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Caitlin Charman

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“It Seems to Bust Your Balls”: Coal Nostalgia, Masculinity, and Energy History in Alistair MacLeod’s Short Fiction

CAITLIN CHARMAN

“I guess your people have been on the coal over there for a long time?” asks the voice beside me.

“Yes,” I say, “since 1873.”

“Son of a bitch,” he says, after a pause, “it seems to bust your balls and it’s bound to break your heart.”

(MacLeod, *Island* 58)

IN *LIVING OIL: PETROLEUM CULTURE IN THE AMERICAN CENTURY*, Stephanie LeMenager argues that the end of easily extractable, cheap oil led to unresolved feelings of loss and grief, a collective emotion that she tentatively refers to as “petromelancholia” (102). Such an emotion is understandable even if, as LeMenager suggests, we must interrogate it and the myths upon which it is based. But what is to be made of expressions of grief and nostalgia for the loss of backbreaking, labour-intensive, so-called dirty energies such as coal in the works of writers such as Alistair MacLeod? As critics have observed, his nostalgia is filled with ambivalence: although his narrators long for the recent past and cultural heritage of industrial Cape Breton, they are acutely aware that such a past and heritage entailed physical hardships, untimely deaths, and economic difficulties.¹ Building upon Frederick Buell’s assumption that “energy history is in fact entwined with changing cultural conceptions and representations of psyche, body, society, and environment” (273), I read MacLeod’s ambivalent nostalgia through the lens of Nova Scotia’s energy history, where, to borrow the words of Claire Campbell, coal simultaneously represented “a web of corporate and political dependencies that lasted for a century” and “a means of (re)gaining both political and economic leverage within Canada” (115-16).

It was not long after Confederation that Nova Scotians began to question how well the province would fare in a country that had clearly turned its back on the sea in favour of land-based industrialization centred in Quebec and Ontario (Campbell 115, 118-19). Nevertheless, Cape Breton's coalfields initially appeared to secure the region's importance to the national economy. In the early years of Confederation, says Campbell, "Canada's industrial heartland . . . demonstrated that it considered Nova Scotia most valuable to the federation for its coal resources," which "literally [became] fuel for nation-building projects concentrated west of the Gulf of St. Lawrence" (115). As Canada entered the First World War, Cape Breton provided the nation with over forty-four per cent of its coal and over a third of its pig iron (Frank 6).

In addition to securing a role in the national economy, coal appeared to be the solution in the early 1900s for a struggling provincial economy and a guarantee of provincial self-sufficiency: "By 1901 coal royalties provided over 40 percent of provincial revenues, surpassing federal subsidies as the greatest single source of the government's income" (Earle 63). This guarantee was not to last, however. Within Canada, the federal government removed protectionist tariffs in 1907 and raised freight rates a decade later; these policies, along with the gradual transition to other types of energy, contributed to contraction of the industry (Earle 65; Mason 154). Meanwhile, aspirations for coal exports to be competitive internationally were thwarted by the distance of Nova Scotia from key American markets and by the high costs of extraction and transportation relative to American producers (Campbell 123; Earle 64).

Although the coal industry remained the province's largest industrial employer for the first half of the twentieth century, production reached its height on the eve of the First World War, and the coal-mining industry did not spur the development of the local economy as the region had hoped (Earle 64-65). According to Michael Earle, after the war, "The coal and steel industries continued to exist [in Nova Scotia] but as industrial enclaves in a largely 'deindustrialized' province," whose heavy industry, by 1920, was predominantly controlled by the newly formed British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO) (64). Established through the merger of Dominion Steel and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company (SCOTIA) by a group of British, Montreal, and Toronto investors, BESCO spelled the beginning of the end of Nova Scotia's dreams of coal sovereignty (64).

By the 1960s, says Earle, the consensus, even among Nova Scotian politicians, was that the coal-mining industry would not become profitable despite efforts to modernize it during the 1950s (71-72). Near the end of the decade, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (DOSCO)² announced that it planned to divest itself of its holdings, and in 1967 the federal government established the Cape Breton Development Corporation (DEVCO) to run the mines (72). However, the purpose of DEVCO was not to resuscitate the province's mining industry but to foster the growth of new industry in Cape Breton and gradually to downsize the mining workforce, with the eventual goal of closing the mines by 1981 (72). Thus, by the 1970s, when MacLeod began writing his Cape Breton coal-mining stories, the industry that had long been a source of employment, regional pride, and identity was "under a death sentence," only briefly commuted by the oil crisis in the decade (72).

