Environmental Discourses in Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy; Or, The Neoliberal Prometheus

Alexandre Desbiens-Brassard

Dystopian art, including dystopian literature, has a long history of engaging with political discourses in ways that only it can afford, giving those discourses free rein to run amok and achieve their logical endpoints with none of the damage that such endpoints usually cause when they manifest as actual societies. These thought experiments are not simply flights of authorial fancy, however. Rather, they are more often than not intended as warnings about the dangers that await a society if a particular discourse fully achieves its goals. The more power that discourse wields in contemporary society, the more urgent the warnings become. In this essay, I consider Margaret Atwood's second most famous work of dystopian fiction, the *MaddAddam* trilogy, as a text that speculates about and warns against the consequences of giving neoliberal ideology absolute control over the environmental discourse of our globalized world. Neoliberal environmentalism, like most environmental movements, is very broad and includes actual policy proposals — deregulation, privatization, limited government, and climate change denial — alongside more philosophical principles such as economic efficiency, technological power, a mechanistic view of nature, and an emphasis on individual "freedom," which for neoliberalism involves "people going about their business, pursuing their selfish interests" as "economic actors" (Dryzek 61). The fact that this freedom forces individuals to stay within the confines of a "free" market that favours almost exclusively the wealthy controllers of said market is not, of course, part of the marketing pitch.

As Chris Vials, among others, has pointed out, the *MaddAddam* trilogy is a work of political and social satire that offers a "challenge to neoliberalism as a political philosophy" (434). Following J. Paul Narkunas and Amelia Defalco, I specifically consider where this challenge to neoliberal environmentalism intersects with the trilogy's criti-

cism of genetic engineering and biotechnologies, consequently reading the novels as "cautionary tales that project the catastrophic outcome of contemporary neoliberal market economies directing and harnessing current developments in biotech, producing a biocapitalist system in which the matter and codes of life become the dominant commodities for exchange" (Defalco 433).

My own contribution to the scholarship on the *MaddAddam* trilogy is to dissect the satirical depiction of the anthropocentric, product-oriented view of nature that shapes the dystopian setting of the trilogy and to demonstrate how it functions as a parody of and warning about a specific neoliberal environmental discourse that political scientist John Dryzek calls the Promethean discourse. In Hellenistic mythology, the Titan Prometheus steals fire from Zeus and gives it to humans. Since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the stolen fire has symbolized the source of technological progress. The philosophers of that period

> were returning to Greek materialists in a revolt against medieval philosophy that had relied more on Aristotle and the idealist tradition. And one of the ways they did this is they took on the whole idea of Enlightenment as literally bringing light. The idea was associated with the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, who was a titan or proto-God, who had brought fire to humankind. He had brought light and reason, so that human beings could remake the world according to their reason. This is really where the idea of the Enlightenment came from. (Foster 125)

Later myths strengthened the symbolic association between fire and humanity's ability to reason and innovate by describing Prometheus as the creator of humanity, whom he shaped out of clay. It is on the basis of such myths that Dryzek calls Promethean the discourse that has "unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome any problems — including environmental problems" (52). Furthermore, the Promethean discourse advocates a reductionist view of nature that, in the words of ecofeminist critic Vandana Shiva, "puts value on only one species — humans — and generates an instrumental value for all others. It therefore displaces and pushes to extinction all species that have no or low instrumental value to humans" (25).

As evidenced by its name, Promethean discourse is much older than capitalism, let alone neoliberal capitalism, and thus cannot be seen solely as a construction of this system. However, the current iteration

of Promethean discourse is closely related to capitalism in all of its forms, having been born from the scientific and industrial revolutions that coincided with and helped the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. As Carolyn Merchant explains in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, "The idea of dominion over the earth existed in Greek philosophy and Christian religion. . . . But, as the economy became modernized and the Scientific Revolution proceeded, the dominion metaphor spread beyond the religious sphere and assumed ascendancy in the social and political sphere as well" (3). Likewise, Shiva argues that "The transformation of the perception of nature during the industrial and scientific revolutions illustrates how 'nature' was transformed in the European mind from a self-organizing, living system to a mere raw material for human exploitation, needing management and control" (104), and Dryzek states that "Promethean discourse flourished alongside capitalism and the Industrial revolution, with its unbounded faith in the ability of humans to manipulate the world in ever more effective fashion" (64). Since it encourages technological progress and consumption in order to solve problems created by consumption itself — thus keeping the profit-churning wheels of global markets well greased — the Promethean discourse is a natural environmental comorbidity of neoliberalism. It is therefore no surprise that "the sixteenth-century groups that evolved the concept of progress are the same groups that right up until the present have pressed for increased growth and development: entrepreneurs, military engineers, humanist academics, and scientists and technicians" (Merchant 179-80), the same neoliberal elites that Atwood ferociously satirizes in the *MaddAddam* trilogy.

