Chronicling the Capitalocene — History, Colonialism, and Capital in Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*

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ABSTRACT: After first situating Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016) within the context of the Capitalocene, this essay turns to the novel's historical narrative as decentering the individual human in a broadening account of history on the one hand, while on the other hand putting a renewed focus on the human through the central role of inequality and exploitation within the context of environmental destruction. In a second step, the essay turns to the novel's representation of capitalism–colonialism as a destructive cycle founded upon the twin logics of elimination and (false) infinity. *Barkskins*, I make the case, enacts a critique of the underlying principles of the Capitalocene while remaining dedicated to the past—no particular vision of the future is offered up, even as history broadens in scope.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocene; Capitalocene; Deforestation; History; Logic of Elimination; Logic of Infinity; Narrative; Settler-Colonialism; Time

Introduction: Turning to the Past in the Anthropocene

As provisional periodization and heuristic concept, the Anthropocene points simultaneously to the deep past and the far future, to the planetary and the minuscule. It signifies beyond the realm of human perception and thus poses a major challenge to both knowledge and representation. One common response to the Anthropocene's challenges in the literary context has been a turn to specific genres and modes whose temporalities are inclined toward futurity and extrapolation, such as science fiction, speculative fiction, or weird fiction. The past tends to be neglected here to a degree, present only in the mode of the future anterior that looks back from a far future—if it is of concern at all. Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*, a novel that is outright and unashamedly historical while still tackling the scalar complexities and nonhuman agents of the Anthropocene, will here serve as one example of how contemporary novels might deal with the Anthropocene's challenges through an explicitly historical realist paradigm. In the novel, Proulx takes her readers on a *tour de force* of the history of North American forests from 1693 to 2013—more than three hundred years in a bit over seven hundred pages. The multigenerational narrative of two families structures this enterprise: the descendants of timber baron Charles Duquet (later Duke) and the mostly Métis relations of René Sel, both indentured servants who come to New France at the start of the novel. It is in the work's juxtaposition of a complex array of human lives with the history of forests that the deforestation of the American North and its attendant dynamics of exploitation come to the fore.

In this essay, I want to explore a tension in *Barkskins*'s engagement with history and human agency in the Anthropocene. First, the essay will problematize the notion of the Anthropocene

and offer the Capitalocene as a potential alternative while relating the terms' central tension between individual and collective to the concerns of the historical novel. Building on that insight, I will then show how the novel's representation of past time decenters the primacy of the (individual) human subject in history while keeping track of the fundamental inequalities of the larger capitalist-colonial system. In a third step, the essay will turn to the novel's representation of the conjunction of settler colonialism and capitalism and their concomitant logic. Driven by displacement, extractionism, and exploitation, the conception of time and the nonhuman world embraced by the collective agents of capitalist production is exposed as founded upon the illusion of infinity, of endless resources equaling endless profit. Settler colonialism's underlying logic of elimination goes hand in hand with capitalism's fundamentally flawed premise of attainable infinitude. Taken together, they form the motor of environmental destruction and ecological disaster that is at the very heart of the novel. *Barkskins* reiterates and thereby critiques the capitalist-colonial logic in which sustainability is impossible and environmental devastation assured; it remains ambiguous, however, whether the countermodels that *Barkskins* puts forward can offer any meaningful resistance against a cycle of destruction that has gone on for centuries. This paper will thus argue that *Barkskins* is a historical novel of the Capitalocene that narrates past time in an effort to question both the human-centeredness of history and the flawed principles under which extractive capitalism–colonialism perceives humans and nonhumans alike.

Anthropocene or Capitalocene in the Historical Novel

The notion of the "Anthropocene" began as a proposed designation for a new geological era after the Holocene[1] and is thus, first and foremost, a geological temporal category. It rapidly gained traction in other fields, not least so in the humanities, as a shorthand for a conglomerate of crises, from anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction to ocean acidification, pollution, and more. Regardless of what one might think of the merits or the (in)accuracy of the term itself, the Anthropocene and its implications are engaged with widely and are of major concern to both the arts and sciences. Humanity, in the Anthropocene, has become a geological force (Savi 945; Chakrabarty 31) and thus a planetary one as well. This assertion comes with a qualification, however: on the one hand, the idea of the Anthropocene, in its etymology and its insistence on humans as a geological force, ascribes an immense significance to humanity. In doing so, it seems to reinforce the very tenet of human exceptionalism that many proponents of the term in the humanities seek to criticize. On the other hand, the renewed attention to the nonhuman world and the disparate scales in both space and time that it points to seem to *decrease* the significance of the human. The human is thus doubly present in the Anthropocene, at the same time a geological agent of immense and potentially destructive power as a collective or species, while often powerless at an

[1] See e.g., Vermeulen 3-4.

individual level when confronted with this collective agency and the vast and unfamiliar scales on which it works.

