile and the St. Lawrence act as the organizing principle for those living on their banks. As a central site of ritual, commerce, and other everyday activities, the people's use of the river brings

¹³ This section does not address 'normal' life along the Vistula, for we only encounter the river in a war-time context and therefore cannot speak to its peace-time characteristics.

about that “domestication of space” and “human worldhood” described by Harrison. Consider, for instance, the extent to which the Nile influences the Nubians’ traditions surrounding birth:

One week after the child is born, he is carried to the river. We must bring the *fatta* and eat it by the Nile, but not all—we must share it with the river. [...]

Then we must wash the baby’s clothes in the river and bring a bucket of river water back to the house so the mother can wash her face. [...] Then—this is most important—the mother must fill her mouth with water from the river and pour it from her mouth onto the child. It is only when the river water flows from the mother’s mouth over the child that the child will be safe. (142)

For the Nubians, the river is viscerally connected to birth. There is first the idea that the food—*fatta*—must be shared with the river in the way of an offering, suggesting that the river and the people along it share something of a symbiotic relationship, feeding and nurturing one another. Secondly, there is the idea that the river will in fact provide protection; that, like a family member, the river is actively involved in the survival of the young. We can thus conclude that every Nubian life, from birth, is touched by the river and that this is the beginning of a lifelong relationship.

However, the Nile is fundamental to the Nubians’ lifestyle not only at momentous times—such as the birth of a child—but also in day-to-day agricultural activities such as the *eskalay* system. Given Nubia’s desert geography, irrigation techniques had to be developed which worked with the river and the existing characteristics of the land to ensure not only bounty but consistency. For this, thousands of years ago the Nubians created the *eskalay* system, which entailed the narrow fertile spaces on the river banks being divided and worked by a communally owned cow, “plodd[ing in] tight circles in the

sand to draw the river, waterbowl by waterbowl, into fields of chickpea and barley” (14). This system demonstrates a harmony with the natural capacities of the river; neither damming nor large-scale diverting projects are required for this type of cultivation. As such, the Nubians’ products supported primarily the local community; in this, the river itself fortified community bonds. Additionally, the *eskalay* systems illustrate how the physical characteristics of the river and the consequent demands it makes on agricultural endeavour have fundamentally shaped Nubian society.

Similarly, the St. Lawrence plays a large part in both the commercial and settlement activities of the area. Jean recognizes that it is not only the river, but also the synergy with other human industries, namely the railroad that “enlivened” the villages and “created a vigour that Jean could not quite explain, though she recognized it somewhat; two stories meeting in the middle” (42). Here, the mills and factories and towns all represent the ways in which river drives human endeavour and lends such vivacity to the region. Travelling by train, Jean and her father regularly visited “the saw mill or the grist mill, the carding mill or the marble works,” “admired the flower gardens at Lock 22,” or “watched as the liquid heat rose above the limestone quarry and held there noses at the stink of the paper mill” (42-43)—each of these sites represents an industry (some better environmentally speaking, some worse) developed in concert with the river. Thus, like the Nubians, the communities and businesses along the St. Lawrence river are acutely dependent on it.

Infiltrating both everyday activities and momentous occasions, the Nile and the St. Lawrence form the linchpins of their surrounding communities. And, Michaels notes, this pattern of the rivers organizing human life is not new; indeed, she illustrates how both rivers have a long history of human involvement. In so doing, Michaels accomplishes two

things: first, she more firmly demonstrates how a river, like Harrison's idea of a grave, can organize human endeavour and become that point around which human worldhood springs up. Second, she also deepens and universalizes the loss of these rivers that follows. That is, in emphasizing these rivers' roles not only in a given community, but as central to a broader human history of endeavour, Michaels forcefully demonstrates and mourns what was lost in the dam-building projects.

Consider, for instance, the palimpsest of human endeavour *The Winter Vault* presents in relation to the Abu Simbel temples. First, there were the Egyptian builders who came down the Nile and first scouted the site of Abu Simbel, painting a white streak along the cliff face to mark where the temples would be built (23); then there was Giovanni Battista Belzoni, who rediscovered the temple in 1817 (31-33); and Avery and Jean and all the engineers and builders tasked with the moving of the temple—these are the layers of history represented by the cliffs of Abu Simbel standing along the Nile represent. Michaels goes further back, noting how

[h]undreds of thousands of years before Nasser had ordered the building of the High Dam, or before Ramses had commanded his likeness to be sculpted at Abu Simbel, these cliffs on the Nile, in the heart of Nubia, had been considered sacred. On the stone summit high above the river, another likeness had been carved: a single prehistoric human footprint. Lake Nasser would melt away this holy ground. (25)

Here Michaels points to the depth of human history to be washed away; the prehistoric footprint, the temple, the rediscovery of the temple, the final moving of the temple—this emphasis on the layered human history of the place is what makes it holy. This instance

of holiness, then, is also an instance of wholeness and continuity, an indication of the Nile's long history as an organizing force in human life.