MacLeod's fiction elegizes this profound loss (Kulyk Keefer 80), and "his celebration [of] and lamentation for the disappearance of the traditional forms of masculine labour indigenous to Nova Scotia prove to be the apotheosis of his elegiac vision" (73). "The Vastness of the Dark" (1971), "The Return" (1971), and "The Closing Down of Summer" (1976), stories included in his 2000 collection *Island*, memorialize Cape Breton coal mining and mark the miners' transition from mining coal there to mining other resources, such as uranium, elsewhere. MacLeod's fiction laments not just the loss of a certain kind of traditional, masculine, working-class labour but also the loss of the miner's working-class body. Moreover, these anxieties about the changing male body are tied to fears about the disappearance of regional identity. The "white collar" male body in MacLeod's fiction therefore functions metonymically, symbolizing the threat of male Cape Bretoners being absorbed into the Canadian body and losing both economic independence and regional masculine identity.

Although MacLeod's narrators long for coal-mining traditions and the regional pride and masculine identity associated with them, critics have observed that MacLeod's nostalgic vision is neither simplistic nor static. David Creelman argues that "between the early stories and the subsequent fictions there has been a distinct epistemological and political shift" (128). According to Creelman, MacLeod's stories from "the late 1960s and early 1970s" articulate a liberal narrative of "the individ-

ual's existential quest for freedom and an independent self" (128, 136). From the late 1970s onward, however, MacLeod's narrators become more nostalgic and more conservative (128-29, 136). Whereas stories such as "The Vastness of the Dark" focus on the narrator's precarious search for a sense of self independent of the community, Creelman notes, in later stories such as "The Closing Down of Summer" and in the novel *No Great Mischief* "the essence of the individual can . . . be established and interpreted *only* within the traditional community and . . . MacLeod insists that identity is tribal in character" (136; emphasis added). As a result, his later narrator-protagonists "discover and secure their identities by fusing themselves with the larger community," a process that also involves searching for comfort in the distant past and in the Gaelic traditions of their Highland Scots ancestors (136).

Yet, as Claire Omhovère observes, MacLeod's protagonists ultimately find that "the commemorated past is quite uninhabitable" and "offers little . . . if any refuge against the economic uncertainties of the present," even if it does provide temporary consolation (59). What is more, though MacLeod's later fiction moves toward the idea of identity as tribal and collective, it also, Jody Mason suggests, expands traditional notions of who is included in the tribe (157). Citing Janice Kulyk Keefer's claim that in *No Great Mischief* "MacLeod insists upon a transnational and transcultural solidarity among those who perform authentic, necessary and demanding labour," Mason contends that MacLeod "replaces . . . what Edward Said calls 'filiation' for 'affiliation'" (157). What ties this *affiliative* family of workers together is not race or ethnicity but "a common history of labour migration, of unsettlement" (157, 166). As Herb Wylie convincingly argues, MacLeod's attention to the negative effects of this migration and his insistence on positioning his characters' grief and nostalgia within the history of neoliberal globalization mean that his writing is "more mordant, astute and contemporary than he is usually given credit for" (58).

One of the more "mordant" aspects of MacLeod's fiction that has received little attention is the extent to which his stories trace the environmental impacts of coal. In his coal-mining fiction, the narrators' nostalgia is complicated by MacLeod's awareness that the history of coal extraction in Cape Breton has marked the landscape and degraded the environment, marring its aesthetic beauty. MacLeod frequently portrays this environmental degradation using metaphors of bodily ruin: the

coal mines are “slate-grey slag heaps and ruined skeletal mine tipples,” “black gashes . . . which look like scabs upon the greenness of the hills and the blueness of the ocean,” and “scarred abandoned coal workings” (*Island* 39, 86, 207). In comparing the decline of the coal industry with diseased and decaying bodies, MacLeod demonstrates an understanding of the environment not as deterministic but as reciprocal — to borrow the philosopher Arnold Berleant’s expression — where human activity imprints itself on the landscape and where, in turn, humans themselves are imprinted by the environment (*Living* 14).³

Not surprisingly, then, MacLeod’s stories also reveal that various forms of mining are imprinted on masculine working bodies, which, like the landscape, are portrayed as diseased, dismembered, broken down, damaged, and scarred. In “The Vastness of the Dark,” for example, the young narrator describes his grandfather and other retired miners as “mine-mutilated old men” (*Island* 30), and he spends every night listening to his father “coughing and wheezing from the rock dust on his lungs” (34), a reflection of the heightened risk of various lung diseases among those who have spent their lives inhaling coal dust.⁴ In “The Closing Down of Summer,” the narrator similarly catalogues the various mutilations that the miners have experienced:

