Extreme Places as Sites of Ecological Exploration: Postmodern Wilderness in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*

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Abstract
This article mainly focuses on Margaret Atwood's fictionalization of the Mackenzie Mountains in the "Bearlift" episode of *MaddAddam* (2013), the last novel in the *MaddAddam* trilogy. The Canadian mountain range between Yukon and the Northwest Territories provides a literary niche for the author to explore the Canadian North and its changing climatic conditions. Atwood also uses it as a symbolic field to undertake a postmodern exploration of the altered conditions of wild places as opposed to anthropic places. The literary imagination has often used extreme places on geographical maps as the setting for the human struggle against hostile nature that most often defeats the undaunted explorers. In recent years, technological progress has turned these places into the most tangible manifestation of anthropogenic ecological crisis. Climate change fiction (cli-fi), within the much broader and longer tradition of science fiction, has become a consistent branch of contemporary literature that deals with the threats posed by anthropogenic climate change and Atwood's trilogy certainly belongs to this current. The Bearlift episode provides an example of the complex implications of a changing environment within the broader theme of ecological discourses and in light of postmodernist theories.

Key-words: Margaret Atwood, climate change, Canadian North, hyperreality, *MaddAddam*.

1. Introduction

The *MaddAddam* trilogy draws the reader's attention to the fact that nature and the environment are conceptual constructs that exist not just within the medium of language and that often deviate significantly from what they represent. The goal of this article is to uncover the uninformed discourses on ecology in "Bearlift" by testing the postmodernist tools used by Margaret Atwood. The first paragraph is devoted to the description of the Mackenzie

Mountains and to the relevance of extreme geographies in science fiction. "Bearlift" displays a cli-fi *ustopia*, in which global warming and climate change are dealt with from a naïve and contradictory environmentalist perspective that aspires to creating utopia, while verging on a dystopia. The *ustopian* quality of the episode is tackled from a postmodernist perspective in the second paragraph, by drawing a parallel with Umberto Eco's representation of hyperreality in nature. Finally, the article shows how postmodernism provides a theoretical framework for discarding the gullible understanding of the environment that emerges from the "Bearlift" episode.

2. *Ustopian* geographies

In 2015, Canadian author Margaret Atwood published the infographic piece "It's Not Climate Change – It's Everything Change", in which she discusses the consequences of current energy policies that still dangerously rely on fossil fuel. In the text, she shows two maps issued by the Canadian federal government that use different criteria to represent the Arctic ice. The most recent one seems to suggest that the polar ice cap has increased, even though a careful interpretation of the facts and figures would easily prove the contrary. Even more than cartographic representations, words and discourses can modify the reader's perception of global warming, a topic that Atwood extensively tackles in her *MaddAddam* trilogy, which can be identified as belonging to the literary branch of climate change fiction (cli-fi)[1]. In the episode analysed in this article, "Bearlift", Zeb, one of the main characters in the novel, hides in the Mackenzie Mountains and works in the cities of Whitehorse, Yellowknife, and Tuktoyaktuk, in Yukon and the Northwest Territories, which are among the scanty indications of place in the trilogy. The Mackenzie Mountains, named after Canadian Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie, consist of several ranges between Yukon and the Northwest Territories and were exploited for oil production during the Second World War. Zeb includes this information in his account of the period spent in the

[1] A branch of science fiction, climate change fiction creates speculative worlds in which climate instability puts life at risk and provides the setting for eschatological reflections. See Schultz (2015).

barrens and mentions the environmental problems of that time, among which global warming plays a major role.

Atwood explored the Arctic and other extreme places of the Canadian Northern wilderness as settings for short stories and as the subject of critical literary inquiry, because she believes that they hold a mythical quality in the Canadian imagination. A milestone of her lifelong interest is *Strange Things*, a work of literary criticism that explores legends of the Canadian North like the Franklin expedition and the Wendigo, the terrifying cannibal monster. In more recent years, a cruise through the North West Passage in the Canadian Arctic provided her with the imaginative material for the short story that gives the title to her 2014 collection, *Stone Mattress*. The Mackenzie Mountains represent a tangible example of Atwood's claim that the Arctic is a repository of both climate change and of imaginative change in the relationship between human beings and nature. As Sherril Grace notes, Canada has entered "the twenty-first century with renewed talk of a Mackenzie Valley pipeline on the one hand and news of polar bears dying and open, ice-free waters at the North Pole on the other" (Grace 2001: XVI). This clearly involves a discussion on the priority that the national community chooses to pursue and, in Atwood's novel, such priorities do not lean toward the wellbeing of wildlife. In "Bearlift", not only is the wilderness of the place irretrievably damaged, but even its naturalness is questioned.

