

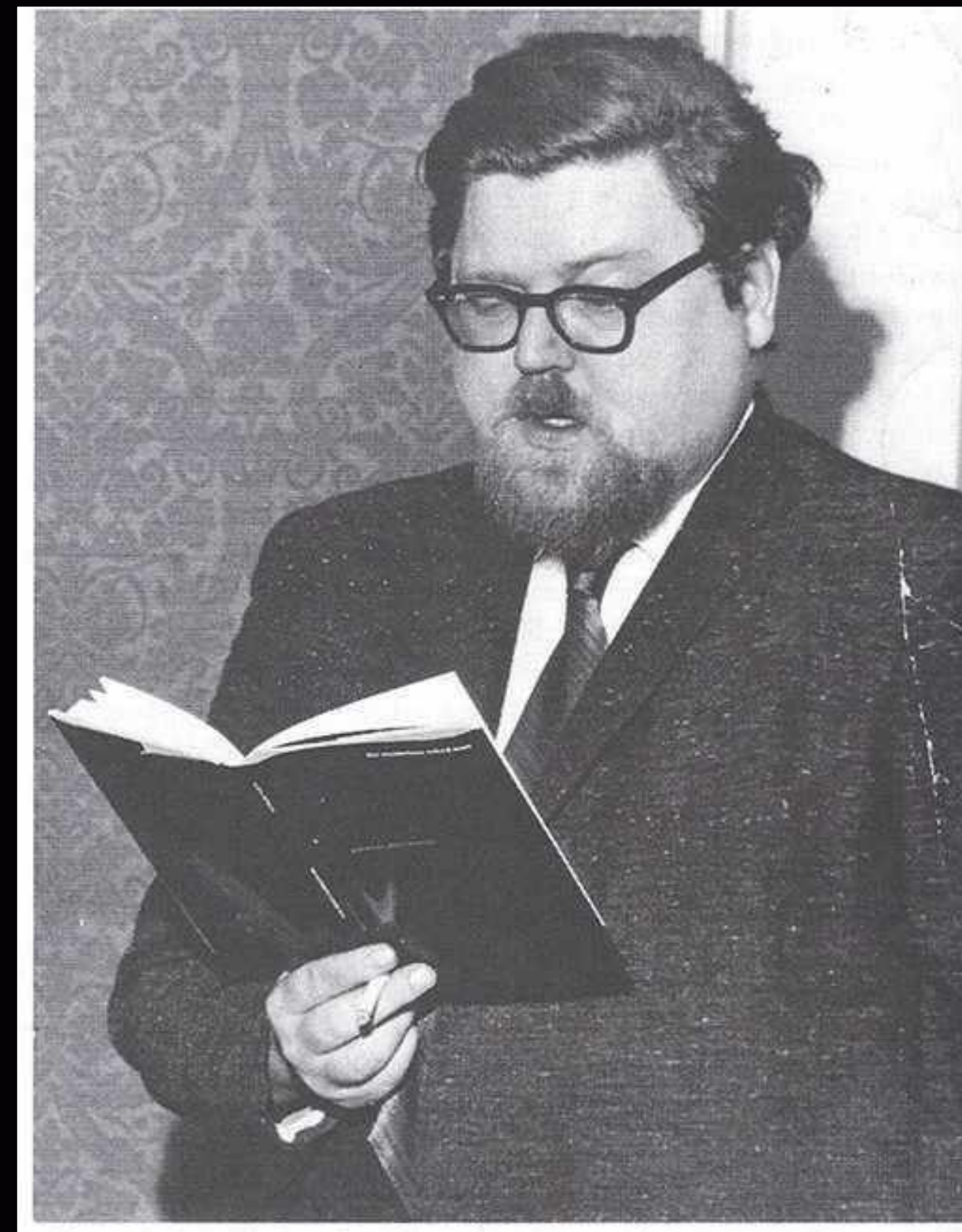
# ALDEN NOWLAN'S POETRY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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## Introduction

In his essay collection "Poet's Progress," Michael Brian Oliver states that "Alden Nowlan is no longer considered, by even the least perceptive critic, to be a "regional" writer" (5). Oliver was referring to the more general affective elements in Nowlan's work, which could not be held to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. But in the decades since, Oliver's analysis of Nowlan has become compatible with new and developing ecocritical methodologies.