Many other critics have already highlighted the trilogy's critique of neoliberalism and its anthropocentric approach to nature, even though they have not used the term "Promethean." For example, Defalco sees the trilogy as a work of critical posthumanism that offers "a challenge to the kind of human exceptionalism necessary for the liberal humanist's treatment of the Earth as simply a store house of available material" (436). What I think is missing in such analyses, however, is how Atwood frames this environmental debate not as a political debate but as a theological and spiritual one. I believe that the term "Promethean," because of its mythical and theological connotations, is particularly appropriate when analyzing the *MaddAddam* trilogy. It helps to highlight how Atwood's satire of neoliberal discourses on nature revolves

around a condemnation of neoliberal relationships between humans and divine beings — not the divine as in any specific deity but as a belief that what we call "nature" is something bigger than humanity rather than a resource for us to exploit. In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, I see an acknowledgement by Atwood that "capitalism has emerged since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a way of reshaping the relation between humans and the rest of nature" and that, as such, "those large, so-called 'social' processes that we always refer to — globalization, imperialism, industrialization — [are] themselves ecological projects . . . that seek to rework the relations between human beings (human nature) and the rest of nature" (Moore 136). What I aim to explore, therefore, is Atwood's characterization of the religious and philosophical assumptions that dominate her neoliberal dystopia — and, in less evolved forms, our contemporary society. In particular, I identify two strains of the Promethean discourse in the trilogy. One is anti-theistic, using the lack of any divine entity as a sanction to exploit nature as one sees fit, up to and including replacing it entirely with a human-made simulacrum of nature, the ultimate expression of technological progress and human exceptionalism. The other is theistic, creating a new, literal divine right to the Earth to justify the exploitation of nature and the plundering of its resources.

* * *

Allison Dunlap "read[s] *Oryx and Crake* as a response to ecological utopias, one that troubles the notion that ecotopianism leads toward positive social change and asks whether the elimination of human-over-nature hierarchy is desirable or even possible" (3). Accordingly, she cautions that, "To fully understand the critique the novel offers . . . , we must understand Crake not only as a capitalist scientist but as a dreamer, a creator, a utopian, and — by virtue of his desire to put an end to human-over-nature hierarchy — an environmentalist" (4). Although I agree that Crake is an environmentalist, I disagree that he embraces, and thus serves as a criticism of, "an ecological utopianism or ecotopianism in which society is not defined by a hoarding of resources and domination but by the sharing of resources and often a 'natural' harmony among species" (2). The central irony of the character of Crake is that, though he wants to save nonhuman nature from the depradations of a neoliberal society and its Promethean belief in the domination

of humans over the natural world, how he goes about doing so exhibits the same Promethean tendencies. As a child, Crake tells another child named Ren that "'Illness is a design fault'" and that as such "'It could be corrected'." In response to this most Promethean claim, Ren becomes curious: "'So if you were making the world, you'd make it better?' I said. Better than God, was what I meant. . . . 'Yes' he [Crake] said. 'As a matter of fact, I would'" (Atwood, *Year* 147).

The worldview that Crake exhibits here is extremely anthropocentric. He denies "the creativity inherent to living organisms that allows them to evolve, recreate and regenerate themselves" (Shiva 9), preferring instead to exalt his own creativity, his own power of reason, in order to "correct" nature's "design fault." If Crake is utopian, then his utopia is that of Francis Bacon, who, "rather than respecting the beauty of existing organisms . . . , advocated the creation of new ones" (Merchant 183). Often referred to as one of the "founding 'fathers' of modern science," Bacon referred in his philosophy of knowledge to "the need to dominate nature not for the sole benefit of the individual . . . but for the good of the entire human race" (Merchant 169). Although Bacon obviously had no knowledge of concepts such as genes and DNA, he nonetheless shared the ambitions of bioengineers. Case in point, in *The New Atlantis*, he describes a utopian society that has the

> means to make divers plants rise by mixtures of earths without seeds; and likewise to make divers new plants, differing from the vulgar; and to make one tree or plant turn into another. . . . By art likewise, we make [beasts and birds] greater or taller than their kind is; and contrariwise dwarf them, and stay their growth: we make them more fruitful and bearing than their kind is; and contrariwise barren and not generative. Also we make them differ in colour, shape, activity, many ways. . . . We make a number of kinds of serpents, worms, flies, fishes, of putrefaction; whereof some are advanced (in effect) to be perfect creatures, like be[a]sts or birds; and have sexes, and do propagate. Neither do we this by chance, but we know beforehand, of what matter and commixture what kind of those creatures will arise.

By believing that human ingenuity and technology can not only fix environmental problems but also improve on the environment itself, Crake walks in the footsteps of Bacon, who "transformed the natural magician as 'servant of nature' into a manipulator of nature and

changed art from the aping of nature into techniques for forcing nature into new forms" (Merchant 182). However, Crake differs from Bacon in one important way: Crake includes all other human beings as part of the nature that needs to be dominated and forced into new forms. Consequently, his ultimate solution to repair the ecological damage inflicted on Earth by humanity is not to wipe out humans and let nature recover according to its own laws and creativity. Rather, Crake aims to wipe out humanity and replace it with the Crakers, "improved" human beings of his own design that supposedly will take much better care of nature than the human beings created by biology and evolution alone.

