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# After Extraction: Idling in the Ruins in Michael Winter's and Alistair MacLeod's Neoliberal Fictions

Cheryl Lousley

"Make It Big Here."
— "Bull Arm Fabrication"

"What is the good life when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility and collective uplift that national/capitalism promised goes awry in front of one?"
— Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (69)

"Idleness is the root of all troubles."
— Michael Crummey, *The Innocents* (6)

The 2013 novel *Minister Without Portfolio* by Newfoundland writer Michael Winter begins with a redoubled romantic break-up: Nora Power ends her relationship with Henry; Henry, in turn, "breaks up" with the oil industry, leaving his good job at the Bull Arm site building enormous, deep-ocean, offshore oil platforms. He handles neither break-up well, cascading into a series of disastrous work contracts until, bereft and unmoored by grief and guilt for the damage he has caused, a compulsion to reparation consumes him. No such compulsion has seized Newfoundland, though the narrative invites an allegorical reading. "Breaking up" with oil is the new moral and political imperative of the climate emergency, which the novel documents in its antepenultimate chapter. The real-life Bull Arm site is leased to contractors for large oil and gas construction projects by a provincial crown corporation, Nalcor. Its promotional tagline — "Make It Big Here," with its industrial swagger and promise of fast upward mobility — suggests that the romance with oil and gas still glows bright. Winter's novel is more ambiguous. In an optimistic reading, *Minister Without Portfolio* is a narrative of pastoral retreat

and renewal — the decidedly urban protagonist withdraws to the aptly named outport Renews where he repairs a house, cultivates love, salvages plants, jigs for cod, and begins to raise a child. In an adjacent reading that I will pursue here, the novel shifts from high gear to idling in a neoliberal context of social, ecological, and economic precarity where social and geographical mobility and relentless productivity are counselled as the only ways to avoid decline: make it big, move on, do more. Henry stays put and idles about; so does the narrative. It's not quite the idleness of the urban *flâneur* and artistic class that Paul Chafe identifies in Winter's *This All Happened* and *The Big Why* ("Beautiful"; Review), but a wayward sauntering and scavenging all the same. Henry mopes. He putters. He is indifferent to earning an income. He dallies with do-it-yourself repair and back-to-the-land living, sometimes well, sometimes with dangerous clumsiness. He watches his neighbours and gets his nose into their business. He's a "minister without portfolio" in the many different senses of the term tossed about in the novel: to be without purpose or defined responsibilities, non-committal, self-absorbed, careless, to have "no moral compass," to enjoy a privileged sinecure, and to be a "capable" generalist and a pastor "taking care of his hundred people" (*Minister* 130, 129).

Winter's novel, I argue, tracks contemporary neoliberal adventures in resource extraction and/as war within the *longue durée* of Newfoundland as a site of extraction and "capitalist ruins" — a phrase used by globalization anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing to describe the "spaces of abandonment" that remain after the search for economically exploitable assets has moved on, leaving behind decimated ecologies and desperate economies (*Mushroom* 6). It is not ruin as end point that she — or Winter's novel — describes; rather, both examine the precarious living that goes on in the ruins produced and abandoned by capitalist projects of extraction. Tsing's insistence that "we are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination" (*Mushroom* 19) resonates with other cultural theorists of late neoliberalism, notably Donna J. Haraway, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, and Lauren Berlant, who focus on ongoingness, endurance, and stuckness rather than opposition, resistance, and future resolution. The political and ethical valence of "stuckness" is decidedly ambiguous, and I examine one iteration here: idleness as a directionless other-time for neoliberal lives and places situated within a *longue durée* of ecological ruination. By bringing Winter's more recent novel into conversation with the oeuvre of Alistair MacLeod,

distinguished for his careful attention to the lives living on after extraction over short and long temporal arcs, I suggest these writers' depictions of idleness foreground the complex socio-ecological reverberations of extraction economies.

Henry's situation — and, allegorically, the situation of Newfoundland and Canada as "extractive zones" (Gómez-Barris xvi) — is an example of what Berlant calls an "impasse" (199). For many commentators, the extraction "impasse" in Canada would appear to be a standoff between oil-and-gas proponents and Indigenous land defenders and climate activists. Yet that very framing implies an aspiration toward some resolution — whether victory for one side over another or compromise between them. An impasse, as Berlant defines it in "After the Good Life, an Impasse," a pivotal chapter of *Cruel Optimism*, is when the disturbances of the present are not resolved into the promise of a future or a good life but are lived, in a "stretch of time," "as adjustment, remediation, or adaptation" (199). An impasse is not static, Berlant insists, but a situation where norms are interrupted without resolution or without a sense of direction: "One no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust" (200). It is "a thick moment of ongoingness" (200), the durational experience of "living on" amid "ongoing crisis and loss" (5). *Minister Without Portfolio* depicts "living on" through heartbreak, loss, and grief, but it also depicts "living on" through the exhaustions and ruins of an extraction-based economy — exhausted fisheries, exhausted workers, ruined soldiers, ruinous investments in boom-time temporary places and bust-time abandoned places, and the ruin of what Berlant describes as the optimism that capitalist production and national attachments will provide a path to the good life.

To be "after" the good life in Berlant's account is not to be living a "bad" life — although that may be the case — but to be "postoptimistic" (200). It is to be living on and enduring the loss of the *promise* of a good life, the promise of security and stability and "upward mobility" and "uplift" that undergirds the modern, capitalist, democratic nation-state (Berlant 69). Its inequalities, its incompleteness, and its contradictions are less hidden in the neoliberal era; it no longer holds securely as a fantasy site binding workers, citizens, and consumers around even a tenuously shared social project. The social project that is named Canada has similarly grown tenuous in late neoliberalism: regionally diverging economic paths and social visions have intensified the dependence and

identities of some groups of Canadians on highly capitalized, world-market–vulnerable resource extraction in the oil, gas, and mining sectors, while for others the historic image of Canada as a resource-based nation dissipates for various reasons. These reasons include the fossil-fuelled climate emergency, the disasterscapes of sour gas drilling and tar sands mining, Indigenous resurgence, and Indigenous critiques of colonial land grabs and ecological destruction, but also the precariousness of access to good housing and employment and the abstraction of finance, information, and service industries from the material resources they command. To be "after" extraction, then, is to be living through the loss of the appearance of a shared social vision of resource extraction as the historic, legitimizing basis for a stable social democracy offering prosperity to its hard-working immigrant-settler citizens.