Alden Nowlan's poetry is deserving of reappraisal in light of new approaches to ecocriticism, particularly those which confront the Anthropocene, wherein extractive environmental practices have radically altered humanity's relationship to the planet. Nowlan's oeuvre often confronts scenes of anthropogenic change which unsettle and redefine his status as a "Canadian" poet. My research builds upon two questions: To what degree is Alden Nowlan a poet of the Anthropocene, and what does his work tell us about the place of Canadian literature in the context of global climate change?



Alden Nowlan reading from *The Mysterious Naked Man*. SOURCE: PUBLISHED INC.  
ALDEN NOWLAN READING FROM *THE MYSTERIOUS NAKED MAN*. SOURCED FROM *THE MALAHAT REVIEW*

## EXTINCTION AND REPLENITUDE

- Extinction involves "the undoing of unique lifeways in connection with the responsibility of identifiable actors and the regional histories that tell the story of the life and death of a species" (Schuster 206).
- The disappearance of a species is such a radical form of loss that it transforms the work of mourning and elegizing. Poetry is one place to start understanding these transformations" (206).
- "...aspects of poetic form themselves become precarious by this very act of witnessing species endings" (207).
- Though not an extinct animal (yet), the titular figure in Nowlan's "The Bull Moose" confronts the anthropogenic oblivion inflicted upon animal life that does not cohere with human society. Nowlan returns to religious imagery as a method of navigating the ecotone which encompasses animal and man.
- This relationship is shaped by "connectives between finitude and plenitude" (212).

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

- Alden Nowlan's poetry anticipates concerns with globalized, anthropogenic destruction of the environment which extends beyond the notion of Canadian national identity and demands that the reader engage with the damage caused to a *global* biosphere.
- Anthropogenic critical methods may be synthesized with literary adaptations of "ecotone" and "edge species" to better illustrate the global relationship between human subject and non-human object.
- Nowlan's work provides contemporary readers a view of Anthropocene poetics *avant la lettre*.

### Atlantis

No waves ten storeys tall and terrible,  
abrupt and hissing as a severed vein,  
erased this city. First the rivers spilled  
across our outer provinces, and then  
there was some talk of dams, but most of us  
approved of irrigation, anyhow  
the peasants need a bath sometimes, we said,  
and later when the swamps began to swell  
and gulls were white against the misty sky,  
the ancients said almost the same occurred  
often when they were young, and so of course  
we were ashamed to mention things like drips  
we heard at night, and someone always laughed  
when little men at parties claimed that pools  
were rising slowly, slowly in their cellars.

## SACRIFICE ZONES

- Coined by Naomi Klein, the term refers to "places, such as oil fields or open-cut mines, that are sufficiently out of the way of consumer experience or where the rights of inhabitants (typically indigenous or nonhuman) are held sufficiently lightly that they can be considered expendable" (Farrier 52) or "expendable places that can be forfeited for the sake of sustaining developed-world lifestyles" (11).
- A "fundamentally relational" concept: "places of extraction, production, consumption, and waste are linked together by relationships of a particular character that can be observed, analyzed, and evaluated" (Juskus 17).
- The concept bears "implicit or explicit religious and theological connotations, interpreting social ecologies in terms of religious practices and beliefs" (17.)
- The speaker in Alden Nowlan's "St. John River" engages with the titular sacrifice zone by way of comparison to weaponry, tourism, and religious fervour.

