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Figure 1: José Maria Velasco. *The Metlac Ravine*, 1893 (oil on canvas).

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# ANTHROPOCENE EFFECTS

## Revisiting Land and Water in Canadian and Mexican Art Histories

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Today's Anthropocene forces us to look skeptically at the water, clouds, soil, plants, animals, and other natural phenomena that surround us, because the damage inflicted on environments, ecosystems, and living organisms is not always visible. Extending this critical gaze into the realm of art history, this essay considers how the non-human world of nature appears in historical works of art. In both Canada and Mexico, paintings of land and water have the status of national treasures: in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Canadian artists known as the "Group of Seven" turned their backs on urban life, to create vivid tableaux of natural scenery, while a few decades earlier José Maria Velasco made some of his most majestic landscape compositions, featuring the Valley of Mexico and other regions of the country. (Fig. 1) Does it matter whether the bodies of water these artists painted were polluted then, or if they are

polluted now? If environmentally-damaging practices had already been set in motion, at the moment the artworks were made, should that influence how we regard these artworks today? These are some of the questions prompted by the apocalyptic teleology of the Anthropocene.

It is important to recognize that the term "Anthropocene" has been debated and challenged by scholars, artists, and activists. The main point of contention arises from the word's semantic construction, as "anthropo" refers to humanity as a whole, implying that "we" (all humans) are responsible for the current state of the planet. But surely the Anthropocene is not the fault of the Indigenous community living next to the oil sands in northern Canada, nor of small-scale Mexican farmers lacking water for their crops. Instead of accepting that "we" are all to blame, many authors identify capitalism and colonialism as the economic/po-



Figure 2: Lawren Harris. *Northern Lake*, 1923 (oil on canvas) McMichael Art Gallery, Kleinberg, Ontario, Canada.