Crake, in my view, is to be read not as an ecotopian but as a satire of neoliberal environmentalism. This satire is not confined to the simple portrayal of Crake, however. It is present in almost every aspect of the trilogy, including in the portrayal of ecoterrorism and ecological colonialism. For my purposes here, however, I am limiting myself to exploring neoliberal environmentalism almost exclusively as it pertains to the novels' discussion of biotechnology and genetic engineering. Within the context of this discussion, Crake serves as an example of the *MaddAddam* trilogy's interest in highlighting how neoliberalism evacuates the mythical/religious origin of the Promethean discourse. If Bacon's "whole objective [was] to recover man's right over nature, lost in the Fall" (Merchant 185), then, according to the advanced materialist logic of neoliberal Prometheanism, humanity's right to exploit the Earth's bounty is no longer given by a deity, says the trilogy, but by the *absence* of one. Crake and the corporate scientists who staff the myriad bioengineering corporations populating the world of *MaddAddam* feel entitled to use nature as they wish not because they have recovered the right to do so from a deity but because they never lost that right in the first place since there is no such deity to take away said right.

Crake's aggressive antitheism also manifests itself as a reductionist biological view of human beings and their activities, a view "characterized by a second-order reductionism — genetic reductionism — the reduction of all behavior of biological organisms, including humans, to genes" (Shiva 25). This worldview causes more than one argument between Crake and his best friend, Jimmy. For example, on the topic of sex — and its corollary, love — Jimmy explains that "Falling in love, although it resulted in altered body chemistry and was therefore real, was a hormonally induced delusional state, according to [Crake]. As for

sex per se, it lacked both challenge and novelty, and was on the whole a deeply imperfect solution to the problem of intergenerational genetic transfer" (Atwood, *Oryx* 193). In another discussion, Crake floats the theory that humans would be happier and less violent if sex were nothing more than a biologically programmed imperative, "cyclical and inevitable, as in the other mammals" (166). When Jimmy protests that Crake's suggestion would transform humanity into "a bunch of hormone robots," Crake replies that we already *are* "hormone robots," "only we're faulty ones" (166). Since Crake is unable to see anything from any standpoint other than practical evolutionary uses, he dismisses anything for which he cannot find a biological purpose as a fault in nature's programming. In doing so, he exhibits "[o]ne of the characteristics of reductionist biology": that is, "to declare organisms and their functions useless on the basis of ignorance of their structure and function. Thus, crops and trees are declared 'weed.' Forests and cattle breeds are declared 'scrub.' And DNA whose role is not understood is called 'junk DNA'" (Shiva 22). Crake applies the same process to "God," which he reduces to "a cluster of neurons" (Atwood, *Year* 228), as well as to any form of thinking that attaches deeper significance to what he sees as inert material processes: "*Watch out for art*, Crake used to say. *As soon as they start doing art, we're in trouble*. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake's view. Next they'd be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery and war" (361). For Crake, art, religion, and any other concept that represents the world as "a close-knit harmony of organic parts," rather than a series of "ordered systems of mechanical parts subject to governance by law and predictability through deductive reasoning," is not just useless but actively detrimental to environmental sustainability (Merchant 214). This is why Crake put so much effort into removing "what he called the G-spot in the brain" (Atwood, *Year* 157) from his new and improved human beings. The fact that, despite all of his technological manipulations, he fails to deprive his Crakers of symbolic thinking — as evidenced by their hunger for myths and the religious rituals and icons that they create throughout the trilogy — is the most obvious sign that the trilogy considers his antitheist Promethean viewpoint as wrong and misguided.

Unlike Dunlap, quoted at the beginning of this section, I do not view the apocalyptic consequences of Crake's desire to improve on and replace nature as a separate criticism of ecotopianism that coexists with

the trilogy's critique of neoliberalism but as part and parcel of that critique. Although his motivation is ostensibly to save the planet from ecological destruction carried out by his neoliberal society, the means by which Crake tries to accomplish this, and the view of nature that leads him to use those means, stay entirely within the conceptual paradigm of that society. Crake fails because he, like all scientists in the trilogy's dystopian world, "exalt[s] the gene over the organism and demot[es] the organism itself to a mere machine. The sole purpose of this machine is its own survival and reproduction, or perhaps more accurately put, the survival and reproduction of the DNA that is said both to program and to 'dictate' its operation" (Shiva 29). It is no coincidence that Crake describes human beings through mechanistic metaphors, the same type of metaphors that evolved coterminously with the rise of early capitalism. Indeed, "the mechanization of the world picture as a conceptual scheme had foundations first of all in the institutionalization of machine technology as an integral ingredient in the evolution of early capitalist economic patterns" (Merchant 218). Viewed in this way, Crake's hostility to any concept of deity represents an intrinsic characteristic of the neoliberal Promethean discourse on nature. Crake and the society that he seeks to destroy justify their right to manipulate nature through the same mechanistic worldview as early capitalist societies, a worldview in which "order [is] attained through an emphasis on the motion of indivisible parts subject to mathematical laws and the rejection of unpredictable animistic sources of change. Power [is] achieved through immediate active intervention in a secularized world" (Merchant 216).

