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DECOLONIZING THE ANTHROPOCENE: READING CHARLES DE LINT'S *WIDDERSHINS*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine Charles de Lint's novel *Widdershins* (2006), whose main theme is an interspecies war for the American land. The paper demonstrates how, by exploring the themes of Indigenous suffering, belief in species interconnectedness, reverence for the natural world, and approach to trauma, the novel participates in the deconstruction of colonial structures present in the concept of the Anthropocene. The paper also engages de Lint's novel in a dialogue with the studies on the Anthropocene to prove that, by providing its readers with alternative modes of thinking, fantasy fiction can contribute to the cognitive change required to save our planet from human-wrought destruction.

Though Charles de Lint is today recognized as a key representative of urban fantasy, readers familiar with his works know that de Lint's fiction has undergone a major development since the beginning of his career in the 1980s. The random images of magical creatures secretly inhabiting Ottawa and the fictional city of Newford have evolved into a complex system that combines Indigenous beliefs with European folktales and reflects the composite cultures of Canada and the US. De Lint's concern with the fate of the underprivileged, initially expressed by his depiction of urban crime and poverty, now focuses on the unequal treatment experienced by ethnic communities. The author also regularly pays attention to the state of the natural world and people's relationship with nature. The aim of this paper is to investigate de Lint's novel *Widdershins* (2006) – in which Native spirits and European fairies

fight an interspecies war for the possession of the American land – in order to demonstrate how this narrative exposes the settler-colonial politics of the Anthropocene.

Debates on the challenges posed by the Anthropocene – a term introduced by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer [2000, 17-18] to describe humankind as a geological agent which alters the state of the planet – focus on climate change, exploitation of resources, degradation of the environment, and people's flawed perception of non-human species, all of which might ultimately lead to the destruction of our world.¹ Since these debates typically use words such as (hu)mankind and humanity, they implicitly assume people's collective responsibility for the creation of the Anthropocene, and then stress the need for unified actions against its further development [Comos and Rosenthal 2019, ix]. While the latter is understandable since the earth is everyone's shared home, the former means that the blame for the current state of events is divided equally between all communities – including Indigenous communities whose impact on the world is different from that of industrialized Western nations [Comos and Rosenthal 2019, ix-x; Tønnessen and Oma 2016, x-xiii]. Dipesh Chakrabarty [2009, 216] recognizes this fallacy: “does not the talk of species or mankind simply serve to hide the reality of capitalist production and the logic of imperial (...) domination that it fosters?”. Arguing that the concept of human collectivity is “a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe” rather than something that transcends cultural diversity and is experienced by an individual, Chakrabarty [2009, 222] states that the Anthropocene “calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity.” Hubert Zapf adds that “the contention that humanity acts as a single unified agent tends to obscure cultural diversity, imbalances of power, and unequal distribution of environmental risk between different parts and cultures of the world” [2019, 3].

Recognizing Anthropocentric discourse as a continuation of settler-colonial politics, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd insist [2017, 763-769] that the beginning of this period should be dated to the year 1610, when European settlers began their exploitation of other lands. This exploitation continues, in various forms, till the present day. Kyle Pows Whyte indicates that, in the 19th and 20th century, Indigenous people

suffered other kinds of anthropogenic environmental change at the hands of settlers, including changes associated with deforestation, forced removal and relocation, containment on reservations (i.e., loss of mobility), liquidation of our lands into individual private property and subsequent dispossession, and unmitigated pollution and destruction of our lands from extractive industries and commodity agriculture. [2017, 208-209]

¹ To see how the term Anthropocene has evolved to embrace various issues see, e.g., Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge: Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015).

Davis and Todd argue that, once people see the connection between the Anthropocene and colonization, they will realize that “the ecocidal 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” [2017, 763]. Hanna Straß-Senol, who studies the colonial underpinnings of the Anthropocene, indicates that “from an indigenous perspective, the homogenizing and universalizing narrative of the Anthropocene discourse has to be problematised” [2019, 117]. Collective contribution to the creation of the Anthropocene is a false conviction that needs to be amended with Indigenous experiences of this period – in other words, the debate on the Anthropocene needs to be decolonized. For Davis and Todd this act of decolonizing “calls for the consideration of Indigenous philosophies and processes of Indigenous self-governance as a necessary political corrective” [2017, 763]. Straß-Senol adds that it is necessary to assess Native communities’ actual participation in the creation of the Anthropocene, the damage they have suffered because of it, and the help they can provide to counter its effects. In order to prove how literature can dismantle the colonial structures of Anthropocentric discourse, Straß-Senol examines Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) and Chantal Bilodeau’s *Sila* (2015), which combine Indigenous mythologies and knowledge with a non-human perception of the world. These works, as Straß-Senol argues [2019, 125-126], illustrate how the Anthropocene – largely a product of the dominant culture and heavy industry [Schwägerl 2014, 64] – can be countered by traditional knowledge that recognizes humanity as just one among the many species inhabiting the planet.