The Anthropocene has by no means gone unchallenged as a denominator for a new era of unprecedented human impact on the strata of the Earth. Since it was first proposed around the turn of the millennium, discussions have sprung up, not only about conceivable starting dates but also about the problematic claims inherent to the term. The debates about the merits and flaws of speaking of an Anthropocene, a Capitalocene, a Plantationocene, or even a Chthulucene as ciphers for the past, current, and future situation of the planet have been led elsewhere in more detail than I can do it justice here.[2] Nevertheless, the matter of terminology cannot be ignored entirely, either, as "[e]ven or especially in the face of climate change, we should not forget that humanity is not one" (de Bruyn 72), nor has it ever been. The notion of humanity as a unified *anthropos* is a fiction and perhaps a dangerous one. It is prudent to be aware that, no matter which metric is considered, not everybody suffers to the same degree under the current crises, and not everybody is responsible to the same degree—even though everybody might be impacted one way or another. It thus becomes a reasonable question if the discourse of species is not disingenuous, hiding a reality of exploitation and inequality under a supposedly unified humankind.[3]

Such criticism, aimed at the inherent universalism of the Anthropocene, is widespread and certainly valid. One can overlook neither the workings of the capitalist system itself, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few, nor the repercussions of colonialism and imperialism, intricately interconnected as they are. Most of the terms proposed as alternatives

> in different ways argue that the Anthropocene's invocation of a human collective overlooks substantial differences between different human communities, and fails to convey that some (typically privileged) constituencies bear much more responsibility for the ongoing planetary crisis than the (often disadvantaged) groups that suffer from it most directly. (Vermeulen 7)

Jason W. Moore, who helped coin the term "Capitalocene" as an alternative, points to the oppressive principle "fundamental to capitalism's political economy, which rests upon an audacious accumulation strategy: Cheap Nature" (2), or rather a *cheapening* of nature as the inferior part of a nature–society or nature–culture dualism that serves as the basis for wealth production. The Capitalocene, then, "signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature" (6), and it is fundamentally oppressive. From this perspective, the origins of the current planetary crisis lie not so much in the mere fact of humanity as a species but in specific practices of domination perpetuated by human thought and specific human groups. What is crucial for this development is precisely the fulcrum of capitalism and colonialism, slave labor, global

[2] See for example Vermeulen 7-19, Haraway 30-56, Savi 948.

[3] See Chakrabarty 39.

trade, and intensive cultivation (Vermeulen 13), an intersection for which the formulation of the Capitalocene is arguably a better fit.[4]

The tension between the individual and the collective, as well as between the specific and the universal, is thus central to the notion of the Anthropocene and its critiques. It is at the heart, too, of the theorization of the historical novel as a distinct—and distinctly realist—mode of writing. According to Georg Lukács, the task of the historical novelist lies in negotiating between "close-to-life spontaneity" or "interactions between individuals," and "the capacity of generalization" or "the unity of social existence" (45). While I will not discuss the dialectics of totality in Lukács here[5], it becomes clear that the historical novel has reliably and continually been read as a balancing act between individual and collective. Fredric Jameson frames that dichotomy of historical realism in more temporal terms as the conflict of "destiny versus the eternal present" (26), or put differently, as two conflicting imperatives of universality/collectivity/era and specificity/individuality/present. Lukács argues that "the historical novel as a genre cannot exist without this dimension of collectivity, which marks the drama of the incorporation of individual characters into a greater totality" (267). The basic tension inherent to the historical novel thus mirrors the very same tension inherent to the Anthropocene–Capitalocene since both deal with the ambiguous role of the human in the course of past time. The historical novel is then uniquely positioned to explore the conflicting roles of human and nonhuman, present and past, individual and collective, in the current moment of the Capitalocene.

Fleeting Human Lives: Decentering and Recentering the Human in *Barkskins*

Scale and the Decentering of the Human

If past time and the tension between individual and collective are truly central to the complications and challenges of the Anthropocene–Capitalocene, then so is scale. The Anthropocene as "a moment when the sum of individual actions has come to affect the planet as a whole, and when the fallout of our actions resonates in faraway futures rather than on the more manageable timelines on which we normally track human actions" (Vermeulen 96), points to spaces and timeframes much larger than are commonly considered, to the planetary and the geological.[6] Correspondingly, the task of the historical novel might have gotten more difficult since "historicity today […] demands a temporal span far exceeding the biological

[4] That being said, the Anthropocene is already so entrenched as to stay (Haraway 47). Careful use is advised for any alternative to avoid the trap of terms that are too totalizing or too universal (see Haraway 50, Moore 5).

[5] For further Lukácsian insights in the context of *Barkskins* and the Capitalocene see for example Fosbury and Tanaka 5, or Ronda 53-54.

[6] Additionally, it points elsewhere both to macro *and* micro: entire oceans and mere molecules, rockslides, and soil erosion, the racecar, and the history of fossil fuels all have to be considered in the context of the Anthropocene, but they cannot be considered at the same scales.

limits of the individual human organism" (Jameson 301) but needs to consider scales beyond the human limit. In turning to such larger-than-human scales in both space and time, *Barkskins* stages an attempt to decenter the human in history.