**Idle Once More**

Idleness has a long cultural history, with both pejorative and positive connotations. The slogan "Idle No More," around which a grassroots Indigenous political movement emerged in late 2012, mobilized political speech and action through an implicit contrast with idleness. The movement, discussed further below, channelled anger, grief, and hope into political opposition, direct action, solidarity building, ceremony, and analysis. Idleness, however, has its most symbolic resonance in contrast not with politics but with work. Max Weber influentially associated the rise of capitalism with a specifically Protestant "work ethic" that moralized a form of self-discipline in which the content or moral purpose of work was less important than a dedication to economically productive work. It remains a cultural standby. "Idleness is the root of all troubles" is one of the few proverbs that a pair of orphaned children, alone in a Newfoundland outport, have gathered in their "little knowledge of the world" in Michael Crummey's novel *The Innocents* (6, 5). Their winter idleness leads to just the sexual trouble one would expect, but the tragedy of their innocence is how their desire to stay where they live is undone by the indebtedness they inherit, which compels them to work themselves to exhaustion during the fishing season to obtain meagre imported supplies. As an overdetermined symbol in relations of class and gender, idleness can be a privilege, associated with a leisure class or with a femininity free from toil. It can be a scornful accusation, with idleness attributed to a malingering working class, to an indolent

regional culture, or to an emasculating fatness. It can be a tactic — the strike — used by unionized workers to negotiate for better wages and working conditions. It can be a long-awaited vacation. It can be devastating, a result of illness, unemployment, or disability. Idling can be the vehicle emissions steadily heating the atmosphere — or their reprieve in an economic downturn, the Bull Arm site sitting "idle," the newspapers proclaim, all that invested capital not turning into jobs, internal revenues, and economic spinoffs (Roberts). It can be a prescribed curative treatment. It can be a rebellious orientation to play and the present moment and to nature without its belaboured "improvements," living beside a pond in the woods — "sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen," says Thoreau (106). It can be the *flâneur* with refined modern aesthetic sensibilities meandering the city streets in wry observation and momentary pleasures: "Basic to *flânerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labour," says Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Chafe, "Beautiful" 116). Literature, contemplation, reading, conversation, and the "culture industry" might not exist without idleness.

The imbrication of idleness with class, work, and culture has a particular significance for Atlantic Canadian literature. One stereotyped image of Atlantic Canada, Herb Wyile argues, is as a "backward" region of idle adults, parasitic on the nation for employment insurance and transfer payments (*Anne* 1-21). Its economic difficulties get attributed to personal and cultural failings such as a lack of entrepreneurial drive or self-discipline — a caricature that dates back almost two hundred years to Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*, the ticking clocks peddled by Yankee Samuel Slick of Slickville ironically favoured among the gullible bluenoses as a sign of social status and not as a tool for improving the efficiency of work. Clocks and clock time — and the anti-idleness work ethic they represent — are also central to L.M. Montgomery's depictions of modernity and the pastoral in *Anne of Green Gables*, as Paul Huebener argues. The impetuous island orphan is socialized into adulthood through clock time but loved for her rebellion to it, as Montgomery's novel contrasts "the child's emphasis on idle dreaming and imagination, and the adult world of schedules and timetables" (Huebener 107). The novel's seemingly timeless celebration of free-spirited youth exemplifies the kind of anti-modern, ahistorical "folk" representations the tourism industry peddles to attract visitors to Atlantic Canada, turning "the region's lack of development . . .

to its advantage, repackaging the region as unspoiled and culturally distinctive" (Wyile, *Anne* 148). National narratives of modernization, prosperity, and upward mobility tend to position place-centred work and place-centred cultures as historical anachronisms, treating them as passive targets for economic improvement or nostalgic preservation. But modernization and entrepreneurial capitalism, Wyile emphasizes, are not somehow foreign to Atlantic Canada but rather are the very means by which its quaint folk identity as well as its oil get produced and monetized.

Atlantic Canadian writing, though, is still scrutinized for the degree to which it appears to harken back to a more authentic, direct, and elemental relationship with land and sea. Such criticism can read nature largely in figurative terms as a pastoral reprieve outside modernity rather than register the slow ruination of livelihood-enfolded ecological relations. Nature often appears as the symbolic outside to modernity, capitalism, and alienating work in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere — this symbolic valence of nature is central to the class politics and obfuscations of capitalism, as Raymond Williams demonstrates in *The Country and the City*. Idleness-as-nature-virtue is part of the legacy of Thoreauvian and Romanticist opposition to the industrial rationalization and ruination of human spirit and natural landscapes, but it has served as a barrier to building cross-class solidarity for environmental justice in making nature "by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay, or live" (White 173). Middle-class environmentalism tends to "equate productive work in nature with destruction" and nature protection with either virtuous recreation or "authentic" work by "traditional" means (White 171). As a mirror image of the Lockean association of work with property, in which nature is idle until transformed through labour, valuing nature only when apparently "unworked" buttresses the tired "jobs-versus-the-environment" excuse for delaying and evading environmental and labour protections. Concomitantly, cultural analysis that focuses only on class can occlude the significant ecological dimensions of the social organization of work and how labour is only one axis through which capitalist exploitation occurs.

