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**"The stillness is the time before the change" –
celebrating the Canadian North and Northern
environment in Elizabeth Hay's *Late Nights on Air***

The above quotation from Elizabeth Hay's novel refers both to the deceptive serenity of an Arctic lake and to the North itself. What change, therefore, is it about to undergo? A great deal of *Late Nights on Air* takes place in Yellowknife, a town in the Northwest Territories of Canada, situated on the edge of the Arctic Circle. In 1974 Judge Thomas Berger came there to hold an inquiry concerning the environmental implications of the proposed gas pipeline. Although Judge Berger is not a protagonist of the story, his inquiry becomes one of its focal points. What is more, the physical setting plays an instrumental part in the novel. The following article, therefore, addresses the portrayal of the Canadian North and Northern environment in Elizabeth Hay's *Late Nights on Air*. It demonstrates how the author utilizes appreciative and awareness discourses to celebrate the Canadian North and Northern environment. A concern central to this article is the novel's presentation of the North as a resource-rich frontier, to borrow professor Caroline Rosenthal's phrase

from her study of representations of the North in Canadian literature and culture (Rosenthal 2009:26). On the surface it is a story about complex relationships among colleagues from a local radio station, who follow in the footsteps of the unsuccessful explorer John Hornby and undertake a canoe trip into the Barrens. As Caroline Rosenthal asserts, it is in fact about the North (Rosenthal 2009:29-30). However, this article concludes that at the heart of *Late Nights on Air* lie both the Canadian North and environmental justice.

The story of the radio station employees and their trip to the Barrens, an extensive tundra region of Northern Canada, comes undeniably to the forefront of the novel. Nevertheless, the Canadian North and Northern environment might also be considered the protagonists. Similarly to numerous Canadian writers before, Elizabeth Hay depicts the North as vast, pristine and wild (Rosenthal 2009:26). She utilizes laudatory vocabulary to represent the Canadian North and Northern environment as in the following passage: “Overhead were ravens and lake gulls, all around were low hills made of *the oldest* rock in the world bathed by the most beautiful light on earth, and lovely miniature birches, and small flowers clinging and spreading” (Hay 2009:40). This usage of appreciative discourse when depicting the flora and fauna, the air, the light and the sounds of the Canadian North emphasizes its aesthetic value. Caroline Rosenthal notices that since the novel focuses on the radio, it is alive with sound (Rosenthal 2009:30). Gwen, one of the station’s employees, takes her tape recorder on the trip to the Barrens to record the sounds of the tundra, such as the crunching of snow, the noises of the animals and the river, as well as the silence. Gwen says of her recordings that “[m]ost prized of all [are] the tapes of the Barren-ground caribou, their clicking hooves and strenuous swimming and muted eating, since who had ever recorded them before?” (Hay 2009:255). Likewise, by chronicling characteristic features of the Northern nature, including the polar nights, the Northern Lights, the fog and the icicles in *Late Nights on Air*, Elizabeth Hay strives to preserve it in the reader’s memory, as if she were concerned about its future.

And concerned she is. As Caroline Rosenthal points out, Hay's book constitutes "an elegy to the North" (Rosenthal 2009:30). The author of *Late Nights on Air* demonstrates that the Canadian North is treated as a resource-rich frontier, which entails grave consequences for its people and the environment. The novel was published in 2007 but it is set in the 1970s when the environmental impact of the planned gas pipeline was being assessed. It was to be used for the transport of natural gas and later oil from the Arctic Ocean to Alberta. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia:

Canadian Arctic Gas Pipeline Ltd...proposed a route from the Prudhoe fields in Alaska, across the northern Yukon to the Mackenzie Delta and then south to Alberta. Foothills Pipe Lines Ltd...proposed a shorter route from the Mackenzie Delta to Alberta. The Arctic Gas pipeline would have been the longest in the world (3860 km) and the greatest construction enterprise ever undertaken. In either case, the engineering problems of building a pipeline over permafrost were monumental...and the impact on the North would have been significant (Marsh 2002).

Elizabeth Hay claims in the novel that building the pipeline is promoted mainly by big business and the government. The project is bound to yield gigantic profits and in their view Judge Thomas Berger's inquiry causes a redundant expenditure and delay. In addition, they disapprove of the fact that it gives a platform to the natives and the environmentalists. In fact, Hay suggests that the pro-pipeline groups are determined to use violence against their opponents. She presents a young man being brutally assaulted after having testified against the pipeline and in favor of the native land claims. However, the author notes also that numerous locals support the pipeline, hoping for employment opportunities. One example is Lorna Dargabble, who testifies in the inquiry that all the North needs is "jobs and kindness" (Hay 2009:150). Judge Berger must take all these conflicting opinions into account. Even though the inquiry committee is based in Yellowknife, it travels to settlements up and down the Mackenzie Valley, on the Beaufort Sea and in the Yukon to hear native voices.