Similarly, Michaels catalogues the history of peoples along the St. Lawrence. Working her way backwards, Michaels lists the settlers who came to the river valley and began to organize their lives around it:

Along these leafy shores of the St. Lawrence, towns and hamlets had sprung up, founded by United Empire Loyalists, [...] [t]hen came the German, the Dutch, the Scottish settlers. Then a tourist by the name of Charles Dickens [...]. Before this came the hunters of the sea, the Basque, Breton, and English whalers. And, in 1534, Jacques Cartier. (37)

And before this, of course, there were the "First Nations [peoples], descendants of Siberian hunters who'd crossed the land bridge from Asia twenty thousand years before and who'd made these shores their home since the melting of the great glacier" (39). This impressive list points to generation upon generation of human life organizing itself around and surviving upon this continental artery, thereby demonstrating not only the loss of the immediate community, but also the loss of this rich space of human history.

However, it is important to note that there is another facet to this palimpsestic representation of the Nile and the St. Lawrence: these historical catalogues demonstrate longevity, yes, but they also demonstrate loss. That being said, to bear a legacy is to acknowledge and learn from what came before; arguably, the very stability and ingenuity with which the residents along the shore of these rivers lived suggests that their homes were the products of increasing refinement rather than outright invention. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the site of Michaels's critique is not development itself,

but rather these projects' questionable motivations and effacement of the losses they caused.

4.2 Floods & Erasure Along the Nile, the St. Lawrence and the Vistula

When history turns against its own memorializing and self-conserving drive, when it is perceived to have become a force of erasure rather than of inscription, of assault on rather than humanization of the earth, then images of an apocalyptic sea inevitably surge up in the human imagination. (Harrison, *Dominion* 16)

Comparing traditional representations of the earth versus the sea in relation to our awareness of our mortality, Harrison suggests that stories of forgetting coincide with stories of flooding, of the sea. Michaels does not write of seas, but she does open her novel with two human-built floodings: the building of the Aswan High Dam and the resultant Lake Nasser and the building of the St. Lawrence Seaway and the creation of Lake St. Lawrence. Michaels's narration of these floods—pervaded by personal tragedy and loss—points to the very thing Harrison sees in the representation of the sea: history becoming destructive, “becoming a force of erasure rather than inscription” and “assault on rather than humanization of the earth.” And, following my discussion of human history along these rivers, in focusing on the flooding of rivers, Michaels also foregrounds the assault on human legacy, on humanity, these floods represent. Coinciding with this physical erasure of these humanized riverbanks comes a historical one with the ‘official’ narratives that surround these floods—those of politicians, developers, administrators, the press—acting as forces of erasure and assault; these are things that, intentionally or not, obfuscate, undo, or deny loss. There are thus two erasures: first, the

loss of the humanized space itself beneath the new lakes, and second, the loss of the right to grieve over that space—the loss is denied and left unmarkable. It is this second erasure which is most damaging, for its values suggest those of Michaels’s idea of an amoral historical perspective rather than a moral memory-based perspective; in denying the right to grieve by denying the loss itself, the right to remember and therefore contribute to a “mending of the future” (Michaels, “Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.) is also lost.

But how, precisely, do these floods constitute “erasure rather than inscription”? How do they efface loss and limit the possibilities for growth? Harrison suggests that “[e]rasure does not mean disappearance only; it means that the site of disappearance remains unmarkable” (12). This is true both literally and figuratively. Indeed, there can be “no gravestones on the sea” and water as an element is “uninscribable” (12), so those who lost in the building of these dams cannot mark their loss upon the surface of the lakes in any enduring way—this is the first erasure. The second erasure lays in this idea of unmarkability and the ways in which the official narratives of these construction projects disallow and even deny these losses. Entrenched in narratives of progress and development, official histories can only treat human and non-human loss as a necessary cost, a sacrifice, or, at worst, nothing at all—it can go unsaid. In this sense, both the silence on the subject of loss and the relabelling of that loss as sacrifice or cost constitutes the erasure; there is either no loss at all or loss in the name of the national good, what Arundhati Roy calls in her essay, “The Greater Common Good,” “Local Pain for National Gain” (15).