In the Acknowledgements of *MaddAddam* (2013), Atwood writes: "Although *MaddAddam* is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory" (Atwood 2013: 393). This is true for ecological conditions and natural disasters as well: "more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts" (Atwood 2003: 253) are a reality both in the trilogy and in the reader's shared reality. Climate change and global warming have modified the geography of the Earth and Atwood pushes this condition to the extreme by making entire states disappear, like Texas that "dried up and blew away" (p. 244). The connection between shared reality and fictional rendition is explicit in Atwood's choice to set one of the central episodes of the novel in the Mackenzie Mountains, as they have recently attracted the attention of researchers who consider the conditions of the

permafrost, soil, and wildlife in the area to be important indicators for measuring climate change[2].

An edited version of the chapter "Bearlift" was published in *Arc*, a magazine launched in 2012 by the editors of *New Scientist* to "explore the future through cutting-edge science fiction" ("Announcing *Arc*") and satisfy those readers fascinated by all the possible temporal alternatives that fiction can foresee but in which science popularization cannot indulge. This episode contributes to reinforce the bond with which Atwood weaves together facts and fiction and creates a link between imagined world and consensual reality. Her commitment to ventures like *Arc* aims to develop "outlets and markets for science fiction authors, and […] to see the form grow into new forms and address new audiences" ("Announcing *Arc*"). Regardless of the label that Atwood and literary critics would use to describe her dystopian works, they all create contexts for new ideas. In the *Arc* editors' words, Atwood's point is that her writing is "not trying to 'reinvent' the genre, or genres; nor is it ignoring, circumventing or celebrating it. It's not a self-reflexive exercise in genre. It's interested in the future – of things, people and feelings" ("Announcing *Arc*").

Post-apocalyptic science fiction is very often set in extreme places, from Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885) to George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949) and J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962). Catastrophic settings encourage authors like Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood to experiment with language and with the storytelling style, in order to push the boundaries of genre and transgress an established literary tradition. This is especially true in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, which borrows styles and themes from traditional science fiction and speculative fiction, but also uses utopian and dystopian language. In the article "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia" (2011) Atwood coins the word *Ustopia* to identify her own writing as a combination of utopia and dystopia, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite – because […] each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood 2011: 66). She

[2] See Liang-Kershaw (1995) and the *Climate Change at the Mackenzie Mountains* research expedition, supported by the Earthwatch Institute, http://eu.earthwatch.org/expeditions/climate-change-in-the-mackenzie-mountains, last accessed March 20, 2016.

describes it as a journey on the border between the known and the unknown, which is also the reason why most utopian writers used to set their tales at the edges of actual maps. It is also a dire journey, because the road leads towards either dystopian unpleasantness or unreachable utopian perfection.

3. A postmodern problem

The conceptual edge over which utopia and dystopia negotiate is the postmodern question of what is uncontaminated and untamed nature, supposing that it still exists, and what discriminates it from reproduced nature. In his essay "Travels in Hyperreality" (1986), Umberto Eco includes a section titled "Ecology 1984 and Coca-Cola Made Flesh". Eco explores the theme of hyperreality – a simulation that appears as undistinguishable from reality – in nature and takes inspiration from the San Diego zoo. The show of uncontaminated nature is accurately designed to the benefit of the visitors who enjoy an amusing and educating experience, but "the final essence of this apologue on the goodness of nature is Universal Taming" (Eco 1986: 52). The public has the feeling of being put into close contact with wild freedom, but they have only submitted to the falsifying industry of hyperreality:

> The first, most immediate level of communication that these Wild Worlds achieve is positive; what disturbs us is the allegorical level superimposed on the literal one, the implied promise of a *1984* already achieved at the animal level. What disturbs us is not an evil plan; there is none. It is a symbolic threat. We know that the Good Savages, if they still exist in the equatorial forests, kill crocodiles and hippopotamuses, and if they want to survive the hippopotamuses and crocodiles must submit to the falsification industry: This leaves us upset. And without alternatives. (p. 52-53)

Even though the San Diego zoo is devoted to animal well-being, the Italian scholar observes the suspicious docility of the animals and ambiguously asks: "Where does the truth of ecology lie?" (Eco 1986: 49), which conceals the question whether the ecology of the zoo is not true after all, but a *lie*. The animals of endangered species live in the artificial reproduction of their original environment and their freedom and authenticity is the main act of the play. Eco explains that the paying visitors of the zoo are led through the

exhibition of natural peace, an idyllic reproduction of wilderness devoid of all the inconveniences that the original wilderness has, for human fruition.