Scale, crucially, is "a *relational* notion: it names the *ratio* between different size domains" (Vermeulen 96), i.e., it is not really about the very large or the very small, the very fast or the very slow, but deals instead with the comparative, the larg*er*, the small*er*, the fast*er*, the slow*er*, and so on. Only when compared to the way humans are used to experiencing their environment, only *in relation* to a particular and limited human perspective, do other scales become too big or too slow. They become challenging precisely because they are unfamiliar and lie outside the preferred spectrum of human perception—if they are accessible to humans at all. Humans struggle when confronted with fleeting, enormous, or excessive phenomena and processes that lie outside these sensory constraints. Timothy Clark writes that

> [i]ssues such as global warming or ocean acidification, so overwhelming in scale, can threaten to dwarf any individual or state action, even as both phenomena cannot immediately be seen, localized, or in many cases, even acknowledged. One of the most influential terms in recent ecocriticism of the past decade is 'hyperobject', coined by Timothy Morton, and meaning entities so massively distributed, both in space and time, that their reality exceeds being adequately grasped at any particular time or place. (38)

Climate change—or mass extinction events, desertification, or the degradation of biodiversity in woodlands, for that matter—cannot really be verified or experienced in its entirety by an individual alone (Chakrabarty 44). Such scalar complications pose a major challenge not only to the natural sciences but also to the arts and the humanities. For literature in particular, it is a fundamental challenge of representation and representability, of *legibility*. How might events or processes of this kind, the scales at which nonhuman lives take place, be made readable in narrative? Annie Proulx attempts to answer this question by explicitly engaging with large scales and extending her narrative over four continents, more than three centuries, and at least a dozen generations.

The lives of individual characters sometimes seem to fly by when viewed in the context of such large temporal scales; what comes to the forefront instead is the time at which trees as nonhuman beings exist in the novel. The importance of trees in *Barkskins*, especially collectively as forests, cannot be overstated. Going far beyond mere theme or metaphor, trees are central on the formal level as both structural template and mediating mechanism for disparate scales,[7] but they also serve as the counterpoint against which humans seem increasingly insignificant.

[7] This is not unique to *Barkskins* but seems to be something of a trend in recent novels. In both Richard Powers' Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* and Michael Christie's *Greenwood* trees and forests feature in similar fashion, namely as models for the novels' macro-structure on the one hand, and as signifiers of the different scales—different speeds, especially—of human and nonhuman existence on the other.

On a formal and paratextual level, the form of trees is used as an explicit structural model through the complex family trees of the Dukes and the Sels that are printed at the end of the novel. Here, trees determine the form and directionality of the text: they not only provide a structure of many parallel strands that interlink from time to time but also establish a double motion of branching out horizontally while going only forward in time, without halt or reversal. The family tree of timber barons and woodcutters serves as a juxtaposition, and indeed a superposition, of human and tree time—generations upon generations displayed within a single tree, enmeshed for good or bad with myriads of other trees.[8] Human time and tree time are thus mapped onto each other, and their histories become the same. Just as climate change, according to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, has collapsed the distinction between natural and human history and their different speeds (31; de Bruyn 75), *Barkskins* collapses the history of the forests and those who make a living in, with, and off them, juxtaposing nonhuman beings and nonhuman time with generations of humans. The consequence of that juxtaposition is an extension of history that also signifies a decentering of the exceptional position of the human subject.

Within and across the different chapters, the focus on long timespans is seen by many scholars as effecting a decrease in the importance of the individual character to the point of near–insignificance (Schoene 1447; de Bruyn 84; Nolé 69). Characters in the novel are legion, and human time and experience become trivialized. The family trees alone contain more than 140 identified characters, and this number covers only those belonging to either of the two families. *Barkskins* has in fact been criticized for that very strategy: reviewers have compared it to an "ant farm" and complained about the detached, lifeless representation of too many characters to keep track of or process (Garner). De Bruyn argues against such criticism, quite compellingly in my opinion, that this impression might just be the point and serves to defamiliarize the human perspective (85). By presenting the characters through the frame of an "ant farm," the novel points at once to the insignificance of the human and to the significance of nonhuman beings or phenomena that are otherwise often ignored or neglected because they are too large or too dispersed to grasp. The lives of both the Dukes and Sels, with a few notable exceptions, go by very quickly, and they die like figurative flies, with sometimes not more than a few lines encompassing an entire life.[9] In their sheer mass and convoluted interrelations, many of the characters "struggle to be remembered by the reader in the novel's speeded-up succession of births and deaths" (de Bruyn 88), further trivializing the individual human. This impression, however, arises only because of the relational nature of scale because compared to the much slower speed at which the forests grow, thrive, and are destroyed, individual human lives must seem like something played in fast-forward. What

[8] Berthold Schoene registers a very similar reading when he writes of *Barkskins* "as framed by arboreality, the unfolding of its human drama embedded wholly within treeness" (1436). While his assessment of the paratextual strategies of the novel is valuable, I am not convinced by the assertion of an overcoming of the need for human mediation in his concept of "arborealism".

[9] E.g., Proulx 159.

happens here approaches a reversal of the human perspective on the nonhuman world: whereas humans usually tend to look at trees disinterestedly and from without, not able to differentiate between trees in a forest, here it is human beings themselves who seem barely distinguishable—you cannot see the humans for the trees, so to speak.