Michaels demonstrates this double erasure in the flooding of Nubia through the juxtaposition of the political pageantry surrounding the dam and the tangible losses

suffered by the Nubians for the project. After the completion of the project, including the relocation of the Abu Simbel temples,

There would be passionate speeches. ‘No civilized government can fail to give first priority to the welfare of its people...The High Dam had to be built, no matter what the effects might be...’ [...] No word would be uttered of the Nubians who had been forced to leave their ancient homes and their river, nor the twenty-seven towns and villages that had vanished under the new lake.

(35)

Here the Nubians’ losses are subsumed under the rubric of a common good, one which cannot “fail to give first priority to the welfare of its people”—the implication being that either Nubians are not of the people or that their loss is part of the realization of this priority. In the same way that Ondaatje criticized the official records of the city’s construction for excluding the workers who built the city itself, Michaels here demonstrates how the official record cannot accommodate the loss of Nubia under this progress-oriented rubric, and therein lies the erasure. This scene is also evocative, both thematically and literally, of Ondaatje’s Bloor Street Viaduct opening ceremonies, at which the workers’ ceremonies are effaced and overridden by those of officials. Both Ondaatje and Michaels criticize official records’ inexplicable difficulty acknowledging developments’ costs. The Nubians loss must remain unmarked, for admitting it and commemorating it would undo the very justifying foundations of the High Dam project. If the project is, above all else, about bettering the lives of the inhabitants of Egypt and Sudan, then the already controversial project can hardly afford to acknowledge the devastating losses suffered by thousands of people. Their loss must then remain uninscribed and unscorable, thereby ensuring firstly that the shortcomings of the

project will not be learned from and secondly that there can be no mourning for the dispossessed, for both shortcoming and dispossession are not acknowledged.

But what are the Nubians losing? Why can they not be compensated for their sacrifices and therefore, in a way, acknowledged for it? Earlier on I discussed the extreme importance of the Nile to the Nubians—obviously, this loss cannot be recuperated. But what of their homes and possessions, their more portable aspects of life? Michaels unequivocally demonstrates that a lifestyle organized and supported by the Nile cannot simply be uprooted and put down somewhere else. As with the *feddans* (shares of land in the *eskalay* system) each in the name of persons centuries deceased (15) and the groves of date palms cultivated by families for generations, there are aspects of belonging and home which are simply not mobile, which are by their very nature rooted to a particular spot.

Take, for example, the remarkable homes in the village of Ashkeit that Jean and Avery visit before it is submerged. Repeatedly, the narrator describe the houses looking as if they had “[grown] our of the desert” like “gardens sprung up in the sand after a rainfall” (131). Though traditional in their form, the Ashkeit houses are individualized in their decoration and exhibit a “human love of place so freely expressed” that the “houses [seem] perfectly adapted to their context in materials and design they could never be moved” (131-32). The completeness of the connection between landscape, the buildings, and “those who made them” produces a beauty “before which one did not wish to prostrate oneself, but instead to leap up” (131,132). These homes could “never exist anywhere else and if moved, would crumble, like a dream” (132). They are products of a specific locale and are perfectly attuned to it.

So if Ashkeit suggests that compensation for the dispossessions the dam causes will, at best, be difficult, Khashm el Girba, the relocation settlement on the Sudanese side of the Nile, demonstrates that it was not even attempted. The new homes are “hollow blocks of concrete that [sit] in rows on the ground with no connection to it, like packing cases” (107-08). Viscerally exemplifying the settlements’ lack of connection to the earth beneath in contrast to Ashkeit’s garden-like homes, a portion of the new settlement is destroyed in a dust storm because “the roofs and trusses had not been properly attached [and] the walls of the houses *had not been anchored deeply enough in the ground*” (179; emphasis mine). There is no sense of belonging or of the houses having grown out of the earth; rather, they seem to have been simply dropped upon it. Khashm el Girba also, ironically, does not have electricity for months after the dam goes into operation. As I emphasize in my discussion of *Green Grass, Running Water*, communities which pay the greatest price for development rarely enjoy its fruits.

The building of the St. Lawrence Seaway exhibits a similar disavowal of loss most prevalent in the relocation/reconstruction efforts. Unlike the situation along the Nile, however, where people and belongings rather than homes were moved, entire towns are moved along the St. Lawrence. Graves, churches, schools, houses are picked up and put down somewhere else as though the earth these things resided on and in did not matter at all. Predictably, this attempt to simply shift the villages is a failure. However, like the political rhetoric surrounding the Nubian displacements that failed to commemorate the loss caused by the Aswan High Dam, this relocation attempt’s failure is effaced by ‘official’ history—*because* rather than in spite of the relocation of their homes. That is, the very completeness of the relocation becomes grounds for denying the significance of what was lost by suggesting that, as everything has been moved, nothing was sacrificed;

indeed, official narratives cannot accommodate the villagers' feeling that it is their homes, not the ones under the lake, that are lost (181).