The genetically engineered nature of the Watson-Crick Institute and Crake's Paradice Project in *MaddAddam* leads to Eco's description of the San Diego zoo:

> Since the temperature around him is artificially kept beyond zero, the polar bear gives the same impression of freedom; and since the rocks are dark and the water in which he is immersed is rather dirty, the fearsome grizzly also seems to feel at his ease. But ease can be demonstrated only through sociability and so the grizzly, whose name is Chester, waits for the microbus to come by at three-minute intervals and for the girl attendant to shout to Chester to say hello to the people. Then Chester stands up, waves his hand (which is a terrifying huge paw) to say hi. The girl throws him a cookie and we're off again, while Chester waits for the next bus. (p. 49)

In *MaddAddam*, biomimicry is employed for human needs and artificially pushed to its extremes in the name of sustainability. Not only is nature tamed and employed for human entertainment and education, but world environments are created from scratch in such a way that they are not imitation anymore, but become original:

> Huge fake rocks, made from a combo-matrix of recycled plastic bottles and plant material from giant tree cacti and various lithops – the living-stone members of the Mesembryanthemaceae – were dotted here and there. […] The fake rocks looked like real rocks but weighed less; not only that, they absorbed water during periods of humidity and released it in times of drought, so they acted like natural lawn regulators. Rockulators, was the brand name. You had to avoid them during heavy rainfalls, though, as they'd been known to explode. (Atwood 2003: 199-200)

Nature is allowed to exist only in an artificial version, so that taming is not even necessary and natural evolution is replaced by synthetic evolution. Hyperreality is brought to a higher level in the bioengineered world because the boundary between natural and synthetic is extremely blurred, if not completely meaningless. It is not a show or a play enacted by tamed animals behind the bars of a zoo anymore, because scientists mastermind the very existence of these living beings:

"So, are the butterflies – are they recent?" Jimmy asked after a while. The ones he was looking at had wings the size of pancakes and were shocking pink, and were clustering all over one of the purple shrubs.
"You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake? […] These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out". (p. 200)

However, the postmodernist influence on Atwood's writings about nature does not condone the disappearance of natural environment in the convoluted spheres of language. It does not even imply the negation of the ecological crisis based on the assumption that nothing exists outside the text, which derives from an oversimplified interpretation of postmodernism. Kate Soper's trenchant words encapsulate the sceptical attitude that some ecocritical theorists take towards postmodernism: "it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the real 'thing' continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier" (Soper 1995: 151). Yet, postmodernism contributes to expose the false assumptions on nature that language often conveys and, as Atwood's writings have often demonstrated, it overturns power relations. In Linda Hutcheon's words, "postmodernism challenges our mimetic assumptions about representation (in any of the 'scrambled menu' meanings): assumptions about its transparency and common-sense naturalness" (Hutcheon 1989: 32). In doing so, language is transformed from a tool of subjugation – nature cannot talk and humanity takes advantage of it – into a tool of empowerment because, as Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer point out, the ecocritical position "entails a critical reassessment of the functional relationship between cultural 'texts' and their material referents" (Gersdorf-Mayer 2006: 11). This leads to the most recent developments in material ecocriticism that see the entanglement of language and reality, meaning and matter[3].

In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, Margaret Atwood explores the possibility that language and storytelling are the keys to overcome the environmental crisis by dismantling opposition and building relationships. Serpil Oppermann maintains that "ecologically oriented postmodernism draws attention to the linguistic

[3] See Iovino-Opperman (2014: 1-17).

manipulations behind the discursive constitution of nature at the bottom of which lies human oppression of the nonhuman world resulting in the environmental degradation" (Oppermann 2006: 117). The entire representation of manufactured nature in Atwood's trilogy exemplifies the mystification of environmental discourses on nature, evolution, and ecological crisis, but we also find a direct parody of self-professed environmental organizations that claim to save environments, like the Mackenzie Mountains, endangered by climate change.

4. Postmodern ecology in "Bearlift"

"Bearlift", the fourth chapter of *MaddAddam*, aptly exemplifies Atwood's parody of superficial and self-absolving environmentalism. Atwood introduces the intertwining multiple layers of the episode: "There's the story, then there's the real story, then there's the story of how the story came to be told. Then there's what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too" (Atwood 2013: 56). Finding out the *real* story is not as important as performing the act of telling the story, thus including as many interpretations of the facts as possible.