Drawn out over hundreds of pages and hundreds of years, *Barkskins* thus stages an attempt at collapsing human and nonhuman history into each other, thereby decentering and de-emphasizing the category of the (individual) human, with trees as the nonhuman counterpoint. As depicted over the course of the novel, however, even if the individual human subject seems no more relevant than an insect, it is *en masse* and over time, "historically and collectively" (Chakrabarty 31), that human lives and human actions will come to have incredible, even terrible, power. The decentering of the individual human before the backdrop of the larger, slower, older trees is thus contrasted by the novel's insistence on the human as collective. However, this recentering of the human does not embrace a universalist species perspective but instead focuses precisely on the differences between human groups and their treatment of humans and nonhumans alike, on exploitation, injustice, and power dynamics.

Exploitation and the Recentering of the Human

While the novel might not be able to escape from universalist tendencies entirely[10], it is my express opinion that *Barkskins* does not hide privilege under the cover of false generalizations. Instead, the novel explicitly stages the inequality of power and responsibility caused by the intersection of settler-colonialism and capitalism. Some suffer while others profit: this is the basic formula expressed by the book's fundamental mode of alternation between the Dukes and Sels. The structural inequality at the heart of (settler) society is poignantly expressed in the oppositions and contradictions of the two families whose stories form the novel's backbone.

As a fur trader in New France, Charles Duquet takes note of the ever-decreasing beaver population, which effectively foreshadows the eventual deforestation of entire regions. In the face of this diminishment, he turns to wood as the prime resource to be exploited as a commodity instead (Proulx 65-73). Underhanded and relentlessly ambitious, he taps into ever-expanding global trade networks to make his fortune and set up his heirs to multiply it. The exploitative practices of capitalism–colonialism and the deforestation of the American North that follows in their wake are not locally contained phenomena. As Charles Duquet travels from New France to France, to the Netherlands, to China, and back again (82-110), the global implications of deforestation and the displacement of human and nonhuman creatures start to become apparent. These implications are reinforced and reiterated when, over the course of the novel, the reach of his family's company extends from the North Atlantic to the Pacific,

[10] This is the case especially in the context of the novel's epigraph, a broad, nearly all-encompassing gesture that makes use of a dubious "we" that can be read as "flatten[ing] the differences of power," thus remaining ambiguous about its political horizon (Fosbury and Tanaka 16-17).

to New Zealand, the Amazon basin, and beyond, clear-cutting forests all over the globe as the raw resources fueling their wealth. René Sel and his descendants experience the other side of these exploitative practices; they suffer much and gain little: Métis woodcutters, raftspeople, guides, and day laborers, for the most part, they experience the underbelly of the capitalist-colonial system. In the implementation of settler-colonialism's logic of elimination—something I will address in the next section—their land is taken away, their language and knowledge seemingly rendered obsolete, and their livelihood made impossible. Eventually, they have no choice but to join in the ubiquitous exploitation, cutting down trees for meager wages, leaving for unknown parts in the hope of making a better life for themselves, or dying a slow death.[11] The inconsequentiality of the individual takes on a bitter inflection here, rendered helpless in the face of the collective settler state's oppressive power.

In *Barkskins*, so de Bruyn argues, climate change is inseparable from the story of the poor (80). He is right, of course: *Barkskins* begins with indentured servants and Métis children cheated out of their inheritance (Proulx 157) and ends with the prospect of ecological collapse; it is a story about those with "nothing to lose but their lives" (299). By the same token, however, the story of climate change and the story of the *rich* is one and the same. Some few gain unimaginable wealth on the back of utter disregard for the wellbeing of many human and nonhuman others—destruction is fueled by wealth and vice versa. Ultimately, *Barkskins* is a story of capitalism–colonialism, determined from beginning to end by the common principles of exploitation, depletion, and displacement. *Barkskins*, by all rights, is a novel of the Capitalocene.

No End in Sight: Colonialism, Capitalism, and Deforestation

Settler-Colonial Beginnings and the Logic of Elimination

Throughout the course of *Barkskins*, humans are historically and collectively engaged in a vast project of logging that effectively amounts to clear-cutting an entire continent. From the very outset, early in the colonization of what is now Canada, woodland must make way for the settlers, whose budding expansion of the capitalist mode of trade and production it fuels. The inextricably intertwined systems of colonialism and capitalism and their common principle of exploitation are clearly made out as responsible for the deforestation and environmental degradation that is to follow. Underlying capitalist trade, proto-industrialist production, and the according practices of exploitation in *Barkskins*'s representation is what Patrick Wolfe calls the "logic of elimination" (387) that forms the very basis of settler-colonialism and, in turn, of ecological devastation as well.[12]

[11] Discourses that resist this logic are not absent from the novel, as we will see later, but they seem outmatched when faced with the capitalist-colonial powers that be.

[12] Fosbury and Tanaka call this representational mode "climate colonial realism," situating "colonialism as the dominant historical force and determinant of the contemporary climate emergency" (2).