Shiva argues that "sacred groves, sacred seeds, and sacred species have been the cultural means for treating biodiversity as inviolable, and present us with the best example of conservation" (77). This argument is validated in the *MaddAddam* trilogy by the positive and even, at times, heroic depictions of God's Gardeners, the actual ecotopians of the trilogy. God's Gardeners are a religious cult whose view of nature hearkens back to precapitalist days and centres on a "nurturing earth image [that] can be viewed as a cultural constraint restricting the types of socially and morally sanctioned human actions allowable with respect to the earth" (Merchant 2). In contrast, in the Promethean discourse espoused by Crake and the rest of his society, "natural resources, ecosystems, and indeed *nature itself* do not exist" (Dryzek 59; emphasis added). That does not mean that Prometheans deny the existence of trees or deer but rather that they see nature as nothing more "than a store of matter and

energy" (59) ready to be used and exchanged by and through the entities that Prometheanism does recognize: namely, "people, markets, prices, energy, technology" (60). Neoliberalism uses this construction to justify the exploitation of natural resources by Promethean entrepreneurs. "As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it," explains Merchant (3). Therefore, it is necessary to deny nature of any autonomous life or, in other words, to deny the very existence of a "natural resource" outside the sphere of human economic activity. In neoliberal Promethean discourse, "the premise that global resources are created by nature and thus fixed and finite is false" since

> [n]ot a single material resource has ever been created by "nature." Human knowledge and technology are the resources that turn "stuff" into useful commodities. What we think of as resources are actually certain sets of capabilities. . . . Two hundred years ago petroleum was just a useless ooze that actually drove down property values. Human creative endeavor, knowledge and technology, however, turned the ooze into a valuable resource. (Taylor 378)[1]

The Promethean paradigm is not finder-keeper but finder-creator. It is only through transformation by way of human technology that brute matter gains exchange value, the only sort of value that neoliberalism recognizes.

Befitting his reductionist biological views of organic beings, Crake sees no difference between a natural resource and an artificial one since they are made from the same brute matter (DNA):

> "So, are the butterflies — are they recent?" Jimmy asked after a while. The ones he was looking at had wings the size of pancakes and were shocking pink, and were clustering all over one of the purple shrubs.
>
> "You mean, did they occur in nature or were they created by the hand of man? In other words, are they real or fake?"
>
> "Mm," said Jimmy. He didn't want to get into the *what is real* thing with Crake.
>
> "You know when people get their hair dyed or their teeth done? Or women get their tits enlarged?"
>
> "Yeah?"
>
> "After it happens, that's what they look like in real time. The process is no longer important."

> "No way fake tits feel like real tits," said Jimmy, who thought he knew a thing or two about that.
>
> "If you could tell they were fake," said Crake, "it was a bad job. These butterflies fly, they mate, they lay eggs, caterpillars come out."
>
> "Mm," said Jimmy again. (Atwood, *Oryx* 200)

What the trilogy dramatizes, in this scene and elsewhere, is the result of the Promethean principle of the non-existence of nature taken to its logical end. Jimmy has the right idea when he couches his question in terms of temporality rather than authenticity because the manufactured pink butterflies are neither real nor fake but *hyperreal*. The world in which Crake and Jimmy live is one of constant simulation, where "natural" and "artificial" are indistinguishable from each other, in major part thanks to genetic engineering, or "genetic miniaturization," which according to Baudrillard is

> the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models — and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (170)

Manufactured from precisely curated cells and DNA strands, the butterflies can reproduce and be reproduced ad infinitum, replacing the real butterflies that they simulate and that have been pushed to extinction by the same neoliberal institutions that created these pink simulacra. After all, once nature has been truly secularized and reduced to nothing but inert brute matter, its conservation is of no utility since one can always make new — and improved — nature. Both Crake and his society advocate for hyperreality; the only difference is that, while Crake misguidedly tries to use hyperreality to save nature from human beings, his society uses it to replace nature with a substitute that human beings will find more docile, more comfortable, and, most importantly, more profitable.