The conjoined precarity of employment, livelihoods, and ecologies demands better theorization of the ecological relations of capitalism. Wyile argues for an appreciation of how Atlantic Canadian literature, especially writing by Alistair MacLeod and Newfoundland writing

following the cod-fishery moratorium, marks the tremendous social upheavals that come with dramatic economic shifts and their embedded ecologies. Adhering to place, nature, or tradition during historical shifts may be a form of nostalgia, but it is also a commitment to what is loved and mourned and a mode of "resistance . . . to the deracinating, liberal individualist logic of post-industrial capitalism" (*Anne* 246). One need not be ahistorical when valuing attachments of community, place, and nature forged through earlier modes of capitalist organization. Remaining attached to the prosperity and security once promised through modernization, industrialization, and productive work is no less archaic.

**Extraction Ecologies**

Harold A. Innes's classic *The Fur Trade in Canada* placed extraction at the core of economic and historical development in Canada: from cod to beaver, then to lumber and wheat, the economic activities and infrastructure of the colonies and then the nation were directed primarily toward large-scale production of raw materials for export to more industrialized regions. Once considered an early and superseded stage in capitalist development, extraction garners new scrutiny as an ongoing mode of what David Harvey terms "accumulation by dispossession" (137-212; see also Moore). While commonly used as a synonym for "natural resource" sectors like forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, and oil and gas, extraction is an economic structure with embedded geographical, distributional, and ecological dimensions. Extraction transforms places into "resource frontiers" supplying metropolitan consumers (Tsing, *Friction* 28). The lack of social commitment to geographically distant places, coupled with the high costs of extending investment to them, encourages fast and large-scale appropriation of resources up until economic exhaustion. Extraction at this scale and pace, as Innes notes about the beaver trade, leads to successive, localized ecological exhaustion, with harvesters moving on to other areas. Glen Sean Coulthard argues that the standard Marxist analysis of capitalism focused for too long only on the exploitation of labour and retained the "instrumental rationality that placed no intrinsic value on the land or nature itself" (14). For Coulthard, "the history and experience of *dispossession*, not proletarianization, has been the dominant background structure shaping . . . the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the

Canadian state" (13). But he also argues that centring the "colonial relation of dispossession" in the analysis of capitalist relations will enable "a more ecologically attentive critique of colonial-capitalist accumulation" (14). Extraction is not just about a stage in the process of production in which raw materials are taken from the earth, but a broader economic rationality of appropriation and decimation of multispecies ecologies and the cultural practices and livelihoods arranged in relation to them.

The reverberating social, cultural, and ecological effects within "extractive zones" — those regions targeted for their life worlds to be converted into capitalist resources — has generated vigorous opposition as well as documentary witnessing that attests to the violence and injustice involved (Gómez-Barris xvi; Nixon 15-30). Rob Nixon gives the label "slow violence" to these devastating reverberations of extraction, trying to make visible as violence the time-extensive processes by which "once-sustaining landscapes have been gutted of their capacity to sustain by an externalizing, instrumental logic" (19). Displacement, he argues, should mean not only "the movement of people from their places of belonging [but also] the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). These extractive zones where people and manifold other species are "displaced within place" are what Tsing names "capitalist ruins": "When its singular asset can no longer be produced, a place can be abandoned. The timber has been cut; the oil has run out; the plantation soil no longer supports crops. The search for assets resumes elsewhere" (6). Living, however, goes on. Like Nixon, Tsing urges attention to "what's left" (*Mushroom* 11). The story of ruin, she argues, tends to be caught up in a capitalist imaginary of progress and abandonment: "*If we end the story with decay, we abandon all hope — or turn our attention to other sites of promise and ruin, promise and ruin*" (*Mushroom* 18).

The analysis of ruination and dispossession involves a broader theoretical shift toward temporal rhythms and not only spatial relations in grasping capitalism as political ecology. Idleness can thus be appreciated as a temporal and durational happening, a "friction" on the speed and pace of extraction and ideologies of efficiency, rather than an absence of activity and work (Tsing, *Friction* 5). The Idle No More movement is an example of Indigenous resistance to further "environmental asset stripping" (Nixon 18) based on the devastating experience of living on through the "ecological aftermath" of ongoing colonial extraction and

settlement (Nixon 17; see also Kino-nda-niimi Collective; Simpson). But the movement, Coulthard emphasizes, is not only reactive and oppositional but also "prefigurative" in character, building "the skills and social relationships (including those with the land) that are required within and among Indigenous communities to construct alternatives to the colonial relationship in the long run" (166; see also Simpson). The actions "physically say 'no'" to degradation and exploitation but they also offer "a resounding 'yes': they are the affirmative *enactment* of another modality of being" (Coulthard 169).

No such resolute optimism appears in the extraction fictions of Alistair MacLeod or Michael Winter. The elegiac tone of MacLeod's stories and novel orients his accounts of extraction toward the past, memorializing the scarred bodies and scarred lands left behind though not forgotten by melancholic, upwardly mobile descendants who make their lives and living elsewhere, in a repetition of the Highland clearances that sent their ancestors into exile and diaspora in Canada. Winter's fiction gives wry and intimate portraits of a creative class of writers, artists, and entrepreneurs who live adjacent to the Newfoundland of extraction and industrialization, ambivalent successors to its extravagant promises, failures, losses, and grief. Although stylistically very different, both authors situate their narratives "after" extraction in the sense of characters living on amid its reverberating ecological and social ruins but at a certain distance or remove, as its ambivalent economic beneficiaries. Rather than read optimistically for recuperating images of creative transcendence, ecological restoration, political resistance, or labour or national solidarity, I follow Berlant's cue to attend to the slow, stretched-out time of the impasse as an affective register of neoliberalism. In MacLeod's and Winter's fraught depictions of idleness, we can see extraction as an impasse that the characters and the nation do not move on from but live on through. A crucial difference is that MacLeod's depiction of neoliberalism is still structured around the post-war promise of upward mobility — even though tinged with profound melancholy for what is lost en route — while Winter's fiction, written a generation later, registers instead the period of its "retraction" into precarity (Berlant 3), with a less tragic overtone.