Settler colonialism is considered distinct from colonialism without a modifier by way of their different goals. While both colonialism and settler colonialism are defined by "exogenous domination" (Veracini 18), only settler colonialism strives for the disappearance of Indigenous peoples. As cynical as it sounds, colonialism is quite content with the continued presence of Indigenous inhabitants as long as this allows for exploitation and profit. Settler colonialism, on the other hand, aims not only to dominate from without but to erase anything that came before it so that the new settler colonial state can be considered "original." Settler colonialism is then "inherently eliminatory," and inherently territorial, in a way that colonialism is not (Wolfe 387-88). Patrick Wolfe thus sees a "logic of elimination" (387) at the core of settler colonialism that is not necessarily present elsewhere. The implementation of that logic is not confined to outright violence or homicide but takes recourse to a varied array of strategies used to eliminate Indigenous presence, some of which might "include officially encouraged miscegenation, the breaking-down of native title […], native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, resocialization in total institutions such as missions or boarding schools, and a whole range of cognate biocultural assimilations" (388). All of these strategies, regardless of the kind or the degree of violence at play, further the logic of elimination. Crucially, settler colonialization and its attendant logic are considered by Wolfe "a structure rather than an event" (390), which are not a simple "one-off" (388) and not complete until the last traces of Indigeneity are erased. In *Barkskins*, this logic of elimination is at once clearly visible in the displacement, dispossession, and assimilation of Indigenous persons and groups, and, at the same time, inextricably intertwined with capitalist dynamics of resource extraction, global trade, and captive markets.[13] In this intertwinement, the logic of elimination comes together with a concomitant logic of false infinity that fuels ever faster territorial expansion, dispossession, and environmental catastrophe.

Corporations, Capital, and the Logic of Infinity

The novel, crucially, does not stage this dynamic of colonial and capitalist exploitation[14] at a single point in time and does not exhaust itself in a depiction of colonial New France in the early eighteenth century. Instead, Proulx traces the effect of these colonial beginnings through the centuries and finds the same logic at play time and time again. Exploitation, displacement, and short-sighted, unsustainable practices are constants in this narrative, whether the year reads 1719 or 1917. Their proponents and profiteers demonstrate an understanding of time dominated by claims of inexhaustibility and infinitude, claims that turn out to be false every

[13] Modern industrial capitalism, after all "required colonial land and labour to produce its raw materials just as centrally as it required metropolitan factories and an industrial proletariat to process them, whereupon the colonies were again required as a market" (Wolfe 394).

[14] Or, in the words of Fosbury and Tanaka, the "feedback loop of extracting Indigenous land, labor, and resources through new industrial forms of colonial-capitalist accumulation" (11). The notion of the feedback loop, strengthening itself, resonates nicely with the logic of infinity that will be presented shortly.

time. The project of resource extraction and deforestation, and the corporations bound up in them, are shown to operate on an utterly flawed logic, with devastating consequences.

At the center of this logic of resource extraction, wealth generation, and the inequality that it fosters, stands the private and profit-oriented corporation. Throughout the course of the novel, the corporation gradually comes to replace the family as the new focal point of capitalist society (and to a degree as an incarnation of humans-as-collective *par excellence*)—a paradigm shift that brings with it a new temporal order and a new outlook on time. Not incidentally, this development follows a shift of the Dukes' focus away from Canada and toward the US, a space more emblematic of the corporate order. Within the course of the nineteenth century, Aaron Ritzenberg writes,

> [t]he legal and economic entity of the corporation [had] established new hierarchies and systems of powers, changed the roles of governments and families, forged new forms of relationships among individuals, and altered basic notions of time and selfhood. The United States was on its way to becoming the world's first corporate society. (36)

The temporal logic of the corporation is not exhausted by timetables or attendance clocks; there is a temporal paradigm at the heart of the corporation besides its increasingly minute management of time. Aaron Ritzenberg describes this paradigm as "relative immortality," signifying the fact that incorporation "granted life to the organizations beyond the deaths of their founders" (36) and thus the potential for infinite existence—mirroring, in a way, the multigenerational timescales of trees. It is precisely this notion of endlessness, of immortality, paired with the legal protections offered by limited liability, that lets characters hail incorporation as "the lifeblood of our American spirit of enterprise" (Proulx 521) as it offers a great advantage in the accumulation of wealth. The corporation in Annie Proulx's novel is depicted as a ruthless organization, intent on undercutting the competition by any means necessary and determined to squeeze its laborers for all that they have. Ideally, the middleman is cut out entirely, and the workers spend their entire wages with the corporation that pays them in the first place simply because they are the only ones providing goods and services in the logging camps (527-28). It is crucial to *Barkskins's* treatment of the corporation, however, that the promise of immortality is impossible to keep. As de Bruyn points out, "the novel begins before the company exists and it continues after it is sold off, disappearing as abruptly as the minor characters living in its orbit. For all its fascination with boardroom politics, there is no dream of corporate immortality here" (87). Or, to be more precise, there *is* a dream of corporate immortality (a nightmare for some), but it ends early in a rude awakening. Despite all the advantages of incorporation, eventually the board decides to de-incorporate (Proulx 630). Less than fifty pages later, the company whose development the reader had followed from inception to zenith and that had dominated the lives of so many is no more (678). In the end, immortality did not realize, and infinity turned out to be a false promise.