Indeed, the inhabitants of the new towns—still in their original homes—knew that “an observer would have said that everything about these houses was exactly the same,” yet they, “distressed, sleepless—knew that it was not” (181). A difference of light, an unfamiliar breeze in a house left one feeling just slightly unsettled; the graveyards becoming places where one felt a sense of “abandonment,” where “no one was watching now” (181). These small differences give the impression that the “gleaming new subdivisions” are the lost villages and not “the ones that been left behind to be dismembered, burned, drowned” (181). Georgiana Foyle provides perhaps the most potent articulation of what has been lost in these spaces. When Avery points out to her that her husband's grave can be moved at the company's expense, she retorts:

If you move his body then you'll have to move the hill. You'll have to move the fields around him. You'll have to move the view from the top of the hill and the trees he planted [...]. You'll have to move the sun because it sets among those trees. And move his mother and his father and his younger sister [...]. They're all company for one another and those graves are old, so you'll have to move the earth with them to make sure nothing of anyone is left behind. [...] Can you move what was consecrated? Can you move that exact empty space in the earth I was to lie next to him for eternity? (47)

Like Eli's exchange with Clifford Sifton about his cabin in *Green Grass, Running Water*, Georgiana's comments forcefully deflates any sense that moving a grave is easy, simple, or even conceivable. Everything that surrounds the grave is immobile, non-transferable,

and irreplaceable—the hills, the trees, the view, the sun, must be moved to preserve the grave’s context. Thus the grave is immobile: such a relocation is unthinkable.

It is this that makes the “total” relocation of the villages so unnerving—yes, the house has been moved, but what of the land, the earth which formed its foundations? What of the river that so enlivened the space? The structure upon the earth can be moved, but the context which made that structure meaningful cannot. Yet this facet of the relocation is denied—as mentioned, it is the drowned villages that are officially thought of as “lost,” yet the residents know that their homes are the lost ones. As with President Nasser’s inability to acknowledge Nubian losses along the Nile, the official records cannot articulate this loss for it would undermine the ostensible Seaway project. When Sir Adam Beck, the 1921 hydro-electric commissioner, calls the loss sustained by the St. Lawrence villagers the “sentimental factor” (40), he admits an awareness of the depth of the project’s transgression yet mocks it. The sentimental factor is something to be overcome to move the project forward; it must be rendered absurd by official records by having the relocation appear to be “complete.”

While the rebuilding of Warsaw is a result of war rather than peacetime development projects—necessary following the Soviet occupation after the Germans had systematically demolished the city—it is the very systematization of the demolition and reconstruction that links the rebuilding of the “city on the Vistula” (279) to the development projects along the Nile and the St. Lawrence. That is, the destruction/demolitions in all three cases were orchestrated with care, and in all three instances so too was the reconstruction process. Lucjan recalls to Jean how the German soldiers “had enforced a strict schedule of demolition, [...] each building, street by street, had been numbered with white paint” and blown up (218). Meanwhile,

[a]cross the Vistula, the Soviets waited patiently, while the Wehrmacht, with great efficiency, levelled the empty city. When the show was over, almost three months later, the Soviet army quickly threw a pontoon across the Vistula—the same river that throughout the uprising and the city’s demolition they had declared “impassable”—and claimed Warsaw for themselves. (218)

Following this, the Soviets initiate a project for swiftly rebuilding the town as an exact copy of what was destroyed, “[e]very lintel and cornice, every portico and engraving, every lamppost” is recreated based on eighteenth-century paintings, photographs, and any surviving drawings or architectural fragments (228-29). In this attention to detail and systematic approach, the German destruction and Soviet reconstruction of Warsaw are akin to the construction projects executed along the Nile and the St. Lawrence. This kinship between the construction initiatives along each river points to Michaels overall argument about the need to commemorate the past in order to learn from it; these instances represent a failure to memorialize and therefore demonstrate the persistence of patterns of human and ecological tragedy that result from this memory loss.