Images of the Anthropocene have appeared also in modern fantasy fiction whose repertoire of imaginary worlds, utopias, and dystopias as well as its visions of destruction and rebirth seem particularly effective for speculation about the causes, nature, and consequences of the Anthropocene. Gina Comos and Caroline Rosenthal assert that “[b]y creating ‘imaginative counterworlds,’ literature and other forms of art may not only help make the risks of the Anthropocene more tangible and comprehensible to the individual, but they function as an important catalyst to critical self-reflection and ecological awareness” [2019, xi]. Since fantasy fiction offers “imaginative counterworlds” *par excellence* and frequently features Indigenous characters, it should be given particular attention in the study of literature’s influence on the Anthropocene and its settler-colonial structures.

It should be noted that Indigenous people and traditions are one of the major components of de Lint’s urban fantasy fiction, and they have appeared, e.g., in *Moonheart* (1984), *Svaha* (1989), *Someplace to Be Flying* (1998), *Forests of the Heart* (2000), and *The Wind in His Heart* (2017). However, since de Lint is a Canadian writer with Dutch origins [Reid 2002, 51] and does not belong to an Indigenous community, his depiction of Native people – though informed by the writer’s respect and sympathy – raises justifiable concerns about

cultural appropriation. Even a well-intended representation of an Indigenous group is likely to fall prey to what Gerald Vizenor condemns as simulated Native presence generated by the dominant culture [1999, 84-86]. Fortunately, writers, readers, and scholars of fantasy are gaining more awareness of the genre's ingrained "habits of whiteness" and its highly stereotypical portrayal of various ethnic communities [Young 2016]. Recognizing a similar problem present in de Lint's fiction, Weronika Łaszkiwicz examines a selection of his works to indicate the writer's evolving treatment of Native characters and cultures. Łaszkiwicz argues that though some of de Lint's early stories recycle cliché tropes of nature-wise noble savages and depict Native people as inhabitants of a fantastic world, his later books become more engaged with modern Native Americans and the socio-economic problems of their communities [2018, 233-249]. *Widdershins* (2006), a fine representative of de Lint's style and goals, deserves to be added to the analysis of his literary output not only because it provides insight into the author's thoughts about the challenges of the Anthropocene, but also because it undermines, at least partly, the colonial underpinnings of Anthropocentric discourse. The following paper will demonstrate how, by exploring the themes of Indigenous suffering, belief in species interconnectedness, reverence for the natural world, and approach to trauma and healing, the novel participates in the deconstruction of settler-colonial structures.²

Widdershins, which belongs to the Newford series, consists of two plotlines. The first one follows the territorial conflict between European fairies, who migrated together with the colonists, and the American "cousins," i.e. original inhabitants of the New World, who can shape-shift into animals. In the course of the novel readers observe how their centuries-old dispute – a projection of the conflict between Native people and the colonists – escalates into an interspecies war when ambition transforms the animosity existing between the fairy, cousin, and human communities into bloodthirsty hostility. The second plotline is a continuation of the events from a previous novel, *The Onion Girl* (2001), and it follows Jilly's struggle with the trauma of past abuse. Though these two plotlines could be easily separated into individual stories, de Lint manages to interweave them at several points and ultimately they deliver a unified message about humankind's position in the world.³

² For other analyses see Laurence Steven's "Welwyn Wilton Katz and Charles de Lint: New Fantasy as a Canadian Post-colonial Genre" (*Worlds of Wonder*, 2004), Christine Mains' "Old World, New World, Otherworld: Celtic and Native American Influences in Charles de Lint's *Moonheart* and *Forests of the Heart*" (*Extrapolation*, 2005), and Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun's "Remembering the Romance: Medievalist Romance in Fantasy Fiction by Guy Gavriel Kay and Charles de Lint" (*Medievalism in English Canadian Literature*, 2020).

³ For the sake of brevity, this article will not provide an extensive summary of the plot or juxtapose *Widdershins* and de Lint's other works (which are quite prominent as far as Canadian fantasy literature is concerned). For additional information see the materials listed in the previous note.