Many of us carry one shoulder permanently lower than the other where we have been hit by rockfalls or the lop of the giant clam that swings down upon us in the narrow closeness of the shaft’s bottom. And we have arms that we cannot raise above our heads, and touches of arthritis in our backs and in our shoulders. . . . Few of us have all our fingers and some have lost either eyes or ears from falling tools or discharged blasting caps or flying stone or splintering timbers. Yet it is damage to our feet that we fear most of all. For loss of toes or damage to the intricate bones of heel or ankle means that we cannot support our bodies for the gruelling twelve-hour stand-up shifts. (*Island* 183)

These miners are acutely aware that mining poses the risk of permanent disfigurement, which can compromise their ability to support their families. They also realize that working underground means working with the risk of “death in the shafts,” a death that is “always violent” and often leads to bodies “so crushed or so blown apart that [they] cannot be reassembled properly for exposure in the coffin” (187).

This culture of risk acceptance, born of necessity, is reinforced

by the gendered socialization associated with mining culture. Citing Robert McIntosh's work on child labour in the nineteenth-century coal industry, Steven Penfold argues that boys who worked in the mines underwent "a process of 'pit hardening', the development of qualities of toughness, manhood and fatalism associated with the collier" (24). Teaching boys the technical skills of mining was important; however, says Penfold, "It was not just skills that were taught . . . but manhood — which in the case of the miner included courage and stoicism in the face of constant danger and a sense of independence derived from being a tradesman" (24). The narrator of "The Closing Down of Summer," a highly skilled, highly mobile, twentieth-century miner, emphasizes the mental toughness and physical prowess of his crew, MacKinnon's miners, and compares the movements of their bodies and their close, interdependent relationships with those of "huge professional athletes on the given days or nights of their many games. Men as huge and physical as are we" (*Island* 200). As Kulyk Keefer suggests, in describing their work as "articulate" and in emphasizing that there is "a certain eloquent beauty to be found in what [they] do" (MacLeod, *Island* 200), MacLeod insists that these miners are "male artists . . . in the heroic mould, we may infer, of a Michelangelo" (Kulyk Keefer 77). They are also described as independent professionals, undertaking contracts for corporations such as Renco Development, and so skilled that they will be paid "thousands of dollars for [their] work" (MacLeod, *Island* 202).

Yet the narrator admits to feeling a kind of archaic fatalism; the end of summer, which signifies a return to work and the leaving of Cape Breton, fills him with a persistent sense of dread that he counters with stoic resolve: "I must not think too much of death and loss, I tell myself repeatedly. For if I am to survive I must be as careful and calculating with my thoughts as I am with my tools" (MacLeod, *Island* 203). The miners' recourse to superstitious beliefs, however, belies their confidence in careful calculations. The MacKinnons wear "worn family rosaries and faded charms, and loop ancestral medals and crosses of delicate worn fragility around . . . scar-lashed necks and about the thickness of [their] wrists" (206). These superstitions tie them to their Highland ancestors and reflect the continuing (and uneasy) tradition of the "pit hardening" process, in which reason fights with superstition and faith in experience and calculating reason jostles with feelings of impending doom (Penfold 24).

The narrator's description of his crew as they skilfully manage risks in the face of dangerous environments also fits the model of ideal masculinity described by Christopher Dummitt in *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada*. Dummitt contends that the idea of the "manly modern" spread throughout the country following the Second World War and in the 1960s in response to Canada's flourishing technocracy and because of a "desire to reaffirm gender divisions after the flux of depression and war and in light of the relative lessening importance of other patriarchal controls in the family and economy" (2). According to the discourse of "manly modernism," a "belief in the rational control of nature, in the possibilities of planned progress, and in the skillful transformation of dangers into manageable risks" was gendered as masculine (2). Moreover, manly modernism emphasized the "values" of "expertise, instrumental reason, [and] stoical self-control" (2). In "The Closing Down of Summer," the narrator's depiction of the miners' efforts to master underground environments through their exceptional skills exemplifies this belief system:

We are big men engaged in perhaps the most violent of occupations and we have chosen as our adversary walls and faces of massive stone. It is as if the spherical earth has challenged us to move its weight and find its treasure and we have accepted the challenge and responded with drill and steel and powder and strength and all our ingenuity. (MacLeod, *Island* 201)

This passage illustrates the intersection of regional and national discourses of masculinity and shows the extent to which these gendered belief systems influence our perceptions of and interactions with the environment and resource extraction.