Consequently, replacing the real with its hyperreal simulation is a thriving industry in Atwood's dystopia. Jimmy's childhood home,

for example, was "a large Georgian centre-plan with an indoor swimming pool and a small gym. The furniture in it was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant — that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something" (Atwood, *Oryx* 26). Hyperreal products can also be found in fields as varied as pornography, food, and even hair styling and skincare. The sex market proposes three-dimensional VR simulations that promise "true, stimulating flesh-on-flesh sensations! Say goodbye to faked screams and groans, this is the real thing!" (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 117), a marketing slogan that doubles as a testament to the extent to which "the 'completely' real [has become] identified with the 'completely fake.' Absolute unreality is offered as a real presence" (Eco 7). Beauty salons offer to replace your real hair with equally "real" hair, except that this hair comes from genetically modified sheep called Mo'Hairs. These sheep come in all of the shades that human hair does and many that it does not (blue, green, pink, purple, etc.). The marketing of the product even emphasizes the hyperreal character of the Mo'Hairs by claiming that the object that they simulate is not "real" hair but the shiny simulacra of hair seen in shampoo commercials, exemplifying what Baudrillard calls the "precession of simulacra" (169): "Onscreen, in advertisements, their hair had been shiny — you'd see the sheep tossing its hair, then a beautiful girl tossing a mane of the same hair. *More hair with Mo'Hair!*" Unlike the "fake" hair of the shampoo commercial, however, the hyperreal Mo'Hairs do "not far[e] so well without their salon treatments" (Atwood, *Year* 238). The simulated hair has all of the characteristics of human hair, including the necessity of frequent salon treatments to keep its fake shine and prevent it from falling into the snarls and split ends of real hair. Similar hyperreal procedures can also change your skin tone, your voice, and even your eye colour, though the last technique has not yet been perfected, so imperfect fakes such as contact lenses — copies rather than simulations — are preferred (261).

In the realm of food, we find the most fascinating and the most critical example of hyperreality in the trilogy: namely, ChickieNobs. These are genetically modified chickens in which "all brain functions that had nothing to do with digestion, assimilation and growth," as well as any body parts that cannot be eaten, were removed. The result is a "large bulblike object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin. Out of it came twenty thick fleshy tubes, and at the end of

each tube another bulb was growing" (Atwood, *Oryx* 202). This "animal-protein tuber" or "chicken hookworm" (203) is the very embodiment of the Promethean view of natural resources, for it is a brand-new source of chicken — not of the animal but of the foodstuff — created by humans, not any external "natural" entity. Thanks to genetic engineering, "you get chicken breasts in two weeks — that's a three-week improvement on the most efficient low-light, high-density farming operation so far devised. And the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain" (203). ChickieNobs are thus a hyperreal commodity that not only replaces real chicken^2 but also improves on said original by giving more foodstuff faster at lower cost. Thanks to their very nature as a simulation of the real, ChickieNobs also bypass the moral obstacles that the real item faces.

Neoliberalism has a vested interest in replacing the real with the Promethean hyperreal because it is capitalism that created the hyperreal, or at least created the conditions necessary for its birth, through its aggressive secularization of nature. It is capital that

> shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. It was the first to practice deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialization, etc.; and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value, of every real equivalence, of production and wealth, in the very sensation we have of unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. (Baudrillard 182-83)

The "reality principle" here refers to a certain capitalist tendency to use the "reality" of a product or a need as a selling point for its wares (and itself). Hyperreality is useful to technocapitalism because it allows for the development of new realities and thus new sources of capital. The above examples from the *MaddAddam* trilogy exemplify how hyperreality can be made synonymous with commodification: sexual intercourse between two individuals is replaced by a coin-guzzling booth in a mall; replacement parts for the human body can now be bought from beauty salons; patented amalgams of breasts and thighs are substituted for sentient animals. Despite their artificiality, all of these products are sold as "the real thing." Although the ultimate goal of the corporations behind these new commodities is to liquidate the "natural" real in favour of

the "artificial" hyperreal, this goal never seems to be achievable, even in the dystopia of *MaddAddam*. Instead, the world of *MaddAddam*, like our own world, ends up in a constant state of struggle between the real and the hyperreal, between the natural and the artificial, between the subject and the commodity.

* * *

Since a total evacuation of pre-existing reality and its replacement by an entirely human-made hyperreality is out of reach, the neoliberal dystopia of the *MaddAddam* trilogy cannot count solely on secular Prometheanism to justify its exploitation and manipulation of nature. It also needs to offer a divine sanction to exploit nature to oppose the divine restrictions offered by the ecologically minded faith of God's Gardeners. In order to extract said divine sanction, Atwood's theistic Prometheans choose to complement the Greek myth of Prometheus stealing fire with another religious framework. More precisely, they choose to link their Promethean beliefs with the tenets of Evangelical Protestant Christianity, which believes in a "covenant" between mortals and the divine that gives humans a *divine right* to dominate and use all that resides on this planet alongside us, as spelled out in Genesis 1:26 (KJV): "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