The chapter begins with the simplified version of Zeb's adventure that Toby tells the Crakers, the genetically engineered people of the post-apocalyptic world, who want to hear about when Zeb was lost in the Mountains and had an encounter with a bear: "Zeb was lost. He sat under a tree. The tree was in a big open space, wide and flat, like the beach except there was no sand and no sea, only some chilly pools and a lot of moss. All around but quite far away, there were mountains" (p. 56). Toby immediately runs into many difficulties in her narration, because she is not used to the Crakers' lack of knowledge of the world. She even has to explain what a mountain is as the Crakers can hardly handle the amount and complexity of new information: "Mountains? Mountains are very large and high rocks. No, those are not mountains, those are buildings. Buildings fall down, and then they make a crash. Mountains fall down too, but they do it very slowly. No, the mountains did not fall down on Zeb" (p. 54).

Then, the reader is led through Zeb's own narration about the time he was working for Bearlift, an environmental organization that claimed to save bears from extinction:

> Bearlift was a scam, or partly a scam. It didn't take anyone with half a brain too long to figure that one out. Unlike many scams it was well meaning, but it was a scam nonetheless. It lived off good intentions of city types with disposable emotions who liked to think they were saving something – some rag from their primordial authentic ancestral past, a tiny shred of their collective soul dressed up in a cute bear suit. (p. 59)

Atwood stresses the environmental problems generated by false assumptions about nature. While it is true that "it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer" (Soper 1995: 151), Zeb's account shows very clearly the flawed discourse on the environment that inspires many social efforts. It is interesting to note that the events imagined in this episode take place when the Corporations have not entirely taken charge of public institutions and, since the whole trilogy is set in a quite close future, this temporal note makes the criticism particularly relevant to the reader's own contemporary world:

> The concept was simple: polar bears were striving because the ice was almost gone and they can't catch seals anymore, so let's feed them our leftovers until they learn to adapt, "*adapt* being the buzzword of those days, if you'll recall […]".
> "I remember *adapt*", says Toby. "It was another way of saying *tough luck*. To people you weren't going to help out". (Atwood 2013: 59)

The damage does not occur on the discursive level only though, because many false solutions and detrimental practices follow from a flawed discourse on nature and its laws.

As Zeb underlines, "feeding trash to the bears didn't help them adapt, it just taught them that food falls out of the sky. They'd start slavering every time they heard the sound of a 'thopter, they had their very own cargo cult" (p. 59). Atwood's postmodern use of language is not meant to deny the existence of reality, but to denounce its mystification which derives from the blind faith in human representations of it. The bears, perceiving their *reality* as food falling from the sky, are victims of the same mimetic assumptions that humans often make and which, being caused by verbal artifice, can only be unmasked through language.

There is a clash between the idea of nature conveyed by the Bearlift organization and the nature that Zeb experiences in the Mountains. To Zeb's colleagues at Bearlift, whom he calls "preposterous green-

hued furfuckers" (p. 58) sermonizing on the necessity to restore the ecological balance, nature is what they see from the sky when they fly with their helicopters to feed the bears:

> The flight was standard, threading the valleys through and around the Pelly Mountains, pausing to bombard the landscape a few times with bear yummies; then over to the high-altitude Barrens with the Mackenzies all around, postcard snow on tops, with a couple more drops; then crossing the remains of the Old Canol Trail, still marked by the occasional World War Two telephone pole.
> […] two bears – one mostly, one mostly brown – were already cantering toward their personal garbage dump as the 'thopter approached; Zeb could see their fur rippling like a shag rug being shaken. Being that close was always a bit of a thrill. (p. 66)

Close enough to feel the thrill of the wilderness, but only in its postcard version, nature is represented as the object of a man's observing eyes, at safe distance from the perils that it conceals. When Zeb experiences that landscape from the inside, he finds "himself sitting under a tree, staring at the tree trunk. Astonishing, how clear the frilly edges were, of the lichen; light grey, with a tinge of green, and an edge that was darker, so intricate…" (p. 67). When he finally moves in that environment that he had only flown over until then, his perception of the surroundings significantly changes. Like in the previous survey from the helicopter, Zeb gives an overview of the landscape featuring both natural and artificial objects and he describes the encounter with a living being, but the effect is neither reassuring nor enticing:

> The tundra was hard walking. Spongy, waterlogged, with hidden pools and slippery moss and treacherous mounds of tussock grass. There were parts of old airplanes sticking out of the peat – a strut here, a blade there, detritus from rash twentieth-century bush pilots caught by fog or sudden winds, long ago. He saw a mushroom, left it alone: he knew little about mushrooms, but some were hallucinogenic. That's all he'd needed, an encounter with the 'shroom god while green and purple teddybears skimmed towards him on tiny wings, grinning pinkly. (p. 72)

The perils that give Zeb the exciting thrill on the helicopter, now become dangerously real and ascribe to nature a complexity that far exceeds what can be contained on a postcard.