In MacLeod's fiction, mining and masculine work are also often associated with sexual development, and productivity in the mine is frequently tied to virility. In "The Vastness of the Dark," for example, the story's eighteen-year-old protagonist is torn between his desire to leave Cape Breton and his frustration at the lack of opportunities that would allow him to stay there. He tells us that his urge to "leave behind this grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town . . . with its worn-out mines and smoke-black houses . . . seems to have come almost with the first waves of sexual desire and with it to have grown stronger and stronger with

the passing months and years” (*Island* 33). When he reveals his intention to leave Cape Breton, his nostalgic and sentimental grandfather says

“Don’t forget to come back, James. . . . [I]t’s the only way you’ll be content. Once you drink underground water it becomes a part of you like the blood a man puts into a woman. It changes her forever and never goes away. There’s always a part of him running there deep inside her. It’s what will wake you up at night and never ever leave you alone.” (44)

The comparison between “underground water” and “the blood a man puts into a woman” is perplexing, on first reading, since it is semen rather than blood that “a man puts into a woman” during intercourse. Yet, in MacLeod’s stories, blood is a complex signifier: on the one hand, elsewhere in his description of mining accidents, blood signifies bodily injury; on the other, blood represents the continuity of family and the passing down of familial ties, loyalties, and values (see Sugars). Read in this larger context, MacLeod’s replacement of the word *semen* with the word *blood* suggests that the production of coal is tied not only to the reproduction of genetics — it is the livelihood that supports the very existence of the community — but also to the internalization of traditional, gendered values associated with coal mining.

However, if coal mining is associated with male virility, it is also — as Lee Parpart argues in his article on the movie *Margaret’s Museum* — associated with its loss, reflecting “a barely suppressed fear [among miners] that literal castration may somehow follow upon the symbolic, day-to-day humiliations endured by men on the periphery” (74). In MacLeod’s stories, *symbolic* castration is portrayed in his repeated suggestion that one of the region’s greatest losses, aside from the deaths of working-class men, is that productive men — men like James in their prime reproductive years — are leaving the province to find work elsewhere. This narrative of leaving, of energy going elsewhere, reflects Francis Gray’s assertion, back in 1917, that “The coal mined in Nova Scotia has, for generations, gone to provide the driving power for the industries of Quebec and Ontario and has, in large part, been followed by the youth and energy of the province” (qtd. in Campbell 123). In more recent years, the story of energy production has changed, though the tale of outmigration has not. When the provincial government privatized Nova Scotia Power in 1992, “The newly privatized utility company

ensured that Cape Breton's last coal mine would be shut down, not because NSP intended to dramatically increase its use of cleaner renewable sources of energy such as solar, wind or tidal, but rather to take advantage of the new global economy — including coal from Colombia” (Gibbs and Leech 45). Nova Scotia's increased reliance on Colombian coal amounts to the province “exporting the old environmental and human costs of coal mining in exchange for lower labour costs down south” (Benjamin).

In MacLeod's stories, the threat of emasculation is also tied to anxieties about the male body and masculine virility that correspond to Canada's postwar transition to the service economy and that further erode regional identity, production, and reproduction. These concerns are exemplified in “The Return,” a story told from the point of view of a ten-year-old boy, Alex, who travels from Montreal to Cape Breton with his parents to meet his extended family for the first time. Echoing the region's historical anxieties about foreign ownership and control, Alex's grandfather sees Alex's father, a partner in his father-in-law's Montreal law firm, as “owned by [his] woman's family,” and he questions why his son has only one child “after being married eleven years,” a lack of virility that the grandfather suggests is “different in Montreal too” (MacLeod, *Island* 85). What is more, the bodies of Alex and his father are marked as different from those of their working-class male relatives by their white-collar clothing; his father is distinguished “by the prison of his suit” and Alex by his “sissy clothes” (91, 89). The climax of the story occurs when Alex visits his grandfather at the mine and his grandfather attempts to recuperate his body by covering him in coal dust, removing his clothes, and taking him to the mine's communal showers (93-95) while his father sits “all alone” in the wash-house “on the bench he has covered with his newspaper so that his suit will not be soiled” (95). This baptism by coal is a sort of masculine initiation, and it “evokes the baptism rituals which . . . are so crucial to male land claiming” (Omhovère 55). In a simulacrum of the “pit hardening” process (Penfold 24), Alex's grandfather tries to mark his grandson as kin, as a coal miner, and as a man. As Omhovère notes, “it is contact with male dirt and toil that signals his entrance into masculinity and his Gaelic lineage” (55). Yet the attempts to initiate Alex are ultimately frustrated by his return to Montreal, suggesting that being removed

from the production of coal is tied to declining *reproduction* and to the loss of regional, masculine, working-class identity.