The effect of rebuilding Warsaw as a replica in exactly the same place results in a curious situation in terms of coping with loss. As with the relocation of the Nubians and the St. Lawrence villagers, the rebuilding of Warsaw is not solely an instance of the effacement of loss within official narratives, it is also a denial or refusal of it that curtails the possibility of mourning. That is, the mourning period itself is limited and even eliminated entirely because official narratives deny that any loss took place, thus rendering mourning superfluous. While Lucjan’s comments on the yearly demonstrations the Soviets put on to “ensure [the Poles] understood this miracle [of the rebuilding] was not an achievement of Polish muscle and sweat but a feat of Soviet socialism” (238)

demonstrate the failure of the official records to acknowledge the Poles' labours, the real trauma is how the Soviets' efforts sought to undo or deny loss. To illustrate this aspect of the Soviets' rebuilding efforts to Jean, Lucjan explains the case of Khatyn and Katyn. In this instance, the Soviets erect a war memorial in the village of Khatyn, a tragic but otherwise commonplace site of German violence during the war, which leads one to wonder why "this site [was] chosen for a national monument when there are so many other places where the dead outnumber those poor souls of Khatyn?" (219) As it turns out, the Soviets memorialized Khatyn—a German site of massacre—to obscure their own mass murder site at Katyn, where "hundreds of Polish officers were slaughtered and buried in a mass grave by the Soviets" (219). The suggestion here is that, for the Soviets, part of the impetus for rebuilding Warsaw was to help eradicate the traces of the disaster they allowed to occur.

And, temporarily at least, this tactic seems to be effective. Despite the frequently surreal, unsettling, and even, as Lucjan describes it, "humiliating" (309) experience of being in the rebuilt Warsaw, there was euphoria among the survivors, though not perhaps of the most healthful sort, the people "desperate with hope" (232). Lucjan recalls a particularly telling proclamation:

For decades, physicists have been trying to figure out—if time can flow both in the future and into the past—why can't a broken eggshell become whole again, why can't shattered glass mend itself? And yet in Warsaw we are achieving exactly this! (233)

This passage is so troubling because, if we look back to Michaels's comment in her interview with Gorjup, the fact is, "the glass has shattered. In a real sense, loss cannot be undone" ("Frozen Acrobatics" n.pag.). Eventually, however, the Poles do realize the

irrevocability of their losses—though the Soviets do not acknowledge this, for, as with the events along the Nile and the St. Lawrence, such recognition would undermine their project—and as such, defeat the Soviets’ goals. That is, if the rebuilt Warsaw was to help obfuscate the loss of the old city, it failed miserably for its very status as a memorial, a constant reminder of what has been irrevocably lost.

Whereas the projects along the Nile and the St. Lawrence deny that loss even took place owing to their relocation and compensation packages, the rebuilding of Warsaw is ultimately a failed attempt by the Soviets to return things to the way they were before the demolition and occupation, to undo what was lost. As far the Soviets are concerned, the rebuilt town eradicates the loss, the trauma of Warsaw’s destruction. Yet, as mentioned, the city is a memorial, a space which fosters a commitment to change and resistance to the Soviets, epitomized in Lucjan’s comment that every stone in the newly built Palace of Culture “symbolized, right from the start, the torments inflicted by Stalin. The higher it rose, the more elaborate its decorations and pinnacles, [...] the greater the depths of submission it represented” (304). The Palace represents a desecration, an constant reminder of the Poles’ losses and the erasure of those losses. As such, rather than representing a triumph of Soviet socialist strength, it instead embodied what the rebuilding of Warsaw sought to obscure: the Palace of Culture is a constant reminder not of loss, but more significantly, loss’s erasure.

For the Poles, this push to resistance is fostered not only by the city, but also by the Vistula, for “even Stalin could not stop the river from entering people’s dreams again, the river with its long memory and its eternal present” (279). Unlike the Nile and the St. Lawrence, the river is not lost here, and accordingly becomes an important factor in boosting the Poles’ morale and allowing the city to begin to “dream its old dreams” (279).

Lucjan recalls how, in the winter, the people living in the ruins of the city “went down to the Vistula with lanterns and shovels” and there were “enormous skating parties. Street orchestras, children, dogs. Vendors selling coffee sprang up on the banks. Pastries in waxed paper” (289). Similarly, Lucjan remembers with great clarity the “first water-markets after the war, the first mountain of Vistula apples, hard, sweet, sour, softened by the sun, rotting, fermenting, the bees circling” (299). In both instances, it is the river which affects a return to normality, to the moment when people can begin to prepare for that softening of the earth required to let grief take seed and become the foundation of change.