Atwood offers this Evangelical Protestant counterpart to Crake's secular Prometheanism in the third novel of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, in the form of the Church of PetrOleum and other similar religions mentioned in passing, such as "the somewhat more mainstream Petrobaptists" (*MaddAddam* 111) and "the Known Fruits, who claimed it was a mark of God's favour to be rich because *By their fruits ye shall know them*, and *fruits* meant bank accounts" (*Year* 288). The reference here is to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount by Jesus. In context, "them" refers to false prophets and not the people whom God favours. Likewise, the "fruits" referred to here are these false prophets' teachings, not their wealth. If "fruits" were indeed meant as "bank accounts," then it would follow that rich people are to be viewed as false prophets, not worshipped. The Church of PetrOleum uses a similarly twisted interpretation of a verse from the Gospel of Matthew to

justify its teachings: "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18, KJV). The Rev's interpretation of this verse as "a prophecy, a vision of the Age of Oil," rests entirely on his spurious claim that "*Peter* is the Latin word for rock, and therefore the real, true meaning of 'Peter' refers to petroleum, or oil that comes from rock" (*MaddAddam* 112). I believe that the choice of Evangelical Protestantism as the religious framework that neoliberalism can bend and twist to justify its exploitation of natural resources is no coincidence. I interpret it as a deliberate attempt to hearken back, as with Crake's mechanistic views, to the very ideas that allowed capitalism to proliferate in the first place. "The emphasis on God's will and active power associated with the Reformation," says Merchant, "tended to legitimate human power and activity in worldly affairs and fostered an interest in technological improvement, empirical observation of God's work in the creation, and experimentation to extract and use nature's secrets for human benefit" (234). Once again Atwood takes religious and philosophical ideas intrinsic to the origins of capitalism and simply pushes them to their extremes alongside the (neoliberal) capitalist society that they undergird.

In the case of the Church of PetrOleum, the Petrobaptists, and the Known Fruits, Atwood appears to be satirizing a specific, neoliberal version of Evangelical Protestantism known as the *prosperity gospel*. I identify this peculiar strain of American Christianity as neoliberal because it came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, roughly at the same time as neoliberalism. Promoted mostly by celebrity preachers and televangelists, the prosperity gospel is an extremely Promethean gospel in that it emphasizes the believer's right to "reach into God's treasure trove and pull out a miracle" (Bowler 7). Wealth is not only a reward for one's devotion, proven in the form of cash payments, but also a right given to humans by God, lost after the fall of Eden, and regained through the sacrifice of Jesus on Golgotha. If you have enough faith, and if you have planted enough "seeds" (tithes), says the prosperity gospel, then God *owes* you a bountiful harvest later. Seed faith rethinks Jesus as a sort of Prometheus who negotiates on behalf of humans to guarantee their right to the divine bounty. The result is a contract between humans and God in which God *has* to fulfill his end of the bargain if humans fulfill theirs. In the words of prosperity preacher Joyce Meyer, "the Bible says 'giving and *receiving*,' but . . . another way to say that word

is *receipting*. The word *receiving* means receipting. . . . When you give, you get a receipt in Heaven. When you have a need, you can then go with your receipt and say 'You see, God, I have got my receipt, from my sowing, and now I have a need, and I'm cashing in my receipt!'" (Glass 00:53:14-00:54:00). In Meyer's account, the covenant between God and humans becomes a commercial transaction in which a capitalist God — through his agent, the televangelist — amasses capital by selling miracles to consumers. As in Crake's secular Promethean discourse, greed is justified here by a Promethean belief in human dominion over resources and commodities, only this time the source of dominion is the presence rather than the absence of the divine.

Admittedly, the Church of PetrOleum lacks the focus on individual prosperity of its real-life counterpart. Instead, Atwood's Promethean religion reaches beyond the realm of the individual and into that of the environmental, transforming the individual's "right to wealth" into humanity's "right to Earth's wealth." For the Church of PetrOleum, the sign of God's favour is not only personal wealth but also access to natural resources, as the Rev indicates:

> My friends, as we all know, *oleum* is the latin word for oil. And indeed, oil is holy throughout the Bible! What else is used for the anointing of priests and prophets and kings? Oil! It's the sign of special election, the consecrated chrism! What more proof do we need of the holiness of our very own oil, put in the earth by God for the special use of the faithful to multiply His works? His Oleum-extraction devices abound on this planet of our Dominion, and he spreads his Oleum bounty among us! (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 112)

Note here the use of the Bible as a repository of promotional testimonies for the importance of oil. The Rev's sermon becomes a sort of infomercial for oil in which "priests and prophets and kings" — all categories to which Christ is said to belong — are paraded as examples of the benefits of the product. This is an argument that the prosperity gospel also uses as a Promethean justification of the right to wealth. One prosperity preacher, John Avanzini, uses one of the Rev's own examples, namely the "expensive anointing oils" of Jesus, as evidence that "Jesus possessed great wealth, and it followed that his devotees should also" (Bowler 96). Because of the similarities in the argument, this part of the Rev's sermon is another great example of how the *MaddAddam* trilogy dramatizes and

cautions against the ever-increasing power and reach of the Promethean view of nature baked into the neoliberal system.