Regional, working-class bodies are also threatened in MacLeod's stories by the invading Canadian body, symbolized in "The Vastness of the Dark" by a visiting salesman from Ontario who picks up James in "a heavy red car" as he is hitchhiking out of Nova Scotia (MacLeod, *Island* 47). Whereas the Cape Breton miners embody strength, skill, and precision, the salesman is corpulent, excessive, grotesque, uncontained, and undone:

He is a very heavy man of about fifty with a red perspiring face and a brown cowlick of hair plastered down upon his damply glistening forehead. . . . [H]is shirt pocket contains one of those plastic shields bristling with pens and pencils. The collar of his shirt is open and his tie is loosened and awry; his belt is also undone, as is the button at the waistband of his trousers. His pants are grey and although stretched tautly over his enormous thighs they still appear as damply wrinkled. . . . His hands seem very white and disproportionately small. (47)

The body of the salesman suggests that he is oversexed, but his large thighs, small hands, and pocket full of pens and pencils suggest a feminized body marked by sedentary work.

It is this body, however, that sees the deaths of miners as an opportunity to use their widows for sex. Driving through Springhill, a Nova Scotian community marked by a series of mining accidents, the visiting salesman casually observes that it "is a hell of a place . . . unless you want to get laid. It's one of the best there is for that. Lots of mine accidents and the men killed off. Women used to getting it all the time. Mining towns are always like this. This here little province of Nova Scotia leads the country in illegitimacy. They don't give a damn" (MacLeod, *Island* 51). Ironically, the salesman, a professed philanderer and adulterer, perceives mining towns and their regions as morally lax. Such a perception parallels representations of the Appalachian region and its miners in American popular culture and media. Rebecca Scott argues that in these portrayals the coal miner is closely tied to the stereotype of the hillbilly; in both cases, "the mountainous landscape itself is implicated in the degeneration of the people who inhabit it. Appalachian stereotypes conflate the land and people with dark, trash filled hollows

sheltering isolated, incestuous communities” (37). This conflation, says Scott, is “instrumental in the cultural, social, economic, and environmental marginalization of Appalachia” (37). Although MacLeod’s story replaces the sexual taboo of incest with illegitimacy, the implication is the same: for central Canada, the construction of Nova Scotia and its people as degenerate and immoral justifies its treatment as a resource hinterland. That the narrator James, himself conceived out of wedlock, has an epiphany near the end of the story about “the awfulness of oversimplification” might be read, then, as a rejoinder to the salesman and as a caution to readers not to transform regions and their inhabitants into reductive stereotypes (MacLeod, *Island* 55).

To the salesman, the miners and their wives are homogeneous, exchangeable, and disposable bodies. Theirs is a whiteness blackened by labour, a perception that MacLeod emphasizes in the salesman’s racist suggestion that the white miners’ blackened bodies are indistinguishable from the bodies of the African Canadian men with whom they work and share a sense of solidarity:

“Lots of people around here marry niggers.” . . . “Guess they’re so black underground they can’t tell the difference in the light. All the same in the dark as the fellow says. Had an explosion here a few years ago and some guys trapped down there, I dunno how long. Eaten the lunches of the dead guys and the bark off the timbers and drinking one another’s piss. Some guy in Georgia offered the ones they got out a trip down there but there was a nigger in the bunch so he said he couldn’t take him. Then the rest wouldn’t go. Damned if I’d lose a trip to Georgia because of a single nigger that worked for the same company.” (53)

The salesman reads the workers’ solidarity across racial lines not as something to be lauded but as further evidence of their ignorance and otherness. Moreover, his description of the miners eating “the bark off the timbers and drinking one another’s piss” parallels the discourse in the American imagination of Appalachia as a region of “dirty-faced hillbill[ies]” (Scott 46). Scott contends that in these portrayals the images of the hillbilly and the miner, both closely tied to natural environments, come together. What is more, in popular representations of the hillbilly, “Recurrent invocations of filthy bodies and dwelling places generate an affect of disgust that reinforces a disidentification

with the landscape and communities of the mountain. These precognitive invocations of embodied abjection rapidly telegraph difference and separation” (45). These constructions of bodily difference and disgust also reinforce the notion that “Appalachian poverty” is “exceptional white poverty,” an idea echoed in the Ontario salesman’s understanding of poor, labouring Nova Scotians (40).