Consequently, the inquiry spurs a reflection over what would emerge as "environmental justice" in the 1980s. Environmental justice

is now defined as “movements to address the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and hazards across population groups, especially by race and/or class” (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011:419). The proposed pipeline is to traverse the traditional home grounds of Subarctic and Arctic indigenous groups, including the Inuit, the Dene and the Métis, which means that they will have to bear ecological consequences of the project. Today, one of the principles of environmental justice adopted by the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 in Washington “affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural and environmental self-determination of all peoples” (Principles of Environmental Justice). However, at the time of the inquiry, long-term land disputes between the Canadian government and the Dene people were still unresolved, which meant that the pipeline could traverse legally their lands without their consent. More specifically, the government claimed that, based on Treaties 8 and 11, the Dene have no title to the lands they inhabited, but they disagreed with this interpretation (McMillan 2004:257). Had it not been for Judge Thomas Berger's inquiry, aboriginal groups of the area would have had no opportunity to express their concerns about the project. Thus, Judge Berger hears testimony both in English and in six native languages, including Dogrib, Slavey, Hareskin, Loucheux, Chipewyan and Inuktitut. Explaining the Dene's point of view, one of the witnesses, a Dene radio host Teresa, argues that:

[i]f someone is sitting across from you and says, 'I want your land'. And you say no, I happen to like it here and I've been here forever, then they should respect what you've said, and that's an end to it. They shouldn't try to get around you. They shouldn't read something else into what you've said. They should *respect* you (Hay 2009:124).

However, even though Judge Berger takes the Dene's land claim into consideration, he does not focus on it to the exclusion of other claims. He devotes attention also to scientists' opinion in order to determine the possible environmental effects entailed by the project. Subsequently, he learns of the irreparable harm which would be done to the area's ecological communities. As Hay puts it, the pipeline will

"rip open the Arctic...like a razor slashing the face of Mona Lisa" (Hay 2009:71). Firstly, the soil bound by ice will begin to melt as soon as the digging commences. Secondly, a potential oil spill is likely to have even graver effects in the Arctic than elsewhere. By turning the ice black, an oil spill damages its albedo or reflective capacity. Hence, the ice absorbs light instead of reflecting it, altering the environment in an unpredictable way. Thirdly, the project will require new settlement and enormous infrastructure, with a negative impact on the fauna. For instance, snow geese gather in the thousands on the Arctic Ocean's coast to feed before flying to Alberta in August. However, they become easily frightened and distracted by any activity in the air or on the ground. Moreover, the white whales of the Beaufort Sea choose warmer and shallower waters of the Mackenzie Bay to give birth in. However, these waters will soon become drilling sites. Finally, Hay pays considerable attention to the potential plight of the caribou. Their calving grounds are located near the Arctic coast. After giving birth, the cows gather in huge herds in July and the author describes it as "a sight over which everyone marvels" (Hay 2009:136). Any disturbance while calving may cause the separation of the females from their young. Reporting all these facts the Judge's commission has to take into account, Hay builds her readers' environmental awareness.

There are several other concerns over potential effects of building the pipeline that are voiced during the inquiry. Firstly, another Southern investment in the Canadian North is likely to cause grave social implications. A young Yellowknife doctor draws Berger's attention to the case of Alaska, where the social impact of the TransAlaska pipeline on Native Alaskans was already becoming palpable. He mentions skyrocketing rates of suicide, divorce, alcoholism, mental illness and crime. Medical and social workers explain that such effects are not uncommon in closely-knit communities when the traditional patterns of life disintegrate, with women bearing most of the burden. The doctor anticipates that native women are likely to become victims of rape by white transient workers with considerable financial means and easy access to alcohol.

That sort of abuse is already a problem as two white workers of Yellowknife mines have been accused of rape on young native women. Also, the doctor's concerns are confirmed by anthropologists, who have for years emphasized the negative influence of prospectors, traders, whalers and miners on local populations, speaking of diseases, alcohol and licentiousness. Moreover, the doctor points out that the Alaskan Pipeline was built *after* a land claims settlement with Native Alaskans while indigenous people in the Canadian North still lack it. He concludes *they* will be the ones to pay "the price in human misery" were this large-scale frontier development to be permitted (Hay 2009:146).