In all three of these instances—the building of the Aswan High Dam, the St. Lawrence Seaway, and the rebuilding of Warsaw—Michaels critiques official narratives for their inability to acknowledge and respond to loss in a way that is compassionate and productive. The ways in which the rebuilding efforts are handled transforms a potential consolation or compensation into an insult, a gag-order which denies the relocatees the ability to grieve in a publicly, historically meaningful way. Rather than becoming a foundation for the future in both a personal and collective sense, the losses along these rivers are shunted to the side and disavowed. As with Ondaatje and *In the Skin of a Lion*, Michaels’s critique of official narratives reinscribes the human and ecological cost of these development projects and, in so doing, allows for the possibility that they may contribute to a mending of the future rather than a repetition of a disastrous past.

4.3 “Everything exists because of loss”

As with both Ondaatje and King, Michaels not only offers a critique of a certain vision of development but also suggests other, perhaps more salubrious, imaginings of the

built world. Sensitized by their individual and shared griefs, Jean and Avery begin to think about ways of building the world that do not necessarily cause, deny, or efface loss, but rather that incorporate it. That is, understanding loss to be inevitable—because, as Avery’s mother, Marina, says, “[f]or better or for worse, [...] love is [always] a catastrophe” (98)—they begin to think about how the built world can help individuals and communities remember and therefore potentially learn from loss. In other words, the human environment—the houses, roads, car parks, and similar structures—should help prepare for that softening of the earth that allows for the acceptance of loss rather than, like a winter vault, keeping that loss enclosed and, to an extent, denied because the mourning/burying rituals are not yet complete. Both Jean and Avery are acutely aware of “waste spaces” the built world abandons and the “despair of space” this abandonment demonstrates as the places “we have imprisoned between what we have built, like seeds of futility, small pockets of the earth where no one is meant to be alive” (135). Jean and Avery understand that the built world need not be so barren and poorly acculturated to the inevitability of loss, and each takes a different approach to vivifying abandoned urban spaces in such a way as to enliven them, to sensitize people to them and thus “help us be alive, [...] [and] allow for the heeding of things” (159). Attentiveness to the world allows not only for the recognition of interconnection and mutual dependence; it also encourages everyday acts of humanity and compassion. To heed things is to begin to memorialize and thus contribute to that mending of the future Michaels hopes for.

For Avery this is an important task for architecture as a discipline which, more or less, determines the shape of our built environments. He wishes for spaces that allow their inhabitants to be reborn (159). Avery places great store in the idea that spaces can produce feeling and behaviour (84); that the space itself should ease the process of living

(and dying). The beauty of a space, its intuitiveness and habitability, is the “awareness of every possibility of life, the life that is possible in such a building” (84). His vision is one of a “simple humanism” (207), a profound belief in the ethical implications of the shape of the world. He wants buildings which are “capable simply of both sorrow and solace: a house that understands that the entire course of a life can be altered, for better or for worse, by someone walking across a room” (207). In this instance Avery exhibits a deep awareness of the potential for loss, but also, more broadly, he is engrossed with “heeding [...] things” (159), with looking at the built world and making meaningful even the placement of a window or a certain angle of light. He loathes the idea of a building failing even to be attentive to the needs of its users, thinking about how “schools in particular [were] so ugly, the antithesis of the qualities one would wish to instil in students” and lamenting that one “could spend just as much money building something lifeless as building something alive...It was not good enough to make things less bad; one must make them for the good” (308). Avery, having spent much of his life dealing with the “coagulating grief” of each of his projects as a dam-builder, now wishes for every space to “live and die in nature, like all life, and continually be reborn” (38, 83). This is not a wish for a space that only lasts a lifetime—for this would be too wasteful—but instead a desire to create a space that is aware of human mortality, of the inevitability of loss that makes human life achingly meaningful. In other words, he wishes for a built world that encourages memorialization rather than historicization in Michaels’ sense: an environment which prepares us for, incorporates, and helps build upon loss and grief as well as the generative possibilities stemming from these experiences. Fundamentally, Avery wishes for spaces that affect a “restoration,” that allows one to “find [one]self, in a place” (135).

Akin to Avery's vision of the built world, Jean's is a project that emphasizes or recalls what one had to give up to experience or be in the world in its present state; she becomes what Lucjan calls a "memory bandit" (244), clandestinely planting flowers and herbs and grasses which are designed to remind people of where they are from, what they gave up to be "here" (in this case, in Toronto). Part of this project, for Jean, is also about reminding us "that what we take for granted already had to be saved" (244). In this sense, her project is twofold: not only reminding people of what they have lost or given up, but also of the importance and beauty of the world around them at the immediate moment and the immense imperative of stewardship within that space. Jean begins by covertly planting in public spaces, "in ravines, then in laneways, along the edges of parking lots, places without obvious ownership, overlooked for years" (135, 196). She decides on this particular approach after, on her walk home from university one day, she sees an old woman and her full-grown son resting in a public garden. She concludes that the mother emigrated to Toronto to be with her son, and that "he would face the responsibility of burying her far from everything she'd known" (195). Inspired, Jean returns to the spot and plants "cuttings that would grow unnoticed except for their fragrance [...] so that if [the mother and son] came back [...] familiar scents would invade their dreams and give them an inexplicable ease" (196). As mentioned, Jean here has a twofold project which includes both reminding the mother and son of what was given up for their present arrangement, but also how that loss can be a celebration, can be a source of "inexplicable ease."