The salesman is similarly reductive in his characterizations of unemployed miners who struggle with leaving their communities to find work. Callously remarking that he is not sure what Springhill residents do now that the mine is closed, he thinks that ““They should get out and work like the rest of us. The Government tries to resettle them but they won’t stay in a place like Toronto. They always come back to their graveyards like dogs around a bitch in heat. They have no guts”” (MacLeod, *Island* 54). This dialogue is juxtaposed — with a great deal of dark irony — with James’s recollection of his father’s description of the eviscerated corpses of the Springhill miners,

transformed into forever loose and irredeemable pieces of themselves; hands and feet and blown-away faces and reproductive organs and severed ropes of intestines festooning the twisted pipes and spikes like grotesque Christmas-tree loops and chunks of hair-clinging flesh. Men transformed into grisly jigsaw puzzles that could never more be solved. (54)

In this scene, literal and figurative castration come together and emphasize Parpart’s assertion that internal colonization “is figured as an assault on empowered masculinity” (68).

As Campbell contends, colonial powers have treated Nova Scotia as a resource hinterland since at least the seventeenth century, when French colonists found that the Cape Breton coastline was filled with coal (116). She argues that at the time coal was useful to the French in building the Fortress of Louisburg, designed to defend both the fishing grounds and the entrance to the St. Lawrence River, a key access point to the North American interior (116). When France ceded the majority of its North American colonies to Britain in the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Campbell notes, “the region’s coal drew even greater attention in the new imperial centre and its rapidly industrial cities” (116). Citing the work of historian David Samson, Campbell observes that by 1800 “coal royalties formed the most important source of revenue

for the then-separate colony of Cape Breton” (116). Thus began “a pattern — and a problem — that would endure. An economy of resource exports would be intertwined with state-building — ‘at the service of, and indeed an activity of, statecraft’” (116-17). By 1826, the General Mining Corporation of London received the exclusive rights to Nova Scotia’s mineral resources, and though local leaders successfully challenged this monopoly, as David Frank points out, in the long run they were unable to break the pattern of external control (8). Expansion of the coal industry in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was fuelled by Canadian investment — best exemplified in the founding of BESCO — that contributed to uneven regional development (9). According to Frank, “With the growth of strong Canadian financial centres, a corporate consolidation movement unified the coal industry into a few large companies and delivered control of the industry into the hands of powerful financial interests in central Canada” (9). This history of centralized, external control — along with “the virtual elimination of Cape Breton’s once-dominant language, Scots Gaelic” — means that we must read Cape Breton’s experience of colonization as a “complex, ‘doubled history,’” argues Parpart (67). On the one hand, the island “shared in the colonial history of the rest of English Canada”; on the other, it was also treated “as a political and economic satellite, or *de facto* internal colony, in relation to the rest of the country” (66). Given this history, MacLeod’s metaphor of Canada as an invading foreign body threatening the region’s sense of masculine identity and independence is apt.

Yet, in MacLeod’s stories, it is not just Canadian men, or men from away, who are associated with an emasculating corpulence. In “The Closing Down of Summer,” the narrator fears that his and the other miners’ sons’ distance from the physical tradition of mining will be written on their bodies. Men no longer involved in extracting energy from the bowels of the Earth will also no longer expend the physical energy required to transform their bodies into an idealized masculine form:

Our sons will go to the universities and study dentistry or law and to become fatly affluent before they are thirty. Men who will stand over six feet tall and who will move their fat, pudgy fingers over the limited possibilities to be found in other people’s mouths. Or men who sit behind desks shuffling papers relating to divorce or theft or the taking of life. To grow prosperous from pain and sor-

row and the desolation of human failure. They will be far removed from the physical life and will seek it out only through jogging or golf or games of handball with friendly colleagues. They will join expensive private clubs for the pleasures of perspiration and they will not die in falling stone or chilling water or thousands of miles from those they love. (MacLeod, *Island* 198)

In a reversal of the salesman's understanding of working-class labourers in "The Vastness of the Dark," in "The Closing Down of Summer" the working-class miner associates white-collar labour in the service and knowledge economies with both moral and physical degradation. Whereas the miners are strong men who embody the suffering of their physical labour, their sons have soft, sedentary bodies and grow rich from the pain and suffering of others. This description is echoed in MacLeod's novel *No Great Mischief*, in which the protagonist's work of dentistry is characterized as "superficial," "trivial," and even "dishonest" and in which the "shame" that the protagonist carries is portrayed as "the permanent burden of the upwardly-mobile dentist in his pristine, respectable southern-Ontario suburb" (Kulyk Keefer 74, 75).