**Unproductive Time: Alistair MacLeod**

Idleness figures in many MacLeod stories as well as in his novel, often

in dramatic tension with expectations of work and productivity. "The Boat" opens with the retrospective narrator in the early morning hours, wrestling once more with a memory of his father waiting for him to start the working day and the realization that he does not, the melancholic memories keeping him idly awake until he can go to work. His father's life is also grasped as a tension between work and idleness — those moments of reprieve from the fishing boat and the caustic salt water when he may lie reading and smoking on his bed, the one place his wife leaves him be, though not without her judgment on his "useless books" (*Lost* 119). The sea, though, is never idle, the "relentless waves" shredding and battering his father's body to mutilated pieces, the lobster beds bringing forth abundant life season after season (124). Also not idle is the call to make the fertility of the sea productive for capital accumulation. While his father's lobster beds "remain untouched and unfished" in the years since his death, the summons of capital is as relentless as the waves: "Twice the big boats have come from forty and fifty miles, lured by the promise of the grounds. . . . Twice the Fisheries Officers and the Mounted Police have come. . . . Twice they have gone away saying: 'There are no legal boundaries in the Marine area'; 'No one can own the sea'; 'Those grounds don't wait for anyone'" (124, 125, 124). A belated answer to this summons is still expected by his mother and her people, though on different terms than those set by the state enforcers: "They think they wait for me," says the echoing rhyme of the next sentence (124).

There is a double irony set up in this passage. There is the gap between the officers who appear to spurn a property approach to the sea yet, as representatives of the state, think they alone may regulate what is its common "wealth" and do so in order to keep the pace of productivity ever constant. Their hubris and naïveté are exposed through contrast with the men and the women of Cape Breton for whom the fishing grounds are a form of common property held and regulated by a community who fish and "love" it, and do so in accordance with the moral claims and rhythms of family and grief (125). The ethical bonds of kin, love, and the "sacred" are set against an alliance of property, capital, and law (124). But the second irony is the gap between his mother's proud and staunch defence of these work- and kin-based traditions and the narrator's belated realization of how they destroyed his father, who likely wanted to pursue instead a life of books, the "unproductive" work the

narrator has chosen to stay true to, leaving his mother and the sea ever waiting for him to show his love.

For many critics, MacLeod's writing is most compelling for his beautiful and haunting descriptions of labouring men who honour their craft, their place, and their kin, even as that honourable world disappears. Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests that MacLeod commemorates the dignity of heroic labour undertaken in primary industries like fishing and mining at the historical moment that they are "in terminal decline" because of "over-zealous exploitation of natural resources" and the emergence of a new economy based in telecommunications (80). She argues that he contrasts the seemingly trivial and cosmetic work of the professional class in this new economy with another ethos, now eclipsed: "the way of living through labour, of rooting one's values and very identity, both personal and communal, in the honest and heroic work one performs" (81). David Creelman finds the secure rooting of identity in communal value in MacLeod's later fiction to be decidedly conservative ("Hoping"), while other critics, notably Cynthia Sugars, Claire Omhovère, Jody Mason, and Herb Wyile (*Anne* 56-66, 156), argue that there is ambivalence, provisionality, and paradox in MacLeod's approach to identity, place, and the past. Christian Riegel, discussing the mourning structure of "The Boat," makes similar claims. By pulling on the thread of idleness rather than of work, I foreground this ambivalence. In "The Boat," the time stretched into waiting, which has no clear or certain end, is set against both the amoral drive to productivity and the conservative faith in a timeless cycle of an ever-giving, ever-destroying nature serving as the stable ground for work, identity, and moral relationship. That the waiting is an extended period of mourning for both the narrator and his mother makes it melancholic rather than oppositional. They mourn his father as well as the end of a way of life that appeared timeless, extending from one generation to the next in a potentially endless chain, but turned out to be all too historical — provisional, fleeting, and easily betrayed. The "moral economy" of the traditional fishery is similarly cast in doubt, shown, for all its proud cultural independence, to be situated within a transnational commodity market: "The lobster beds off the Cape Breton coast are still very rich and now, from May to July, their offerings are packed in crates of ice, and thundered by the gigantic transport trucks, day and night, through New Glasgow, Amherst, Saint John and Bangor and Portland and into

Boston" (124). The extraction economy and moral economy work hand in hand, while the sea appears to be endlessly giving still.

A machine in the garden image appears in MacLeod's emphasis on the "gigantic" transport trucks of "now," marking the break of the modern from the mythic, both thematically and within the narrative (124). The linear journey out of Cape Breton, mirrored by the narrator and his sisters (each of whom marries into the Boston upper middle class), takes the lobsters, the family, and the story out of timeless, cyclical nature and into historical time. It is the quintessential modern progress narrative and upward mobility tale, the narrator with his "clean shirt" and "comforting reality" of a teaching position "at a great Midwestern university" replacing the "brass chains" his father wore on his wrists (106, 125). That apparent freedom and mobility and the supposed progress they represent are, of course, undercut by the repetitive, restricted movements the narrator makes from home to an all-night restaurant to work, with even his "free time" trapped within memory and guilt. The death of his father has not freed him. The release from nature, tradition, and hard physical labour has not freed him. He is in a "holding pattern" (Berlant 5). And this holding pattern — this impasse between the modern and the traditional, between mythic and historical time — seems to leave the fishing grounds waiting, too.

But only in the mythic narrative is the sea ever giving, ever abundant, ever destroying; belief in this myth sustains both the moral economy and its embeddedness in the extractive one. In the progress narrative, the fishery's only future is exhaustion. Though the "rich" fishery continues and "the footsteps never stop" of the men who tread each morning to their fishing boats, the fishery's end for this one family prefigures the abandonment of the place by capital once extraction of the resource is no longer competitively cheap (125). The son has already abandoned his mother to live off her "inadequate insurance policy" (124); she lives off the remains of his father's work, much like his melancholic thoughts feed from the memory of discovering his father's gruesome remains, the story's closing image. The whole story is framed retrospectively by ruin and anticipates the ruination of the sea. But unlike the narrator's mother, the sea is not waiting for the narrator to return, to don the mantle of the dubious heroic sacrifice of his father before him. His "holding pattern" might be read as a lack of courage, whether the courage to be true to his own love of the boat or the courage to face the dangerous sea and his mother's disappointment and to assume the role

of responsible son. Either way, it gives those fishing grounds a temporary reprieve, a fallow period when left "unfished," the lobsters living on (124). His father, too, the son recognizes belatedly, lived his world in his moments of idleness, not just his duty-bound work.