The Duke corporation stands here in analogy to the enterprise of deforestation and extractionism that it is bound up in; these projects, too, are exploitative in nature, ruthless in

method, and founded upon a flawed premise of false infinity. From the very outset, forests are seen first and foremost as an endless source of profit within the (settler) colonial logic. This assessment is unequivocally shared by the main characters within the first part of the novel,[15] present in the minds of René, Charles, and their master. Monsieur Trépagny is convinced that the North American forest "is infinite. It twists around as a snake swallows its own tail and has no end and no beginning" (5), elevating it to almost mythical status in reference to the figure of the Ouroboros.[16] René Sel, on the other hand, derives the idea of an infinite forest from his experience of working in it: "There seemed always more and more trees on the horizon. He suffered the knowledge that his countless ax blows were nothing against the endless extent of the earth's spiky forest crown" (57). Charles Duquet, lastly, sees the forest as a conveniently placed resource, timber "all around him in quantities inexhaustible and prime" (73). This notion of inexhaustibility will be the cornerstone of all his exploits to come. I follow Leonardo Nolé in tracing back the origins of Charles' enterprise "precisely [to] the false belief that forests are infinite and always able to regenerate themselves. In his mind, the logical consequence is that an infinite resource can lead to infinite profits" (74).[17] This logic is defended and maintained even in the face of evidence to the contrary. When Duquet returns to New France after his travels, he recognizes that the forest is in the process of being depleted, just like the beaver population before:

> He could scarcely believe it. […] The forest had been pushed out of sight, and in the place of woodlands were rough fields with crops growing between stumps. The muddy trail west that he remembered was now a fair road. For a moment he was frightened; if miles of forest could be removed so quickly by a few men with axes, was the forest then as vulnerable as beaver? No […]. These forests could not disappear. In New France they were vast and eternal. (Proulx 118)

Even this radical juxtaposition of plentiful past and cleared present leaves no lasting impression, the shock he feels passes quickly, and he returns, with renewed conviction, to the mantra of the forest as eternal. Eternity here aptly describes the temporal dimension of infinity: because the forest is infinite and thus has no end and no beginning, it cannot be exhausted, and consequently, it must last forever.

This conviction does not remain limited to either the person or the lifetime of Charles Duquet; his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the people directing his company when his own person has become only a vague memory, all share the same assumption. It becomes a matter of pride that "here in New England there is such bounty of every wild resource that there is no limit to the assets, whether fish or furs or land or forests" (Proulx 212). Why think of

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[15] However, not all characters share this conviction, as will be seen in the discussion of possible counter-discourses.

[16] This formulation also already anticipates the paradox inherent to the capitalist-colonial forest practices in *Barkskins*. Just as the snake eats itself, this kind of logging is ultimately self-destructive, irrevocably destroying the conditions that make it possible and profitable in the first place, a negative feedback loop so to speak.

[17] See also Fosbury and Tanaka 8.

sustainability or the replenishing capabilities of land, animals, and resources if the supply is unlimited? The future is of concern to Duquet and his heirs only with regard to safeguarding and increasing profits. Cyrus, one of Charles' descendants, is confronted with the issue of sustainability when the land they have logged up to now is increasingly depleted. When met with the accelerating scarcity of trees, he takes it to be only a *local* problem; finitude becomes a consideration, but only as an obstacle to be overcome. Even though there is not much forest left in Maine or New Brunswick—described as infinite perhaps a hundred years ago—"[w]e [the Duke company's loggers] *hear* of great forests farther west" (363) that are yet untapped. The forest as such, his cousin Edward is convinced, is still "infinite and permanent" (364). The only reaction to the deforestation of entire regions, the only concession to the "treeless future" (458), is thus the acquisition of more woodland. Preservation or sustainable practices are of no concern whatsoever—instead, scouts are sent out to find the next "inexhaustible" piece of forest. When James Duke finds trees far beyond his expectations on an expedition to the Michigan territory, he is suitably impressed: "A thousand men could not cut all this in a thousand years. We'll get them. We'll get a thousand men" (466). Of course, ultimately a lot more than a thousand men cut most of it down in much less than a thousand years.

The logical sequence of the logging industry, from beginning to end, is always the same in the novel. Much like settler invasion, deforestation is presented as a structure rather than an event. A forest is found to be inexhaustible, infinite, endless until it is depleted—sometimes within a few years, sometimes within a few decades—and discarded in favor of the next. The novel traces the expansion of capitalist interests within the colonial setting of New France, the settler-colonial context of the United States' westward expansion, and globally. From Maine and New Brunswick to Pennsylvania and Ohio, further West to Michigan and Illinois, eventually all the way to Oregon and the Pacific Coast, and even beyond the North American continent to New Zealand and Brazil[18]—everywhere the forests suffer the same fate. Inevitably, after a brief phase of hectic activity, they are exhausted, finished, and done for, and every time the assumption of infinity proves to be false. There is no replenishment to speak of, and what follows instead, just as inevitably as the depletion of the forests, are natural disasters. Time and time again, great fires, floods, and landslides demonstrate the dangers of ruthless extractionism, ravaging the weakened and eroded soil and those who still try to make a living on it. Events such as the Miramichi fire of 1825 (382), the terrible flood in New Zealand (441), or the great Montana fires of 1910 (648) are decidedly not presented as "one-off event[s]. In fact, the novel explicitly ties the natural disaster to the larger capitalist system" (de Bruyn 80). They are devastating, both for nonhuman and human inhabitants of these regions—much more so, of course, for the poor and disenfranchised than for those whose actions have led to the disasters.