As Laurie Kruk suggests, "MacLeod's short stories frequently draw our attention to his characters' work-marked *hands*" (138). In "The Closing Down of Summer" and in *No Great Mischief*, mining hands embody physical work; conversely, "pudgy," unmarked, white-collar hands embody its lack, associated with the loss of masculinity and authenticity. Such a distinction fits into an international discourse of mining and masculinity in which men who sacrifice their bodies are understood to perform real work for the benefit of others.⁵ In the Appalachian region of the United States, for example, "Especially in the underground mines, local stories suggest, miners daily face physical challenges that would overcome the average man. The work they do is *real* work; they have to work hard to keep up with the demands of the company for production and the demands of the nation for energy" (Scott 67). According to Scott, "the logic of extraction" (1) is built upon this narrative, in which certain regions are identified as "*sacrifice zones*," places "written off for environmental destruction in the name of a higher purpose, such as the national interest," and certain bodies are deemed to be sacrificial (31). This logic is internalized by the miners themselves and by those who reap the benefits of energy production, and it accounts for

some of the narrator's ambivalence in "The Closing Down of Summer" about the miners' sons becoming white-collar workers.

Although the narrator of this story acknowledges that the miners' sons will experience "gentler deaths" than their fathers, he still reads this workplace transition as a fundamental loss and an emasculation: "And yet because it seems they will follow our advice instead of our lives, we will experience, in any future that is ours, only an increased sense of anguished isolation and an ironic feeling of confused bereavement" (MacLeod, *Island* 199). In addition to reflecting fears about the loss of Cape Breton masculine identity, the narrator's "confused bereavement" — his lament that the miners' sons will be "far removed from the physical life and will seek it out only through jogging or golf or games of handball with friendly colleagues" (198) — aligns with Canadians' concerns during the Cold War about the expanding waistlines of white, middle-class men (McPhail 1021). Deborah McPhail argues that national anxiety about the increasing rate of male obesity incited "a post-war crisis in masculinity related to the collapse of the public and private spheres" as more and more women began to enter the workforce alongside their male peers (1021). She observes that, in Canadian business newsletters and in the national media (1033), "Reports decrying Canada's dilapidating manhood were not only concerned with national defence, but also the nation's gendered economic relations" (1032). Canadians worried that white, middle-class men, softer and less physically fit than before the Second World War, more involved in the feminized labour of office work, and surrounded by female colleagues, would be unable to protect the country from external threats (1033). These fears were compounded by the "belief that men's sedentary labour was, ironically, making men too ill to work" (1032). As "women were increasingly winning their own bread, men were reportedly becoming less able to work for theirs" (1032). McPhail observes that national data, such as the government-administered Sickness Survey (1948), validated these fears, revealing that "more men were beginning to take 'disability' or 'sick' days, a fact that commentators were beginning to relate to a lack of physical fitness" (1032). Citing an article from 1959 in *The Globe and Mail*, McPhail notes that these concerns led to the burgeoning of fitness clubs and classes targeted at white-collar male workers and to businesses encouraging their male workers to use them (1033). "The Closing Down of Summer," published less than twenty

years later, reflects these concerns about declining physical fitness in the context of major economic transitions.

MacLeod's fiction is also haunted by the spectre of uranium extraction and its effects on male Cape Breton bodies. In "The Closing Down of Summer," for instance, the narrator recalls the MacKinnon miners working in the "uranium shafts of Ontario's Elliott Lake and short-lived Bancroft," where they had "trouble getting [their] dead the final few miles to their high white houses" (MacLeod, *Island* 187). This recollection suggests that, though the role of Cape Breton as the nation's "sacrifice zone" (Scott 31) might have changed, Cape Bretoners have continued to sacrifice their bodies in the name of national energy extraction. That this sacrifice is so strongly tied to Cape Breton identity that it seems to be inevitable is illustrated in "The Vastness of the Dark" when James, anxious to get away from the nearly defunct coal-mining industry in Cape Breton, tells his mother that he will be leaving the island, and the only place that she can imagine him going is "Blind River, the centre of Northern Ontario's uranium mines" (MacLeod, *Island* 40). Her response reminds James "of the way Charles Dickens felt about the blacking factory and his mother's being so fully in favour of it. In favour of a life for him which he considered so terrible and so far beneath his imagined destiny" (40). Yet, when he is picked up along the roadside in Springhill by a group of Cape Breton miners headed to Blind River, or to newly discovered uranium shafts in Colorado if their run-down car can make it that far, he is undecided about whether or not to go with them (58). The story ends with James acknowledging his family's deep roots in the coal-mining tradition, a revelation that prompts his fellow passenger to observe that it is an industry long associated with a particular kind of masculine heartache: "I guess your people have been on the coal over there a long time?" asks the voice beside me. 'Yes,' I say, 'since 1873.' 'Son of a bitch,' he says, after a pause, 'it seems to bust your balls and it's bound to break your heart'" (58).⁶