### St. John River

The colour of a bayonet this river  
that glitters blue and solid on the page  
in tourist folders, yet some thirty towns  
use it as a latrine, the sewerage  
seeping back to their wells, and farmers maddened  
by debt or queer religions winter down  
under the ice, the river bottom strewn  
with heaps of decomposing bark torn loose  
from pulpwood driven south, its acid juice  
killing the salmon. August, when the stink  
of the corrupted water floats like gas  
along these streets, what most astonishes  
is that the pictures haven't lied, the real  
river is beautiful, as blue as steel.

## GLOBALIZATION, NEOLIBERALISM, AND "CANADIAN" IDENTITY

- The global nature of capitalist development demands that typical understandings of regionalism shift beyond the concept of borders (Wyile 21).
- Two forces which have had an outsized impact on Atlantic Canadian identity, and thus Canadian identity more generally.
- "In conjunction with the continuing decline of the resource sectors in Atlantic Canada—especially the crisis in the fisheries, but also the impact of corporate practices in the mining, lumber, and agricultural industries—this ideological sea change has put a heavy burden on the region that is likely at best to be only temporarily offset by the exploitation of offshore energy resources" (4).
- Nowlan's Poem "Atlantis" anticipates the communal concerns which arise in the face of neoliberal development: "and then / there was some talk of dams, but most of us / approved of irrigation, anyhow /the peasants need a bath sometimes, we said, / and later when the swamps began to swell /and gulls were white against the misty sky ..." (lines 4-9).
- Here, Nowlan observes the 'ecotonal' tension between development and the earth's biosphere.

### The Bull Moose

Down from the purple mist of trees on the mountain,  
lurching through forests of white spruce and cedar,  
stumbling through tamarack swamps,  
came the bull moose  
to be stopped at last by a pole-fenced pasture.

Too tired to turn or, perhaps, aware  
there was no place left to go, he stood with the cattle.  
They, scenting the musk of death, seeing his great head  
like the ritual mask of a blood god, moved to the other end  
of the field, and waited.

The neighbours heard of it, and by afternoon  
cars lined the road. The children teased him  
with alder switches and he gazed at them  
like an old, tolerant collie. The women asked  
if he could have escaped from a Fair.

The oldest man in the parish remembered seeing  
a gelded moose yoked with an ox for plowing.  
The young men snickered and tried to pour beer  
down his throat, while their girl friends took their pictures.

And the bull moose let them stroke his tick-ravaged flanks,  
let them pry open his jaws with bottles, let a giggling girl  
plant a little purple cap  
of thistles on his head.

When the wardens came, everyone agreed it was a shame  
to shoot anything so shaggy and cuddlesome.  
He looked like the kind of pet  
women put to bed with their sons.

So they held their fire. But just as the sun dropped in the river  
the bull moose gathered his strength  
like a scaffolded king, straightened and lifted his horns  
so that even the wardens backed away as they raised their rifles.  
When he roared, people ran to their cars. All the young men  
leaned on their automobile horns as he toppled.

## Research Methods

- My research method was adapted from Stephen Tedeschi's discussion of the Anthropocene as a critical method, and Gabriele Helms' exploration of "Ecologically informed poetry" within Canadian contexts (146).
- The former analysis forwards methods of research wherein the distinction between human and nonhuman is recasted: For Tedeschi, "[Anthropogenic] Critique analyzes the differences, tensions, and inequalities within and between societies; it transmutes the Anthropocene's focus on the global into an imperative to think through the relations between parts and wholes" (89)
- This discourse is compatible Helms' discussion of ecologically sound poetry as that "which develops in a space where writers and their environments meet" (146).
- Tedeschi notes that "in order to redescribe the world in terms consistent with the Anthropocene concept, critics have compiled a thick dictionary of neologisms" (89).
- ... and Helms adopts the terms "ecotones" (boundaries or transitional areas between two or more diverse communities) and "edge species" (organisms often restricted to the ecotone) from Eugene P. Odum in order to assert that "environmentally sound poems constitute an edge species that is the product of the meeting and reciprocal influence of writers and nature in the ecotone" (146).
- Within these frameworks, other critical Anthropogenic approaches may be sublated and applied to Alden Nowlan's poetry.

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