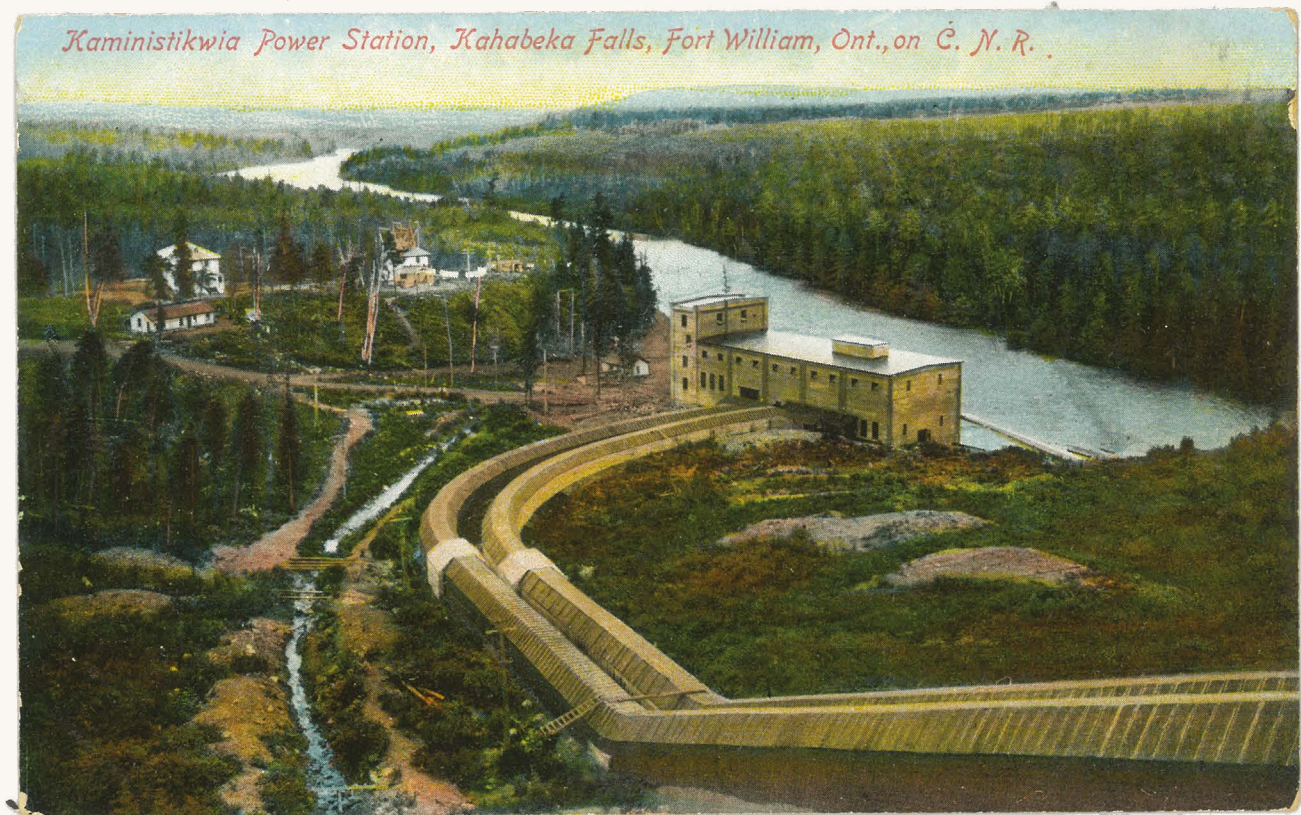


Figure 3: Postcard of Kaministiquia Power Station, Kahabeka Falls, Fort William, Ont. On C.N.R.  
Published by Stedman Brothers, Brantford, c. 1907.

litical systems responsible for present-day environmental devastation. TJ Demos insists on the term, "petro-capitalist Anthropocene," because "the Anthropocene thesis... serves to distract attention from the economic class that has long benefitted from the financial system responsible for catastrophic environmental change."<sup>1</sup> Jason Moore proposes to replace the term Anthropocene entirely, arguing that "Capitalocene" more accurately describes how capitalist values have determined our era. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd are amongst those who conflate the Anthropocene with the violent, exploitative logic of European colonization: "the ecological logics that now govern our world are not inevitable or 'human nature,' but are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonization."<sup>2</sup>

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763) Complementing this critique are voices that describe alternatives to the Anthropocene, emphasizing respect and earthly coexistence. Indigenous authors across the Americas speak to a deep-rooted sense of kinship with the non-human inhabitants of the planet.<sup>3</sup> Combining science and cultural theory, Donna Haraway insists that humans are part of "ongoing multispecies stories," that we should embrace our embeddedness in "earthwide tentacular powers and forces."

In Canada, the "Group of Seven" acquired the prestige<sup>4</sup> of a national art movement in the early 20th century. In the Group's most famous paintings there are no people and no trace of human inhabitation or industry; not a road, piece of fence, or telephone pole can be seen. Paintings by Lawren Harris, such as *Northern Lake* from 1923, depict earth, rocks, trees, and water as something pristine and timeless, existing apart from human culture. (Fig. 2) This vision of the Canadian territory has been criticized, for erasing Indigenous people, and camouflaging the theft of their land. As Carmen Robertson has commented about this art movement, "Empty vistas and stormy skies claim land in ways that visually assure Canadians of the white settler nation's divine providence."<sup>5</sup> The Group of Seven's wilderness paintings can also be challenged from a present-day ecological





Figure 4: Postcards of logging industry in Canada, c. 1906-1910.

perspective. Today, when it is understood that even the most remote and minute parts of the planet's biosphere have been drastically altered, the fantasy of a pure, timeless, and unchanging natural world seems like a dangerous ideological construct.

To critically re-frame this episode in Canadian art history I introduce another type of visual culture—photographic postcards—that began circulating only a few years before the Group artists began their plein-air forays. These early postcards were not primarily concerned with tourism and leisure, but instead show mines, mills, lumber camps, electrical plants, canals, dams, and other types of industry and infrastructure, embedded in the nation's natural environments. It's not that these postcards are objective, truthful documents, as compared to the visual fictions of art. Indeed the often-anonymous makers of postcard imagery drew on the history of landscape art to picturesquely frame scenes, while the original black and white photos would be embellished with colour and romantic glimmers of light. Despite this pictorial artifice, postcards provide a valuable archival record of land-use, that was actively ignored by the better-known painters.