**Neoliberal Idle: The Closing Down of Summer**

"The Boat," MacLeod's first published story, appeared in 1968. Thematically and stylistically, there is little to periodize it as a neoliberal short story, but reading it this way puts extraction and its resource frontiers in the long story of neoliberalism. Wyile and Mason both note how the mining episode in MacLeod's 1999 novel *No Great Mischief*, the core dramatic event from which the narrator and his brother Calum never recover, is set in the late 1960s, on the cusp of what would become neoliberal globalization, and with the mining crew already enmeshed in "the dynamics of a more global, post-Fordist regime" (Wyile, *Anne* 61). Mason dates the episode precisely to 1968, arguing that the timing "seems to insist on the relation between the rise of globalization and what preceded it" (160). To Keefer's attention to labour, Mason adds a consideration of the productive role of exile and displacement in transnational capitalism. Mason notes the analogies that MacLeod draws between the Gaelic highlanders who migrated to Cape Breton when dispossessed in the industrialization of British agriculture, migrant workers in contemporary Caribbean-to-Canada labour programs, and the Blackfoot displaced in the settlement of the prairies. The novel's crafting of these parallels, Mason argues, "urges us to consider the historical connections between a modernizing Britain and a territorially expanding one" (161). The exploitation of labour and the accumulation by dispossession, in other words, are conjoined in MacLeod's novel and fold disparate places and peoples unevenly into their extraction, production, and commodity chains. Mason's focus on labour, however, gives little attention to extraction or to the ecological dimensions of the social organization of work. Extending Keefer's argument that "MacLeod insists upon a transnational and transcultural solidarity among those who perform . . . physical labour" (82), Mason foregrounds a historicized working-class solidarity built around shared experiences of migration and exile, which, she argues, MacLeod extends over the "rise and fall of industrial capitalism" from the clearances to neoliberalism (152). She concludes with a rallying cry for a new political optimism, noting

that "the affiliative bonds (figured by MacLeod as a new kind of family) created through common working conditions are crucial to our collective survival" (167).

Idleness drops a wrench into work being read as the common basis for political identity or ecological resilience, however useful common working conditions have been for political organizing. In *No Great Mischief*, the narrator and his brother are suspended in extended idleness: Calum, an unemployed alcoholic and a former convict, has no social role without the mining work that once defined him; the dentist narrator, Alexander, embodies the idleness of the upper-middle-class professional occupied in cosmetic rather than essential work. Both men's idleness is contrasted with the bending, working bodies of the migrant farm workers in the fields the narrator passes driving back and forth on the highway to visit Calum, though all three forms of living are depicted as being unmoored and transient in the novel. To read these brothers' idleness only for its contrast with honourable work — as signs of their fall from grace — would participate in the neoliberal attribution of economic woes to personal and cultural failings, thus missing historical and structural causes and broader cultural and personal significance. MacLeod's 1976 short story "The Closing Down of Summer" notably introduces its miners in extended idleness, on the beach, ignoring calls from the Toronto financiers to get on the job. More explicitly than "The Boat," this story marks the early stages of the economic transition now labelled neoliberalism, while also, as Mason argues for *No Great Mischief*, deftly marking its continuities with earlier extractive regimes, barely visible as traces on scarred bodies and lands that soon will disappear: "We leave no art or mark behind. The sea has washed its sand slate clean" (*As Birds* 28).

The story begins with idleness as a privileged form of leisure, where summertime as idle time — a temporary reprieve from work — is tied up with the tourist marketing of Nova Scotia as "Canada's Ocean playground" and a pastoral reprieve from the modern. But summertime as idle time is melancholic in this story, a sign not of pleasure but of loss, of "displacement in place" (Nixon 17). MacLeod sets the scene with a description of deadly stagnation in a hot summer that shows no sign of breaking though it is the end of August: "the gardens have died and the hay has not grown and the surface wells have dried to dampened mud" (7). The fish and the waters, too, are dying in the heat: "The brooks that flow to the sea have dried to trickles and the trout that inhabit them and

the inland lakes are soft and sluggish and gasping for life. Sometimes they are seen floating dead in the over-warm water, their bodies covered with fat grey parasites" (7). The dried-up brooks and gardens and fodder make for a hard time for inhabitants, who struggle to keep on living. For visitors, though, the times are good. Floating alive but lazily in the sea are a "record" crop of tourists (7). As the trout are consumed by parasites, so the Nova Scotian highways are "heavy with touring buses and camper trailers": "More motorists have crossed the border. . . . More cars have landed at the ferry docks. . . . Motels and campsites have been filled to capacity" (7). The story implies that the "booming" tourism economy is eclipsing the declining fishing economy as "cars with the inevitable lobster traps fastened to their roofs" travel the highways (7): the traps are out of the water and empty, their symbolic value replacing their use value. Production is replaced by consumption, doing by idling, and inhabiting by visiting — what will come to be called the post-Fordist transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy is nigh.