These examples from MacLeod's coal-mining stories caution us that, like the visiting salesman in "The Vastness of the Dark," we must avoid "the awfulness of oversimplification" (55) when we are trying to understand the difficulty that regions can have in transitioning from dirty energies to clean energies.⁷ This transition involves more than economics or infrastructure: it also involves disentangling ourselves from

and rewriting the stories of our embodied, encultured, and gendered relationships with energy systems.

NOTES

¹ For the best critical accounts of the complexity of MacLeod's portrayal of mining nostalgia and its economic context, see Mason; and Wylie.

² BESCO was reorganized as DOSCO in 1928-29 in an attempt to stem the company's financial crisis (Earle 66).

³ According to Berleant, "Environment — and landscape with it — [are] . . . not just our physical surroundings, not only our perception of this setting, our environmental ideas and activities, or the order that society and culture give them, but all of these together. An integral whole, environment is an interrelated and interdependent union of people and place, together with their reciprocal processes" (*Living* 14). As Omhové points out, in stories such as "The Return," "the mine is insistently described as having the characteristics of a living organism" (56). It should be noted that Berleant himself refuses to speak of "the" environment because he says "it embodies a hidden meaning that is the source of much of our difficulty. For 'the' environment objectifies environment; it turns it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves" (*Aesthetics* 3-4). In other words, our objectification of environment is problematic because it misguides us into thinking that we are separate from place when we are not.

⁴ Various mortality and morbidity studies have shown that at least three diseases are tied to inhaling coal dust: pneumoconiosis, chronic obstructive bronchopneumopathy (e.g., emphysema and chronic bronchitis), and stomach cancer (Huang et al. 451). In Nova Scotia, Mao et al. demonstrated that between 1971 and 1983 Cape Breton men died from pneumoconiosis at higher rates than men in the rest of the province (qtd. in Soskolne and Kramer 421). Meanwhile, more recent epidemiological evidence suggests that the activities of industrial Cape Breton and the industry's "wanton disregard for environmental safeguards — through coal mining, coking operations and steel production effluents discarded over many decades into the Sydney area and harbor" (Soskolne and Kramer 410) — have left a legacy of human illness on the island not just for those who worked in the mines and the steel plants but also for local residents, who have experienced "the highest rates of cancer and heart disease in Canada" over several decades (Gibbs and Leech 44).

⁵ It also recalls the eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century American discourse of "*homo faber*, 'the man who makes,' a concept inherited from European political economists such as Adam Smith and John Locke" (Currarino). According to Rosanne Currarino, the idea of *homo faber* was tied to "the health and success of the republic," and it centred on the belief that "Only the unstinting and productive labor of men could propel the economy of the United States forward through the creation of useful commodities for exchange or profit."

⁶ MacLeod's *No Great Mischief* reveals the nation's ambivalence about uranium extraction and its ties to the production of nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war, a prospect that threatens Canadian bodies. In the opening of the novel, the white-collar narrator drives by "anti-nuclear protestors" in Toronto "walking and carrying their signs" and chanting about the hazards of radiation across the street from those whose placards declare "'Pacifists, Communists Love You,' 'If You Don't Like What This Country Stands For, Go Somewhere Else,' 'Canada, Love it or Leave it'" (3). This scene reveals the compet-

ing discourses surrounding uranium mining and the “strained divisions” (3) in Canadian Cold War politics.

⁷ The enduring nature of these myths about energy and identity makes Nova Scotia susceptible to reverting to coal extraction, not just because it represents an economic opportunity, but also because it is so familiar and so ingrained in cultural memory. This enduring cultural memory accounts for the enthusiasm among provincial politicians about the American company Cline Group announcing its plans to reopen the Donkin coal mines in Cape Breton in 2017 despite environmental concerns regarding fossil fuels and global warming and despite the dangerous nature of coal mining (see CBC; and Mortimer). Yet, as Campbell argues, nostalgia in Nova Scotia for the golden age of sail suggests the possibility of an alternative mythology that could be harnessed in the province’s efforts to rely more on wind power (117-18; 133-34).

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