[18] For a more detailed discussion of the global reach and the networks of trade and exploitation at play here under the term of "imperial planetarity," see Fosbury and Tanaka 11-15.

The logic of infinity is thus clearly linked to the logic of elimination; the two are almost dialectically interwoven: while the false promise of infinite resources is one reason or pretext for the implementation of the logic of elimination, to get at those resources, Indigenous people need to be eliminated. At the same time, the logic of elimination in its embodiment of dispossession, displacement, and territorial expansion is what keeps up the illusion of infinity, at least for a while. And ultimately, of course, the dire environmental consequences caused by adherence to a notion of false infinity represent yet another mode of elimination itself. In the end, large sections of *Barkskins* are devised to display a cycle of destruction that proliferates a deeply flawed logic, if not an utter self-delusion, founded on capitalist-colonial exploitation that, in turn, begets more exploitation, resource depletion, environmental destruction, and human displacement. Sustainability seems to be utterly impossible in this framework, this perspective on time and the nonhuman that does not allow for anything but endlessness, even when confronted with the repercussions of such a paradigm.

Counter-Discourses: Is Resistance Futile?

Still, there is an oppositional current of thought to be found in *Barkskins*. The novel criticizes the capitalist-colonial logic not only by displaying its methods and consequences but also by juxtaposition with explicit counter-discourses voiced by characters within the text itself. Two primary sources of opposition to the dominant paradigm can be distinguished: a German-inflected notion of preservation and forest management on the one hand, and Indigenous practices and knowledge on the other.[19]

Perhaps the more surprising of the two is the appearance of a distinctly German forestry as an opposite pole to the capitalist logic. The landlooker Armenius Breitsprecher and his nephew Dieter have a somewhat different view of the supposed infinitude of forests, informed by early proponents of forestry science such as Heinrich Cotta and Hans Carl von Carlowitz (Proulx 474, 459). Armenius in particular frames the Dukes' practices, their "acquisitive hunger […,] the clear-cut despoliation, the insane wastage […], the ruin of the forest world with no thought for the future" (466), as the expression of a distinctly American attitude that spurns forests and forestry. Duke & Sons have no understanding of soil erosion, reforestation, or even the simplest principles of forest management, and they do not want to hear of it: cutting trees down, so their thinking goes, is management enough (476-80). Dieter, however, seems to share his uncle's assessment. To Lavinia Duke, his wife-to-be, he says: "But in Europe people consider the past and the future with greater seriousness. We have been managing forests for centuries and it is an ingrained habit to consider the future. Americans have no sense of years beyond three—last year, this year and next year" (553). Dieter thus positions himself against what he perceives as shortsighted and unsustainable logging practices. He advocates for

[19] This analysis is by no means exhaustive. The discourse of German forestry, and *especially* the discourse of Indigenous representation, lives, and knowledges in *Barkskins* deserve a much more extensive and detailed treatment than I can offer here.

reforestation of logged land, creates tree nurseries, and keeps some of his own land from the corporation in order to preserve old trees and grow new seedlings. In this way, "the first evidence of forest conservation tinge[s] Duke & Breitsprecher's reputation" (574). Dieter's ideas, however, only go so far, hindered by their disreputable nature in the eyes of others and his adherence to an exclusively economic logic of wealth accumulation when arguing in favor of reforestation. Still heavily implicated in the project of exploitation, his notion of sustainability is notably depicted as too little, too late, and outdated to boot: monocultures of trees planted in orderly rows cannot take on the same roles that the cut forest could (644). The efficacy of this approach as a counter to the cycle of destruction described above is thus doubtful. While Dieter thinks and gets others to think "on a scale of decades rather than months or a few years" (574), his actions ultimately do not seem to matter on this scale; the individual's agency eventually succumbs to the collective logic of capitalism. The unsustainable practices of Duke & Breitsprecher might be tempered to some degree, but they continue unabated elsewhere, for example, when the Kauri forests of New Zealand are cut down contrary to Dieter's explicit instructions (632).

Barkskins's other potential counter-discourse is heavily linked to the Métis characters of the novel and the Indigenous inhabitants of the American continent, mostly Mi'kmaw. Their practices and knowledge are put forward as an alternative conception of living in and with the forest, a theme that features most prominently at the beginning and the end of the novel. At the very beginning, we have Mari, Monsieur Trépagny's Indigenous servant and later René's wife, who possesses knowledge inaccessible to others. René and Mari stand in stark opposition on the subject of the forest; to her, it

> was a living entity, as vital as the waterways, filled with the gifts of medicine, food, shelter, tool material, which everyone discovered and remembered. One lived with it in harmony and gratitude. She believed the interminable chopping of every tree for the foolish purpose of "clearing the land" was bad. But that, thought René, was woman's talk. The forest was there, enormous and limitless. The task of men was to subdue its exuberance, to tame the land it grew on—useless land until cleared and planted with wheat and potatoes. (Proulx 50-51)

Here we can already see the ideas of limitlessness and productivity that will come to inform the dominant attitudes toward the forest, an ideology that is explicitly gendered and linked to colonial power relations. In the tension between Mari and René—himself a servant, but one emblematic of the settler colonial system—"multispecies kinship" is pitted against a "masculinist, colonialist worldview in which the land is transformed into a reservoir of resource infinitude that exists exclusively for settler cultivation and extraction" (Fosbury and Tanaka 6). Within this conflict staged toward the novel's beginning, Mari's view is blotted out, for the most part, and the theme is not taken up again in earnest for a long time. Against the combined and collective logics of elimination and infinity, a single voice of dissent is easily drowned out.