Productive work, of course, has not vanished entirely but has moved off-shore: "Out on the flatness of the sea we can see the fishermen going about their work. They do not make much money anymore and few of them take it seriously. They say that the grounds have been over-fished by the huge factory fleets from Russia, Spain and Portugal. And it is true that on the still warm nights we can see the lights of such floating factories shining brightly off the coast" (12). These offshore lights that displace the very stars are not simply portrayed as foreigners who displace the locals; rather, the melancholic arc of the story sets the tourists aside to focus on a specialized Cape Breton mining crew whose members similarly travel the world on short-term contracts "drilling and hammering our way to the world's resources" (25). In ironic and tragic parallel to the tourists, the crew spends "a summer of idleness" on the beach, drinking moonshine and letting their scarred and sore bodies recuperate (8). Their returns are temporary visits — mostly for funerals and burials by which they now mark the seasons: "Often, in winter, we would have to use horses and sleighs to get them up the final hills, standing in chest-high snow, taking out window casings so that we might pass the coffin in and then out again. . . . Or sometimes in the early spring we would again have to resort to horses when the leaving of the frost and the melting of the winter snow turned the brooks into red and roiling rivers and caused the dirt roads that led into the hills to become greasy and impassable" (13). And then we turn to autumn: "When my

brother died in Springdale, Newfoundland, it was the twenty-first of October and when we brought his body home we were already deep into fall" (15). Even summer is a season of mourning. A description of a Newfoundland mining crew living in similar economic exile refrains this theme: "the mangled remnants of their dead were flown from India in sealed containers to lie on such summer days as these beneath the nodding wild flowers that grow on outport graves" (27).

The dead stay put in perpetual idleness. But while they live, the adult men are not able to make a living, or thus to live in this place regularly enough to inhabit its earthly seasonal changes. They inhabit, instead, a death cycle driven by capital accumulation. Each death marks the arrival of its next season, ongoing in perpetuity. And each contract brings another kind of death, for even as the men live, they mourn the loss of family, place, and language. The more the crew members are away, the more they speak and sing in a Gaelic their own children in Cape Breton do not know. The wives and the children live instead in a world of hit-parade music, television soap operas, and gleaming household appliances, being groomed for upward mobility on the wages earned by the men who "tunnel ever downward" (18). And what of those places where they work — what worlds are lost with the arrival of the crew? We get an understated glimpse in the story's brief juxtaposition of the seasonal revolutions with unseen political ones: "We have moved about the world, liberating resources, largely untouched by political uncertainties and upheavals, seldom harmed by the midnight plots, the surprising coups and the fast assassinations. We were in Haiti with Duvalier in 1960 and in Chile before Allende and in the Congo before it became associated with Zaire. In Bolivia and Guatemala and in Mexico and in a Jamaica that the tourists never see" (25-26). An inversion of the tourist itinerary, this travelogue shows the tight association of resource extraction with political violence — the coercive side of accumulation by appropriation and its violent effects. A global map that marks, like graves, the nations caught up in the early stages of the neoliberal economic restructuring, it sweeps across the lands of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous subjects. Their still-precarious political projects for liberation from colonization and enslavement are overturned so that extractable resources may be "liberated" from their lands and their livelihoods.

When the weather turns at last, the men rise from the sand, walk back up the cliff, and set out upon the road in their speeding cars to "go by the scarred and abandoned coal workings of our previous gen-

erations and drive swiftly westward into the declining day" (30). The scarred bodies of the miners are echoed in the scarred landscape they depart from, in another etching of how life is lived in the rhythms and the environments made for capital accumulation. Abandoned by capital investment, this place sits idle and neglected: half inhabited, half abandoned by members of the fading generation in their global search for work. The story moves back from political to mythic time in its closing recitation of a medieval lyric, "I wend to death" (31), with the narrator musing fatalistically on how leaving the idleness of the beach for the next contract — this brief reprieve from dangerous work — will be death for some of them. Their extended idleness — this postponement of the next job through hot weeks as "the telegrams from Renco Development in Toronto have lain unanswered and the telephone calls have been unreturned" (8) — has thus been a subtle form of resistance to the beckoning call that puts their bodies to work and death. As a temporary delay, this idle break from work offers no alternative to the extraction economy, which is but the less visible underside of the consumer one. It stretches the time, like mourning does. It defers the death work, adds friction to its pace and efficiency. The liminal beach time is a period of impasse, not a resolution.

Mason notes how MacLeod's retrospective narrators are often temporally distant from the dramatic events they describe, intertwined with yet not determined by them. In "The Closing Down of Summer," the same effect is achieved although the narrator has only a temporary reprieve from the ongoing drama of extraction. Retrospection draws one near while one is distant, but it also takes time. Retrospection has a duration. The lengthy story, which winds its way through memories and mining sites and crews across Canada and internationally, is presented as the melancholic reflections of a narrator who has time to think and remember only because of this idleness on the beach. As his thoughts grow sombre and creep toward "self-indulgence," he tells himself, "I must not think too much of death and loss" (27). But idleness — time to think, time for the body to heal, time for the mind to wander freely where it will — seems as important as work in making his life what it is. And the ever-present sea and the ever-changing weather that prompt the miners to rise up from the beach might be mythic — just like the miners themselves whose working clothes "make us loom even larger than we are in actual life" (29) — but what Tsing would call their complex, "polyphonic rhythms" (*Mushroom* 24) are also shown to exceed

the rationalized temporality of extraction and abandonment so coolly understood in MacLeod's story by the departing men who "visited the banks and checked out all the dates on our insurance policies" (29).

**Michael Winter: After Extraction**

Extraction per se is not a predominant theme in the criticism on Winter's fiction since critics focus on his depictions of the creative class whose lives seem to unfold at some remove from the overdetermined folk representations of hardy Newfoundlanders or their post-moratorium struggles. As Chafe avers wryly, "It is procrastination, not Confederation, that determines the fates and failings of these characters," describing the *flâneur* protagonists of several contemporary Newfoundland novels, including Winter's "fictional memoir" *This All Happened* ("Beautiful" 115). These novels feature "not the struggling settler or oppressed outporter but the urban idler" (115). That the writer and artist characters in Winter's early fictions are those of the author's own creative class milieu has been much discussed, leading critics to foreground Winter's layers of ironic self-reflexivity as they debate his representations of "sophisticated and cosmopolitan" urbanites longing, at times, for traditional forms of community (Thompson 75; see also Armstrong; Chafe, "Beautiful"; Halford). Not quite the "idle rich," the creative class comprises those who convert their idleness into cultural products, often well enough to earn an income. *Minister Without Portfolio* would seem at first glance not to fit the mould, since its main characters are rugged men in skilled industrial jobs, and it has been read by some reviewers as an adventure romance (Rowsell; Creelman, Review). But *Minister Without Portfolio* makes explicit the transnational extraction contexts in which both urban and rural Newfoundland continue to be remade and underscores the similarities between the creative class and other neoliberal entrepreneurs. To the speculating financiers that figure in his earlier novel of neoliberalism *The Architects Are Here, Minister Without Portfolio* adds oil, mining, and military support subcontractors (Wyile, "Glocalization"). What is most striking about the novel is not so much its thematization of extraction but the bifurcation of the novel into a first part of fast-paced adventure and its deflation in the second half as the protagonist tarries with grief and guilt and slowly rebuilds a house. Chafe positions the *flâneur* as a melancholic and ironic "counterweight" to the progress and industrialization narratives that

have dominated Newfoundland politics ("Beautiful" 122) — this is just how I read the tempo shift in *Minister Without Portfolio*.