Jean's subsequent plantings exhibit a similar desire, as she seeks to reinsert reminders of humanity, subtle scents and small tokens, into the fabric of an increasingly inhospitable urban environment. She later says that "[i]f someone walking down the street

experiences the scent of a flower they haven't smelled for thirty years—even if they don't recognize the scent but are suddenly reminded of something that gives them pleasure—then maybe I've done something worthwhile" (202). She plants with precision, planning trips to "Chinatown, Greektown, Little Italy, Little India, Tibet, Jamaica, Armenia," armed with plants that will recall distant homelands (247). Following this, however, Lucjan points out that "what [she evokes] could be something painful" (202). While this is undoubtedly true, that there's no telling what one may uncover when sifting through another's sensory memory, Jean's activities demonstrate fallibility but not inviability. Indeed, Jean's attempts are grounded in the deep belief that loss is inevitable and must be memorialized in order to mean something, to be a moral experience rather than an amoral disavowal of what one's present life has cost; as her friend Daub Arbab tells her, "[t]o mourn is to honour" (248). Speaking of Warsaw, Lucjan himself says that the first thing one needs at a site of loss are flowers (217-8), and Jean realizes that just as loss is everywhere, so too should flowers be everywhere, reminders of past losses—in this case, scents and blooms and vines that remind one of the home they gave up to be "here," in this new home in Toronto. Thus, Jean does not let the risk of grief interfere with the chance to inspire happiness, for she has come to understand by the end of *The Winter Vault*, that, eventually, these two feelings are inseparable.

Additionally, Jean's activities suggest a unique connection with water that Avery's buildings do not necessarily share. Jean's plantings began in "ravines, then in laneways, along the edges of parking lots," and so on (196), places which allow for the self-sustaining growth of plant life, sites not requiring irrigation where plants can flourish off, incidentally, the only renewable source of water for much of the world (Barlow et al, *Blue Gold* 5), rainwater. Although Avery's projects are similar to Jean's insofar as buildings in

the air are not unlike geologic formations in water—“air rushing through between buildings behave[s] just like water forced through a narrow gorge” (81)—Jean’s guerrilla gardening represents a more visceral engagement with both the waste spaces the built world has abandoned and the planet’s only renewable source of water.

This connection between happiness and grief is not unlike the crucial connection Michaels lays out on the very first page of the novel between loss and creation, destruction and birth. The novel opens with the reflection that, in the oldest cave paintings in the world, “We made our paints from the bones of the animals we painted. No image forgets this origin” (1). This passage intimately connects death and creativity; the death of an animal produces the material of creation. This is Avery and Jean’s optimism, this is the origin that their acts of creation strive for: to produce spaces attuned and materially connected to that which creates them, to recognize all acts of development as re-constitutions or rebirths that follow after and come before other losses, griefs, and deaths. Similarly, the opening page tells us that “[w]ith the first grave—the first time a name was sown in the earth—the invention of memory. No word forgets this origin” (1). In this sense, it is loss which forms the foundation of human endeavour; for Michaels as for Jean and Avery, memory is the most fundamental basis needed for change.

In this sense, *The Winter Vault* simultaneously recognizes the tragedy of so-called developments like the Aswan High Dam or the St. Lawrence Seaway, as well as their potentials. Michaels’ novel pushes towards “the heeding of things” and an attention to the ethical imperatives of building home spaces and communities. Michaels not only critiques the shortcomings of these projects but also considers the ways in which they can contribute to a “mending of the future” (“Frozen Acrobatics” n.pag.), for, as Lucjan says, “everything exists because of loss” (233).