For example, when a hydroelectric power station in Kahabeka Falls (in the province of Ontario) opened in 1906, it quickly made its way onto a postcard. (Fig. 3) The nation-wide business of logging was often recorded—from the felling of trees, to huge log booms travelling down rivers, to the display of saleable wooden commodities. (Fig. 4) Other postcards showcased movement, transportation, and networks, as extracted materials circulated throughout the Canadian territory. The labour of loggers and miners was also made evident. (Fig. 5) This cumulative portrait of a modern, economically-activated nation could not be more different from the wilderness ethos associated with the Group of Seven. These postcards did not try to hide that everything on or inside lands and waters was available for extraction, consumption, and profit. As glimpses of the capitalocene, they deserve to be seen alongside the nation's legacy of landscape art, as convincing antecedents to the 21st-century Anthropocene.

Turning to Mexico, James Oles has noted that José María Velasco was one of the first artists "to be elevated in the post-Revolutionary period as an exemplar of nationalism."<sup>6</sup> If the Canadian artists discussed above



eliminated all traces of human presence from their compositions, such is not the case with Velasco, but in artworks made from the 1880s through to the artist's death in 1912, a distanced viewpoint ensured that elements such as people, roads, and buildings would be dwarfed by sublime expanses of land, water, and sky. In paintings such as *The Metlac Ravine* (1883) and in numerous depictions of the Valley of Mexico, there is apparent harmony between natural forces and human occupation of the land. One would never know, looking at these monuments of Mexican art, that Velasco's career coincided with the intensified foreign investment of the Porfiriato years (1876-1911)—with profound consequences for the land, water, and people of Mexico.

The canon of Mexican art also provides, however, an inspiring counter-Anthropocene vision: Diego Rivera's mural, *El agua, el origen de la vida* (Water, the Origin of Life) painted in 1951. (Fig. 6) In contrast to much landscape art (including the paintings of Velasco), where an artist estab-

lishes visual mastery over a territory, by hovering above the surface of things, Rivera brings viewers down to earth—and indeed underground and underwater. Visitors to a purpose-built pavilion in Mexico City's Chapultepec Park look down onto painted walls and floor—originally the tunnel and storage tank that delivered water from the Lerma River into the city. Above-ground are engineers, urban planners, workers, and thirsty civilians, while the extraordinary underwater scenes include monumentally-scaled allegorical figures embedded in an exuberant profusion of underwater life that includes a parade of ancient, minuscule organisms. (Fig. 7)

**Rivera's artwork can indeed be described as an imaginative hydrocommons: water sustains many interconnected forms of life, while the act of delivering it to the people who need it is manifestly a social responsibility.**



Figure 5: Postcard of King Cobalt Silver Mine, Cobalt, Ontario. Published by Valentine & Sons Publishing Co. Ltd. C. 1908.





Figure 6: Diego Rivera. *Water: The Origin of Life*, Detail 1.

**Images from the past continue to inform our understanding of the embattled planet, and invite questions about where we situate ourselves as the catastrophe continues.**

Rivera's title, *Water: the Origin of Life* confirms the artist's interest in the essential role of water, while it can be argued that the mural resonates with critical thinking about the Anthropocene. Astrida Neimanis writes about water from a posthumanist perspective, proposing that we think of ourselves as "bodies of water," since the human body is mostly made up of water. "Figuring ourselves as bodies of water is a way of taking up an ethical subjectivity towards our planet's vital waters."<sup>7</sup> The planet's accumulated waters are regarded as a kind of "hydrocommons," to stress

issues of encounter, ethics, and responsibility. Rivera's artwork can indeed be described as an imaginative hydrocommons: water sustains many interconnected forms of life, while the act of delivering it to the people who need it is manifestly a social responsibility. (Rivera's artwork seems more relevant than ever, considering the present-day possibility of the privatization of water in Mexico.)<sup>8</sup> The entangled forms of life in Rivera's artwork can also be described as "multispecies assemblages," as the human figures in the underwater scenes do not dominate, but rather a non-commodified natural vitality allows a multitude of live forms to thrive. (Fig. 8)