First of all, the novel decolonizes Anthropocentric discourse by invoking the theme of Indigenous suffering and recognizing the dispute over natural resources (American land) as a problem caused by European settlers whose pursuit of new life resulted in the dispossession of the tribes. Rather than depict their suffering as a thing of the past that, though tragic, has little impact on the modern world, de Lint recognizes the reality of traumatic post-memory, yet he does not pursue this topic to the extent of insisting on Native victimhood. His positive protagonists, be they human or fairy, openly acknowledge the damage inflicted on Native communities by colonial politics, respect what remains of their territorial sovereignty, and search for a viable solution to the conflict. Still, at one point de Lint writes: "Lizzie knew that a lot of Native Americans harboured a grudge against Europeans, and rightly so, she supposed, all things considered. So she thought she understood his anger" [*Widdershins* 2006]. This fragment, while it recognizes the suffering of Indigenous people, attracts the reader's attention for a different reason. Describing the feelings of Native people after centuries of racial and cultural genocide as a grudge is a gross understatement. Yet this is a reflection of how people from outside Indigenous communities, oblivious to the world-shaping power of language, belittle Indigenous experiences. An Indigenous turn in the discussion of the Anthropocene demands the unveiling and deconstruction not only of colonial power structures still operating within the mainstream society, but also of such colonial language. Sadly, this is not a theme that de Lint pursues in *Widdershins*.

The author does, however, undermine colonial worldviews by developing the theme of humankind's connectivity to the land and animals according to Indigenous beliefs. Native people see the land as "*a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* (which) can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and no exploitative terms" [Coulthard 2014, 13]. Thus, according to their beliefs, the land should be cherished and protected rather than exploited, and its animal inhabitants regarded as kin, not as lesser creatures deprived of agency. A relationship of kinship demands that Native people nurture their connection to the world and guard against neglecting its non-human – or more-than-human – inhabitants [Ansloos 2016, 70]. Such beliefs remain in stark contract with Western insistence on humankind's superiority, informed by the biblical image of man as the master of the earth. It is this insistence that has facilitated exploitation of the natural world. As Davis and Todd argue, problems of the Anthropocene are grounded in "a specific ideology defined by proto-capitalist logics based on extraction and accumulation through dispossession" [2017, 764]. Inarguably, the Western politics of expansion and accumulation has contributed to the creation of the Anthropocene and its colonial underpinnings, visible in the dispossession of Indigenous people, exploitation of the natural world, and genocide of non-human species [Tallbear 2016]. As Davis and Todd

explain, “[w]hat settler colonialism, and its extensions into contemporary petrocapiatalism, does is a severing of relations. It is a severing of relations between humans and the soil, between plants and animals, between minerals and our bones. This is the logic of the Anthropocene” [2017, 770]. Recognizing the damage of such logic, scholars of the Anthropocene call for a revision of human/non-human relations and renewal of species interconnectedness [Comos and Rosenthal 2019, viii; Meijer 2016, 74]. Since Western ideologies fail at providing modern people with templates for thinking about man as part of nature rather than its master (the world is a subordinate entity even if man cares for its well-being), it is necessary to bring other perspectives into the discussion of the Anthropocene in order to teach people about different modes of interaction with the environment. Thus, the Indigenous worldview is a much needed shift since it recognizes the land as an animate entity conditioning the human existence (rather than as an entity severed from it) and entails a re-evaluation of human/non-human relations [Davis and Todd 2017, 769-770]. A chance for a similar relationship does exist within Western Christian thought. After all, the name *Adam* is derived from the Hebrew *adamah* meaning “ground,” which implies “an intimate link between man and the earth from which he was created” [Ward et al. 1991, 18]. The idea of “other-than-human relatives” is also present in biblical tradition, e.g. in the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi, who sees animals as part of divine creation. Still, these connections seem to be forgotten by the Western world. But since respect for the land and interspecies connectivity seem fundamental to undermining the exploitative politics of the Anthropocene, they will have to be retrieved by Western societies.

Widdershins deconstructs the colonial discourse of the Anthropocene by repeatedly emphasizing this connectivity and equality between various species. Thus, the novel fulfills a pattern identified by Gabriele Dürbeck in stories of the Anthropocene: “the interdependency narrative” that requires meaningful interaction between different species [2019, 23-47]. De Lint’s cast of characters includes humans, cousins (called animal people), supernatural creatures, and regular animals (shown as sentient beings) who all need to negotiate their interests and cooperate to protect their shared home. The human protagonists learn that it is always better to be mindful and respectful of the land and its inhabitants: Lizzy is offered protection from malicious fairies because she mourns the death of a deer woman, and Jilly is aided in her fight against her evil brother by a pitbull that sympathizes with her because it also suffered abuse. Both human protagonists are elevated by their relationship with non-human beings: Lizzy becomes aware of the mysteries hidden in the world, and Jilly can finally heal from her trauma. Regardless of their species, all characters are shown as capable of feeling love, making mistakes and learning from them, and doing something for the benefit of the world. This shift in agency depicted in *Widdershins* changes

the dynamics of human/non-human relationships. Since people are not the only sentient and sensitive species of the world, *anthropos* is removed from the center of attention and its illusory omnipotence that led to the creation of the Anthropocene is rendered as an aberration that needs to be corrected. While such a shift knocks humankind off the pedestal of power, it splits the burden of responsibility for the well-being of the world and offers us the possibility of existence within a web of meaningful relationship with the rest of the living world. The pedestal is a lonely place to be, and de Lint invariably emphasizes the value of life in a community (with Native communities implied as a role model). In that way he echoes the call voiced by scholars that humankind should accept “its existential interconnectedness with all other living creatures, as well as with the oceans and their tides, the atmosphere, and the mountains” [Schwägerl 2014, 67-68]. This praise of connectivity can counter both “the colonial violence of individualism” [Ansloos 2016, 73] and detachment from nature woven into the fundamentals of the Anthropocene.