Furthermore, using an environmental Promethean discourse rather than an individual one allows Atwood to make explicit connections in the trilogy between the Church of PetrOleum's brand of Promethean environmentalism and neoliberal power. Whereas today's prosperity preachers tend to focus their commercial efforts on selling their own products (books, video and audio recordings, seminars, etc.),[3] the Rev is more than happy to serve as a spiritual PR firm for the oil industry, both by demonizing its enemies with pithy teachings (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 117) and by letting its executives hawk their wares directly to believers-consumers, inviting "a lot of top Corps guys [to] turn up at the church as guest speakers, [where] they'd thank the Almighty for blessing the world with fumes and toxins, cast their eyes upwards as if gasoline came from heaven, look pious as hell" (111). Evidently, the connections between the Rev's church and oil corporations go both ways. Says one of the Rev's sons to the other: "There's quite a few Petrobaptists on the [corporate police] force, and there are a number of OilCorps heavies on the Church board. There's a lot of overlap because of the benefits to both parties" (125). Consistent with the rest of the trilogy's ideological work, the power created by this overlap between the neoliberal system and the Promethean discourse of the Church of PetrOleum is used to silence any resistance to the system and cover up its inner workings.

As evidenced by its almost symbiotic relationship with power players in the trilogy's dystopian society, the Church of PetrOleum is presented mostly as a neoliberal *simulation* of religious movements. Despite also hiding political and socio-economic activism behind a newfangled and somewhat parodical theology, God's Gardeners are depicted nonetheless as exhibiting a real degree of religious devotion and faith. The Church of PetrOleum, in contrast, is never described as anything more (or less) than

> the way to go in those days if you wanted to coin the megabucks and you had a facility for ranting and bullying, plus golden-tongued whip-'em-up preaching, and you lacked some other grey-area but highly marketable skill, such as derivatives trading. Tell people what they want to hear, call yourself a religion, put the squeeze on for contributions, run your own media outlets and use them for robocalls and slick online campaigns, befriend or threaten politicians, evade taxes. (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 111)

The simulated nature of the Church of PetrOleum is further cemented by the description of its megachurch as being "all glass slabbery and pretend oak pews and faux granite" (111). Like Jimmy's childhood house in the corporate compounds, everything about the Church of PetrOleum is simulated, from its physical premises to its "nailed together" theology. It thus comes as no surprise that the Rev of the Church of PetrOleum "liked to theme-park everything" (114), for the theme park is the ultimate expression of the hyperreal replacing the natural world.[4] In other words, the Church of PetrOleum is to religion what the Crakers are to humans and the ChickieNobs are to chickens — a neoliberal copy meant to replace the "real thing" with a more profitable version.

* * *

In dramatizing the Promethean discourse in both its secular and religious forms, the *MaddAddam* trilogy sounds a loud and urgent warning about the new myths used by neoliberalism to obfuscate and justify exploitation. Be it the secular Promethean discourse of corporate scientists or the pro-oil prosperity gospel of corporate preachers, the "mysteries and sorceries of capital" (McNally 209) are exaggerated and mocked in the trilogy in order to reveal "the hidden processes by which embodied powers are appropriated and exploited" and to "trac[e] the outlines of an occult economy that subsists on the energies of labouring bodies" (201). According to the *MaddAddam* trilogy, whether the Promethean right to nature and belief in "the power of technology to order human life" (Merchant 220), both biologically and socially, are given by a divine figure or the absence of one matters little. The result of "viewing nature as a source of scarcity and technology as a source of abundance" is always the same: namely, the proliferation of "technologies that create new scarcities in nature through ecological destruction" (Shiva 108). If the theistic or antitheistic nature of the Promethean discourse matters little, then why does Atwood go out of her way in the trilogy to present us with two strains of the Promethean discourse? And why did I just spend numerous pages analyzing how the two strains are used in the trilogy? The answer to both questions is that, by highlighting how the same discourse and the same worldview can take seemingly contradictory forms, the trilogy — and my analysis of it — highlight the insidiousness of neoliberalism and its ability to camouflage itself. The discourse of Crake and that of the Church of PetrOleum at first

glance might seem to be incompatible with each other, "natural" enemies, as it were. But, as we have seen, they are in fact two sides of the same coin, two variations of a shared environmental paradigm that has persisted since the birth of capitalism. Both discourses rest on the same fundamental principle that nature is nothing but a reservoir of resources to which humanity can claim a right.