Apart from some comments by Armenius and Dieter that reproduce the well-established trope of the ecological Indian (Proulx 481, 553), the link between the forest and Indigenous knowledge remains largely silent. Reasons for this silence are manifold and directly related to the logic of elimination: over the course of the novel, the tight-knit communities of the first chapters are faced with both direct violence and the processes that Rob Nixon so aptly called "slow violence" (2). Faced with such "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2), these communities begin to unravel. In an uncanny rendering of the different strategies inherent to the logic of elimination "whose common intention was the destruction of heterodox forms of Indian grouphood" (Wolfe 400), *Barkskins* stages the impact of dispossession and disease, displacement, and assimilation. Over the course of the novel, Mi'kmaw people abandon their homes, either by force or voluntarily, in search of a place that offers better chances at survival (Proulx 158, 162, 612), and livelihoods increasingly depend on the settler colonial order. Indigenous knowledge is lost alongside language, seemingly without use in the new world of the settlers, to the point that even "the old Mi'kmaw names [are] fading out" (606). In the novel's comparatively brief part set in the 20th century, the residential school is introduced as the extreme point of elimination, as a space full of violence and sexual abuse "where Mi'kmaw children, their culture and language [suffer] a forty-year implosion as deadly as any munitions ship" (620). In short, the perceived silence of Indigenous discourse on trees and forests reflects a violent breakdown of community and identity to a point of almost complete elimination where mere survival already means resistance.

This only changes in the last part of the novel. Here, Felix and Jeanne Mius, direct descendants of both Charles Duquet and René Sel, work together with acclaimed forestry researcher Sapatisia Sel under a scholarship financed by the Breitsprecher Tree Project—a last remnant of Duke & Breitsprecher initiated by Dieter's grandson. Together with other Mi'kmaw people and Indigenous activists, and researchers from all over the world, they work to understand and perhaps to strengthen again, the diverse ecosystems of the forests. Sapatisia explains: "many of the people working to replant forests and resurrect damaged rivers are the children of indigenous forest residents. Dispossessed people who lived in forests for millennia until recently are the ones who step forward to do the repair work" (Proulx 705-06). Whether they can be successful, however, remains just as doubtful as Dieter's aspirations: Can the forest be repaired, healed, resurrected, or has it been abused for too long? Can the medicine plants that Mari knew to apply so adeptly, for example, grow and heal again in a forest and a world that has so drastically changed?

The novel does not return a clear verdict. Neither German forestry nor Indigenous knowledge practices are presented as the wondrous tonic that will counteract centuries of exploitation and destruction. There is some hope in the presence of Mi'kmaw people, working on their ancestral land again with Breitsprecher funding while the Duke name is no more, but that is all. *Barkskins* very deliberately tells a story of deforestation that unfolds over a long period of time but stops short of the future. In the end, Sapatisia's speech to the forest workers serves

as a reminder of the timescales at play here: "It will take thousands of years for great ancient forests to return. None of us here will see the mature results of our work, but we must try, even if it is only one or two people with buckets of seedlings working to put forest pieces back together" (Proulx 706). The attempt is made, must be made. That much is clear. Beyond that, *Barkskins* remains silent about the future of forests and humans alike—any notion of destiny is avoided as the novel's ending dissolves into the eternal present.

Conclusion: Chronicling the Capitalocene

Ultimately, *Barkskins*'s representation of past time brings together two tendencies that might seem to run counter to each other: on the one hand, the novel's macrostructure de-emphasizes the significance of the human in the Capitalocene. In its zoomed-out tableau, the individual life comes to be almost irrelevant, while the existence of trees and forests on completely different timescales comes to the foreground, effecting in turn a broadening of history toward the nonhuman. On the other hand, the novel very much focuses on the human, specifically as a collective agent of environmental destruction whose outlook on time and the nonhuman world leaves no room for sustainability whatsoever. Crucially, however, this representation does not work on the basis of a singular, unified "mankind" but differentiates between groups of unequal power and unequal responsibility in the Capitalocene. The principle of false infinity that the agents of the Capitalocene perpetuate is presented as part of the logic of elimination as a fundamentally violent, unequal, and exploitative paradigm that underlies both human–human and human–nonhuman interactions. Both paradigms are reiterated over the centuries and show no sign of stopping anytime soon. The futurity of this chronicle of destruction and deforestation is sidestepped, its presence felt only *implicitly*: readers might extrapolate from the novel's narrative arc that there will be neither forests nor humans left if things continue as they have, or they might draw hope from the presence of counter-discourses that position themselves against capitalist-colonial devastation. Either way, *Barkskins* itself gives no answer. It is, after all, first and foremost, a novel of the past.

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