The novel encourages an allegorical, extraction-focused reading in the opening to the second part of the book, which begins with a mad-dash recap of the history of Renews. In just two paragraphs, the *Mayflower*, the Beothuk genocide, the pirate Peter Easton, the First World War, and the bitter 1949 vote for confederation are reprised, culminating in a third and final paragraph that is centred on this sentence:

> After running through the cod and salmon and herring and mackerel and tuna and turbot and shark and redfish and periwinkle and shrimp and lobster and halibut and scallops and haddock and flounder and squid and three types of crab and caplin and eel and lumpfish roe and pollock and sea cucumber and whelk and sea urchins — after all that they managed to clear land deep in the woods for rudimentary failed aquaculture and then marched to the sea again to stake out cultivated mussels in the sheltered ice-free saltwater coves and they converted front rooms of tidy bungalows into hair salons with pun names and worked for forestry and dairy and they laboured intensively with poultry and they hung signs off mailboxes selling fresh eggs and they operated convenience stores with tanning beds and bed-and-breakfasts with backyard nine-hole mini-golf courses and mink farms and retrained under federal package settlement programs for displaced inshore fishers. (160-61)

That's one sentence. Its exhaustive, repetitive conjunctions — adding up, one by one, the living sea resources exhausted, each in turn, beyond any economic viability — suggest that the history of the place is structured around a single-minded relentlessness, a form of serial monogamy in successive single-resource extractions. Resource exhaustion is the literal centre point of Winter's narrative. But unlike MacLeod's recurring contrasts of production with consumption and transience with rootedness, Winter's novel describes a mixed economy patched together through entrepreneurship and meagre welfare-state support. Life goes on in Newfoundland, in the ruins of successive fisheries collapse, through a mix of resource, service, and creative industries, a mix of subsistence and market economies, a blurring of the rural–urban lines, and periodic labour migration. This mixed economy mirrors the work experiences and the idleness of the protagonist, Henry, who is dispirited and trying to make a living amid his personal ruins, having contributed to the death of a friend and then to the disabling of a work-

mate. It also mirrors the entrepreneurial mix of the "successful" Rick Tobin, for whom Henry goes to work on those two fated contracts (12). Rick has "made it big," to quote the Bull Arm slogan, as a contractor who "could channel [his] force into ambition and drive and learn how to connect labour with materials and funnel them into the delivery of services" (12), first along the shore, then to Fort McMurray, and then to Afghanistan, finding profit in servicing Canadian forces.

The novel opens with Nora ending her romantic relationship with Henry; as he leaves her house bereft, he walks to "the polluted harbour and stare[s] up at the green and marble monument to the war dead" (5). His gaze moves to the "sleeping," inactive harbour, with its "pure utilitarian boats" for search and rescue, military operations, and offshore oil (5). The instrumentalized soldiers in honourable service prompt him to consider "war, or not war but an expulsion from civilian life. Or the hell with it, there is something noble in servicing oil rigs" (5). This theme of service returns in the second half of the novel, as Henry is encouraged to see himself in service to Renews and its "hundred people" (130). In the first half, noble service is lightly satirized as Henry is urged on to his adventures in war and resource extraction through neoliberal injunctions to "live a dangerous life" (4). His friend John, already working for Rick in Fort McMurray, counsels Henry to move on: "You're through with Nora now you need to break your relationship with the land" (9). He's urged to accept a "new" relationship — a contract in Afghanistan: "The contract started in March. Springtime, Henry — start anew" (9). These naturalized exhortations with their "logic of land and season reminded Henry of Sunday school sermons of ancient times" (9). The irony here is that Henry has shown little relationship to the land: "Like a lot of Newfoundlanders . . . he pictured an acre of land in his head that was his land. The picture has no location, it's a floating acre with a perforated edge like a postage stamp that hovers slightly above the land, though there is, of course, a view of the Atlantic" (60-61). That irony is redoubled when the ever-absent Rick's home base in Renews — a place Henry has had no interest in, for "rural areas were for excursions" (13) — is where Henry will cultivate his renewal after the tragedies in Afghanistan and Alberta.

While Henry's attachment to Newfoundland as home is initially a romanticized image, he nevertheless turns a parcel of land into his land, in a relationship framed not as conquest or property or reward but as mourning and a "compulsion" to reparation (29, 184). In her analysis

of Lisa Moore's *February*, which depicts a widow's decades-long grief for the husband she lost when the Ocean Ranger, an off-shore oil rig, collapsed into the Atlantic Ocean, Caitlin Charman shows how Moore's novel presents a practice of "resistant mourning" that illuminates and responds to neoliberal economies organized around worker disposability and "place detachment," which treats "places solely as sites for resource extraction" (126). Mourning, in contrast, emphasizes care, attachment, singularity, and remembering. Charman argues that in taking time, Helen's mourning becomes a form of resistance: "Helen's refusal to simply *get over* the death of her husband resists the kind of corporate amnesia that treats people and places as easily replaceable" (126-27). Prolonged grief can sometimes seem to hold a person back from living their life. But the invocation to "get over it" or to "move on" echoes a globally mobile corporate strategy that substitutes one place and one worker with another once killed, exhausted, or too expensive to sustain. Rather than repeat this doomed cycle, Henry tarries with his grief and guilt. He learns how to care for the house that was to be Tender Morris's, how to develop a caring relationship with Martha, girlfriend of Tender Morris, raising with her the baby she conceived with Tender Morris, and how to care for the past, the gardens, and the "hundred people" of Renews (115), knowing their lives are precarious, never safe or secure. He strives to make amends for his carelessness, avowing that "my hands are responsible for these accidents" (59). He wants to figure out "how can I do a better job. How can I be less false and more honest and do better" (302).