The present-day Anthropocene is a global condition: extreme weather, pollution, and other forms of ecological devastation certainly don't respect national boundaries. The museums of Canada and Mexico are filled with artworks



depicting land and water, vegetal and animal life, and myriad other types of natural phenomena. Given the Anthropocene's global scope, the national character of these artworks is no longer very convincing, but this imagery is nonetheless a valuable cultural inheritance, with the potential to instruct and inspire. Images from the past continue to inform our understanding of the embattled planet, and invite questions about where we situate ourselves as the catastrophe continues. **MM**

## Further reading

Moore, Jason, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016).

O'Brian, John and Peter White, eds., *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2007).

Preziosi, Donald, "Introduction," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



Figure 7: Diego Rivera. *Water: The Origin of Life*, Detail 2.

## Notes

- 1 Demos, T.J., *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), p.49.
- 2 Davis, Heather, and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene". *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16 (4), 2017, p.763.
- 3 Todd, Zoe, "Fish, Kin, and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Inquiry*, no. 1, Vol. 43, 2017, pp. 102-107.
- 4 Haraway, Donna, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 55, 101.
- 5 Robertson, Carmen, "Notes to a Nation: Teachings on Land through the Art of Normal Morrisseau," in Erin Morton, ed., *Unsettling Canadian Art History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), p. 70.
- 6 Oles, James, *Art and Architecture in Mexico* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), p.187.
- 7 Neimanis, Astrida, "Posthuman Phenomenologies for Planetary Bodies of Water," in Cecilia Asberg and Rosi Braidotti, eds., *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), p.57.
- 8 Hackbarth, Kurt, "Multinational Corporations are Sucking Mexico Dry," *Jacobin*, July 8, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/07/mexico-water-crisis-nuevo-leon-monterrey-garcia-privatization>, consulted January 5, 2024.

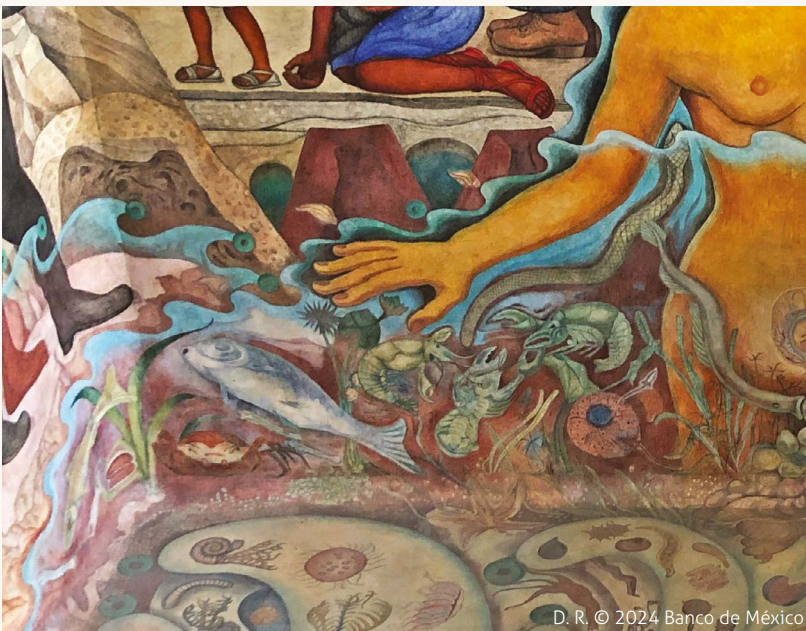


Figure 8: Diego Rivera. *Water: The Origin of Life*, Detail 3.