As for the economic aspect, the inquiry demonstrates that the project will provide well-paid jobs for native men, however only short-term ones. The town doctor fears that once the pipeline jobs are gone they will drift South in search of the same pay, which will result in unemployment. In this way, the Canadian North is likely to lose its best young men just at the time when the Dene are striving for self-determination. Dido, one of the radio station employees and an immigrant from the Netherlands, observes with her newcomer's eyes that opportunity in the Canadian North is available only to white businessmen, who cannot wait for the project to commence. Judge Berger's approval of the pipeline, she believes, will reinforce this already visible racist marginalization of indigenous people.

Since Elizabeth Hay pays close attention to Judge Berger's findings and makes the main protagonist of *Late Nights on Air*, Dido, a social and environmental activist, it may be argued that the book's main topic is not love or the radio crew's trip to the Barrens but the Canadian North and environmental justice. Together with another radio employee, Eddy, Dido forms a Northern support group and she prepares a documentary on sexual abuse of native people. Eddy engages in political photography. He travels to Los Angeles and organizes an exhibition of his disturbing photographs showing unposed, half-naked and intoxicated Dene women. The idea is to present the dark side of a far Northern boom town where the local natives are exploited by the dominating whites. He intends his pictures

to be a warning of what lies ahead, if the pipeline is built. Moreover, Eddy is determined to write a book chronicling the plight of the Dene and to donate the proceedings to the Dene community. While the other radio employees become excited by John Horby's exploration of the Arctic, Dido and Eddy cannot care less. It is not the North that interests them as "[t]he present called out for justice, not for nostalgia over another extravagant failure on the part of blind and incompetent white men" (Hay 2009:111). The rationale behind forming the North of Sixty Support Group is to better understand and publicly support the native land claims. Ordinary people in town including the United Church Minister, a nurse, a teacher, an architect and a painter belong to the group and meet in private houses or trailers. But even among them the difference of opinion and the struggle between the opponents and the proponents of the pipeline is dramatic. Eddy testifies in the inquiry that a group of pro-pipeline activists have adopted the name of their Northern support group and have commenced printing advertisements promoting the development. He recognizes Berger's good intentions, however he claims they are not enough. He argues that the Dene should be given the right of self-determination "[b]ut it's never going to happen, not by having nice, polite meetings" (Hay 2009:149). Eddy believes that only radical actions can turn the course of events. While it may seem that the author approves of Dido and Eddy's activism, there are shades of gray in their portraiture of the two. Firstly, the author's choice of words when describing Eddy and the almost brutal way he treats Dido suggest his tendency to use violence. Moreover, when Lorna Dargabbe dies mysteriously after declaring that what the Canadian North needs is jobs and hinting that Eddy has been charged with rape, one is led to believe that he is responsible for the murder. Dido, on the other hand dies a premature death. The author indicates that radical activism perpetuates the vicious circle of mutual mistrust, hatred and even violence, leading nowhere. It may be concluded, therefore, that Hay agrees with the ideas Eddy and Dido promote while favoring Judge Berger's way.

After 283 days of inquiry and having gathered 40,000 pages of testimony delivered by 1700 witnesses, Judge Berger compiled an

impressive report (Hay 2009:280). The report called *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland* published in 1977 recommended that no pipeline be built across the Northern Yukon and called for a moratorium of at least ten years on the Mackenzie Valley pipeline to deal with aboriginal land claims and to establish conservation areas particularly for porcupine caribou, white whales, and several bird species (Berger 1977:9). In the novel, Judge Berger speaks of the Arctic wilderness as “the last of North America, the eighth wonder of the world” and he highlights the importance of protecting that endangered world (Hay 2009:197). Also, he emphasizes “the need to preserve native culture and to foster the development of an economy based on renewable resources” (Hay 2009:285).

What Elizabeth Hay does not mention in her 2007 book is that the project was returned to in 2004 (Rosenthal 2009:30). In this light, it is plain to see why she sets her novel at the time of the Berger Inquiry. She seeks to remind the Canadian reader why Judge Berger put a stop to the pipeline in the 1970s and to raise awareness of the dangers pipelines entail in the Northern reality. She chronicles and celebrates the unique Arctic and Subarctic natural enclaves and their people as if she were afraid that this time the Canadian North may not be fortunate enough to resist this large-scale development project. As she puts it, “[t]he stillness fools you. The stillness is the time before the change” (Hay 2009:268). Even though the construction did not yet commence in 2007 when she published the book, the final decisions are being made as we speak (Jones 2013). Even though the book focuses on the local, it does spur a reflection on the wider topic of ecology and environmental justice and makes one ask the question: do we really need to use so much oil?

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