Zeb leaves the security of the helicopter because his partner, Chuck, attacks him for reasons that are revealed much later in the novel, giving another perspective on the dangers surrounding environmentalist discourses. Chuck is an adept of the Church of PetrOleum, a sect that was founded by a false Messiah and that is based on the cult of oil and money:

> The Rev had nailed together a theology to help him rake in the cash. Naturally he had a scriptural foundation for it. Matthew, Chapter 16, Verse 18: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church". It didn't take a rocket-science genius, the Rev would say, to figure out that Peter is the Latin word for rock, and therefore the real, true meaning of 'Peter' refers to petroleum, or oil that comes from rock. 'So this verse, dear friends, is not only about Saint Peter: it is a prophecy, a vision of the Age of Oil, and the proof, dear friends, is right before your eyes, because look! What is more valued by us today than oil?' (p. 112)

Upon this scriptural foundation, the Church grows in the worship of The Holy Oleum and its extraction from the bowels of the earth: "The Holy Oleum must not be hidden under a bushel – in other words, left underneath the rocks – for to do so is to flout the Word! Lift up your voices in song, and let the Oleum gush forth in ever stronger and all-blessed streams!" (p. 112).

The extraction of oil is the reason why Chuck crosses Zeb's path, because Bearlift works in a geographical area – the Mackenzie Mountains – where a huge amount of oil could be extracted and the PetrOleum Church is interested in infiltrating the organization to hijack it. Its adepts obviously have no interest in preserving the environment, since their faith is based precisely on its consumption. The idea of nature on which Bearlift and similar organizations base their actions of environmental protection is clearly deceptive, but so is the idea of nature fostered by the Church of PetrOleum and other ultra-conservative groups:

> they were all death on ecofreaks. Their ads featured stuff like a cute little blond girl next to some particularly repellent threatened species, such as the Surinam toad or the great white shark, with a slogan saying: *This*? or *This*? Implying that all cute little blond girls were in danger of having their throats slit so the Surinam toads might prosper. (p. 182)

5. Conclusions

By presenting these opposite misleading discourses over nature, Atwood exposes the deceptive use of language and the consequent fallacious reasoning shared by both environmentalist groups and non-renewable resources fanatics. The playful and parodic element holds a crucial role and is also directed at the reader's own experience.

Postmodern and ecocritical theories share a few basic peculiarities that contribute to giving a thorough description of the representation of nature conveyed by the *MaddAddam* trilogy. First, they both favour the metaphorical use of language over purely logical discourse to better communicate the complexities of ecological relations; second, they reject dichotomical thinking opposing nature and culture; third, they both discard metanarratives that impose an inaccurate view of the evolution of species, which Atwood exemplifies in Crake's dream of artificially-made perfect organisms. A postmodern reading of Atwood's trilogy does not deny the environmental crisis but, on the contrary, underlines the necessity to elaborate narratives capable of transforming literature and culture into strategies of survival[4].

Eric Wilson (2003) enlightens the symbolic hidden charge of polar ice and asks:

> What, then, is the secret imperative of polar melting, of the apocalyptic global warming amid which we now live? Perhaps this: The melting that we have wantonly made through our greed and waste should shock us into a new awareness of ice, of its place in the living whole – an awareness that might translate into new modes of being: less egocentric, more ecological. (p. 220)

Atwood's choice to set "Bearlift" in the Mackenzie Mountains is revealing of the tight connection between the actual environmental conditions of the place, threatened by climate change and oil extraction, and the symbolic charge of extreme places that rely on a delicate equilibrium, in spite of their harshness. Confronting such

[4] For a theoretical and practical exploration of the possibilities of literature as a strategy of survival to overcome the ecological crisis, see Iovino (2006).

a fragile environment at peril, the reader is encouraged to bring language closer to reality, to ponder the *ustopian* quality of that imagined possible future and to take a stance that might lead him or her toward true ecological awareness.

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