Chapter 5 Conclusion

This project has looked at how water, and the way we handle our water resources, “has become a most powerful symbol of the growing inequality in our world” (Barlow, *Blue Covenant* 1). Whether it is the analysis of power struggles between the upper and lower orders in *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the consideration of exploited labourers building the Bloor Street Viaduct and the Toronto Waterworks in *In the Skin of a Lion*, the treatment of the Grand Baleen Dam in *Green Grass, Running Water*, or the discussion of the Aswan High Dam and St. Lawrence Seaway in *The Winter Vault*, each of my chapters have demonstrated how water is and will increasingly be one of the primary sites of struggle in the quest for social and ecological justice. This is unsurprising when one considers that “the world is facing a water crisis due to pollution, climate change and a surging population” (Barlow, *Blue Covenant* 3), that “[o]ver half of the world’s hospital beds are occupied with people suffering from illnesses linked with contaminated water and [that] more people die as a result of polluted water than are killed by all forms of violence including wars” (*Sick Water?* 5). Thus water and water sanitation and infrastructure will—to an ever increasing extent—play a crucial role in the future development of the planet.

My consideration of these novels assumes that, combined with scientific research and activist work, a literary approach to water issues helps illuminate the inextricability of social and ecological justice from water justice. This is because literature generally and these novels in particular evoke, with great specificity and humanity, an array of issues crucial to water management development projects, such as the human toll of such projects and differing conceptions of what the built world should ideally look like (and

more frequently what it should not look like) in aesthetic and political ways. Ondaatje illustrates the appalling objectification of workers in the service of a city that requires their labour but effaces their contributions; this prompts readers to look at the built world and ask who built it and at what cost. King shows how a poorly planned dam built in Northern Alberta to power cities in the south harms a specific community, and he uses that specific instance to look at historical patterns of dam-building on Native land with equally if not more damaging effects. Michaels distils the loss of an entire nation, Nubia, and the corruption of a fecund ecosystem, the Nile delta, into the moment when a mother and her adult daughter, previously neighbours, are relocated to settlements thousands of kilometres apart, likely never to see each other again (137-38). This is not an exercise in transforming history into pathos; it is an engagement with history—in this case, the history of development—that demands ethics. Development is not amoral; it is not something that just happens. These authors narrate small but rich portions of the complex webs of interconnection and influence, cause and effect, that one needs to understand in order to realize how a dam upstream causes a fisherman to lose his livelihood downstream, or how fertilizer run-off from a neighbour's lawn can suffocate fish via the eutrophication¹⁴ of nearby lakes.

Just as these novels are not exclusively concerned with transforming history to pathos, neither do they deal in platitudes or banalities. As I mention in my introduction, the United Nations has only recently declared access to potable water and sanitation to be human rights (“Win!”), and these novels demonstrate, among many other things, how

¹⁴ Eutrophication results when a lake or stream becomes “over-rich in plant nutrient” as a result of fertilizer runoff. The water is “overgrown in algae and other aquatic plants. The plants die and decompose” (*Sick Water?* 76) and eat up the water's oxygen. As a result, the water body becomes lifeless. Cf. *Sick Water?* for more information.

contentious a process putting this recent declaration into effect might be. While United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director Achim Steiner and United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) Executive Director Anna Tibaijuka may state the necessity of ensuring that “a sustainable link is made from farms, rural areas, and cities to the ecosystems surrounding them,” (*Sick Water?* 5), these novels question how this is to be done and who gets to decide. These are neither simple nor unimportant questions, and resolving them entails balancing “the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity” while being regularly frustrated by the “continually evolving” nature of the project (Das xi) since economic, environmental, and social needs are far from static. Given the critical status of water resources around the world, these issues—and the ethical questions posed by Ondaatje, King, and Michaels—are of deep importance. Like the ongoing debates about how societies are to ethically, equitably, and ecologically meet the UN’s target of universal access to water and sanitation, they are vibrant and volatile.

But where does one go from here? These novels imaginatively demonstrate that the design and execution of development projects are, at best, contentious. They have also shown what is at stake in resistance and potentially viable alternatives and avenues for development. But these are still stories, and there is a chance that we can go no further with them. However, as I have been suggesting throughout this project, “[i]f we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives” (Okri qtd. in King, *Stories* 153). We cannot hope to make the connections Steiner and Tibaijuka ask for until we begin to comprehend that such connections can be made; their very existence needs to be defined. Additionally, stories have a power of influence and pervasiveness that any scientific treatises and policy debates take much more time and energy to accumulate. In

this, stories can work like the connective tissues in an organism, animating various parts of the body (say, ecological, political, and industrial aspects of a given development) to produce something cohesive, moral, and meaningful—something productive. Simply put, stories have a broadness of scope and applicability that, in itself, can be powerful. Let us hope, then, that the stories we tell ourselves do not “negate [our lives] with meaningless,” powerlessness, and despair, but rather that they “give our lives meaning,” energy, and hope (Okri qtd. in King, *Stories* 153).

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