Consequently, any solution to the ecological problems created by neoliberalism must involve a counterdiscourse to Prometheanism, one that can reshape our relationship with nature as an autonomous, "divine" entity. Atwood accomplishes this with her depiction of God's Gardeners and how, as survivors of the apocalypse created by Crake's misguided Promethean tech fix, they cooperate with other life forms (namely, the Crakers and the Pigoons) to create the possibility, admittedly fragile, of a new world that will at last be free of the shackles of the Promethean myth in all of its forms. Ultimately, by allowing us to identify the cause of the current ecological crises in a more holistic fashion, the *MaddAddam* trilogy gives us hope. The hope is that, once we have seen through the various neoliberal disguises of Prometheus, both secular and divine, we can bind him anew and ensure that, this time, he *stays* bound.

Notes

[1] This quotation comes from a collection of essays published by the CATO Institute. Founded in 1977 by Ed Crane and billionaire Charles Koch, the CATO Institute is one of the biggest libertarian think tanks in the United States and thus a prominent flag bearer for neoliberal and Promethean ideologies in North America and beyond. Through publications such as the one cited here, the CATO Institute works to influence policy decisions in accordance with neoliberal principles such as deregulation, privatization, and laissez-faire capitalism.

[2] Of course, one could argue that the real chickens replaced by the ChickieNobs are already a human-made commodity since chickens, like all farm animals, have been selectively bred over the centuries to favour certain characteristics that make them better sources of commodities than their wild ancestors. They therefore "consist of improved and selected material, embodying the experience, inventiveness, and hard work of farmers, past and present; the evolutionary material processes they have undergone serve biological and social needs" (Shiva 52). As such, they are the product of human ingenuity, just like ChickieNobs.

[3] One notable exception is Kenneth Copeland, arguably the richest and most famous televangelist and prosperity preacher currently active. He was a member of President Donald Trump's Evangelical Advisory Board and recently became the object of several online memes. Copeland owns several oil and gas wells on his 1,500-acre tax-free parsonage, a piece of land given to him "by a rich oil baron named Paul Pewitt" (Keteyian). I

cannot say for certain whether or not Atwood was aware of Copeland when creating the Rev, but the similarities between them are numerous enough to make me suspect that they were intentional.

[4] The mention of a theme park in relation to the Church of PetrOleum might also have been intended as a subtle reference to Heritage USA, a genuine Evangelical theme park in South Carolina. Founded during the glory years of the prosperity gospel movement by televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, the park was ten times the size of Disneyland and twenty times that of the Magic Kingdom portion of Disney World. Until its closure in 1989, a little over a decade after its opening, Heritage USA boasted the title of the third most visited theme park in the United States (Bowler 77).

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *MaddAddam*. 2013. Vintage Canada, 2014.

—. *Oryx and Crake*. 2003. Vintage Canada, 2009.

—. *The Year of the Flood*. 2009. Vintage Canada, 2010.

Bacon, Francis. *The New Atlantis*. 1627. *Project Guttenberg*, produced by Michael Pullen and William Fishburne, 23 Oct. 2008, www.gutenberg.org/files/2434/2434-h/2434-h.htm.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Simulacra and Simulations." Translated by Paul Foss et al. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, edited by Mark Poster, 2nd ed., Polity, 2001, pp. 169-87.

Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. Oxford UP, 2013.

Defalco, Amelia. "*MaddAddam*, Biocapitalism, and Affective Things." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2017, pp. 432-51. doi:10.1093/cwwrit/vpx008.

Dryzek, John S. *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2013.

Dunlap, Allison. "Eco-Dystopia: Reproduction and Destruction in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *Journal of Ecocriticism*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-15.

Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality*. Translated by William Weaver, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.

Foster, John Bellamy. "The Ecological Dimensions of Marx's Thought." Interview by Sasha Lilley. *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*, PM Press, 2011, pp. 123-35.

Glass, Trevor, director. *Suffer the Children*. *YouTube*, 2007, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X5dpfzXUus.

The Holy Bible. Authorized King James Version, Holman Bible Press, 1998.

Keteyian, Armen. "On the Road to Prosperity." *CBS News*, 5 Feb. 2008, www.cbsnews.com/news/on-the-road-to-prosperity/.

McNally, David. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. Brill, 2011.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. 1980. Fortieth Anniversary Ed., HarperCollins, 2020.

Moore, Jason W. "The Socio-Ecological Crises of Capitalism." Interview by Sasha Lilley. *Capital and Its Discontents: Conversations with Radical Thinkers in a Time of Tumult*, PM Press, 2011, pp. 136-52.

Narkunas, J. Paul. "Between Words, Numbers, and Things: Transgenics and Other Objects of Life in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddams." *Critique*, no. 56, 2015, pp. 1-25.

Shiva, Vandana. *Biopiracy: The Blunder of Nature and Knowledg*e. South End Press, 1997.
Taylor, Jerry. "The Growing Abundance of Natural Resources." *Market Liberalism: A Paradigm for the 21st Century*, edited by David Boaz and Edward H. Crane, CATO Institute, 1993, pp. 363-78.
Vials, Chris. "Margaret Atwood's Dystopic Fiction and the Contradictions of Neoliberal Freedom." *Textual Practice*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2015, pp. 235-54.