While the grief that motivates Henry's pastoral work on the self is not acknowledged consciously as an ecological loss, practices of ecological care are at the heart of his idling time. He builds a composting toilet, collects water in a rain barrel, gathers heritage plants from abandoned gardens, attends to his garbage, and learns how to read the coast when jigging from the dory. These slow, care-dependent practices are juxtaposed explicitly with the fast waste and toxic incineration fumes produced by the military and support operations in Afghanistan, the water pipes at the refugee camps in the devastated arid land, and the military's culture of detached impermanence, eating "rations that you heated in a bag with a chemical that was activated by water" (32) — a culture replicated in the frequent-flyer labour camps of Fort McMurray. He goes through his own "trial by fire" when falling into the flaming incinerator at the local landfill when carelessly dumping his shingles. The contrast

and the continuities between Henry's experiment in inhabitation and the neoliberal extraction economy are drawn out further by the association of the accidents with treasure hunts. The mining accident in Fort McMurray takes place when they are in the "jewellery box," "a face of a rock in a room that's full of precious metals and stones" (58). At the moment the stalled drilling machine starts up, breaking both of Jamie Kirby's arms, "the jewellery box lit up. It shone, this gold room, like some underground temple to wealth" (59). "House of Gold," meanwhile, are the words on Tender Morris's tattoo, which Henry learns only when he reads them on Tender's dying body in the aftermath of a roadside bombing. In contrast to the minister of defence, who pops up throughout the novel on the television screen always showing himself performing his dual role in upholding national security and enabling resource extraction (104), Henry as minister without portfolio pursues Tender's vision of "seeking roots in a rootless tradition" (38), symbolized by the abandoned root cellar where he seeks shelter and finds solace. The house "that had to be fixed up or knocked down" (37) and that Henry in his bereft idleness fixes up symbolizes the prefigurative possibility for life amid the ruins. Henry allegorizes a renewal of Newfoundland's relationship with land and sea. He learns from those who have long made their lives there while recognizing that the "past will never be resurrected" and was shakily built, in any case, on contested extractive premises (295).

There is an undeniable ambivalence here, much like what Peter Thompson describes in Winter's *This All Happened*. Thompson remarks that "while Gabe goes to great lengths to present himself in his diary entries as an 'ethical observer' interested in guarding traditional forms of social monitoring that exist in small communities, his actions are ultimately self-serving" (88). In *Minister Without Portfolio*, Henry builds a life for himself literally by taking the place of Tender Morris; he could be another displacement of local producers by a consuming class whose members romanticize the outport and its supposed ecological self-sufficiency and have the privilege to dally in idleness. But Henry's directionless idling also suggests that the wealth quest of the extractive economy should be abandoned in pursuit of nothing more — and nothing less — than to live somewhere well with others. Henry inhabits an impasse that is not as hopeless as the one in *The Architects Are Here*. Wyile emphasizes how that novel's title phrase refers to a "fatal shift in the *zeitgeist*," a sense that, as Gabe puts it in the novel, "we're at the end

of the good times. Our generation will be the last, we think. . . . Now there is nothing but, at best, a slow decline in the natural world while the man-made world has accelerated." The passage ends in fatalistic pessimism: "we couldnt [sic] muster the hope needed to pass the new world off onto youngsters. The architects are here, we said to ourselves, and to the future" (qtd. in Wyile, "Glocalization" 153). In *Minister Without Portfolio*, where "the seasons are all out of kilter now," John's biologist wife explains, as they watch the whales lingering near shore much too late in the season (308), they find themselves "after" the good times but, in the ruins of capitalism, living goes on.

**Conclusion**

Stephanie LeMenager proposes the term "petromelancholia" to describe the strong affective attachments that so many people have to the pleasures of a fading modernity fuelled by cheap oil, especially in places that serve as resource frontiers and sacrifice zones for the oil industry (102). It is a poignant form of cruel optimism. Wyile describes how Winter's novel *The Big Why* presents an ironizing twenty-first century retrospective glance back at the failed mid-twentieth century Newfoundland boosterism that placed its optimism in industrialization, modernization, and joining a bigger national economy: "We've got to get the people off fishing, Smallwood said. That's stone age. We have mining and hydro, paper mills and shipbuilding. There's chemicals and oil refining and agriculture and logging" (qtd. in *Anne* 214). One generation's future becomes another's past. One generation's optimism is another's tragedy — or deflated anachronism. In MacLeod's fiction, extraction is tragic because it is the source not just of damaged bodies and lands but also a pride, community, and skilled knowledge among its workers that cannot be fully shared or experienced by the beneficiaries of their sacrificial work. Upward mobility is both the promise that binds and the rift between the generations. Work, though, does not sum up the lives or the texts. In the "unproductive time" of idleness, when the sea is "unfished" and the calls "unanswered," another living happens. MacLeod's mythic natural cycles are also historical ones that refuse to contain nature within a productivity ethos. Winter's more ironic, parodic tone, albeit one tempered by melancholy, presents a perspective from those still engaged in dangerous, physical work but removed further from the class tensions between capital and workers and between

modernity and tradition. Like members of the creative class, they are entrepreneurial workers seemingly in charge of their own fortune, but they also inhabit a precarious world, of precarious jobs and precarious ecologies, that no longer offers any secure path to the good life. The idleness of Henry in *Minister Without Portfolio* does not resolve that precarity but is a way of living within it that finds some meaning in small acts of service and reparation.

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