The novel opposes humanity's detachment from the natural world also by insisting that the wilderness should be approached with respect, because it is a liminal space that enables people to experience the divine. For instance, when Geordie encounters a stag cousin, he thinks: “Standing here in his presence, I understood the reverence people had felt for that European lord of the forest. Here, in our own woods, I wanted to go down on my knees in front of Walker and ask for a blessing” [*Widdershins* 2016]. Typically for de Lint's fiction, *Widdershins* treats the wilderness as a sacred space inhabited by otherworldly entities whose manifestation elicits an array of emotions ranging from awe to terror. Thus, the protagonists learn to approach the wilderness with reverence verging on devotion. Such an attitude mirrors Native spirituality which is grounded in humankind's connection to the natural world, and such premises undermine the colonial politics of exploitation that underlies the Anthropocene.

The novel also employs Indigenous wisdom to develop the theme of Jilly's healing. While details of ceremonies may differ across tribes, Indigenous cultures generally share a holistic approach to healing since in order to deal with a disease they employ practices that address not only the patient's body, but also the mind and the spirit – physical healing is conditioned by spiritual one. While de Lint, fortunately, does not describe or reconstruct authentic Native practices, he embeds Jilly's healing in that basic tenet of Indigenous spirituality: the woman cannot heal the injuries she suffered in a car accident until her spirit is healed from the trauma of abuse. Thus, Jilly must face the memory of her malicious brother in order to cleanse herself of fear, guilt, and hatred, and in that way facilitate the mending of her body. A similar theme appears in de Lint's other works, e.g. in *The Wind in His Heart* (2017) and the fate of Abigail White Horse. Applied to the Anthropocene, the Indigenous approach to healing implies that unless people work towards the healing

of their minds and spirits (e.g. from the greed and wastefulness which fuel consumptive lifestyles), they will not be able to heal the world.

This act of healing requires people to re-evaluate their relationship with their oppressors. Vizenor argues that Native communities need to move beyond the state of victimhood perpetuated by memories of genocide and mainstream narratives in which Native people are doomed to fail in the wake of colonial progress. Unless Native people are able to break the constraints of past trauma and regard themselves not as victims but as survivors, Vizenor states, they will not be able to reclaim their sovereignty [2009, 1-14]. Jeffrey Ansloos adds that attempts at peacebuilding between Indigenous and white communities require the former to include their oppressors in the process of healing and the latter to recognize their complicity in sustaining the settler-colonial politics of oppression [2016, 70-72]. This call for a move beyond historical trauma toward reconciliation is visible in *Widdershins* when Grey offers mercy to Odawa after a decades-long conflict that cost him the lives of his beloved, and when Anwatan, a deer cousin, aids a bogon (creature from Scottish tales) responsible for her death. When one of the protagonists explains their choices by saying: “We’d be letting our personal feelings get in the way of what’s really important, which is that we take care of each other and this messy old world we’re living in” [*Widdershins* 2006], de Lint is asking his readers to forsake personal animosities for a greater good. By promoting reconciliation embedded in the admittance of guilt and forgiveness, *Widdershins* echoes the call for a renewal of the relationship between members of various communities, which can partly erase the specter of colonialism still hovering over the contemporary world.

It should be noted, however, that some aspects of *Widdershins* preserve the settler-colonial structures. For one thing, though typically for de Lint’s works the novel involves a large cast of characters, none of them is Indigenous. The aspect of indigeneity is introduced only in the figures of supernatural cousins, whose communities (clans with chiefs), customs (e.g. drum ceremonies), beliefs (e.g. in Raven who created the world and Coyote the trickster), and problems (the theft of land by the immigrants) are clearly inspired by tribal cultures and histories. However, these elements are often associated with Indigenous people by default and commonly treated as universal for all Indigenous cultures – in reality, such a mixture of artifacts and practices obscures the diversity of Native traditions. What is produced is not an image of authentic Indigenous people, but of “Indians” who are a simulation of Native presence, grounded in Colonial and Romantic discourses [Vizenor 1999, 80-84]. Even though de Lint’s white characters are respectful of other communities, their respect cannot compensate for the lack of a Native perspective in matters related to Indigenous issues. De Lint does write a few chapters from the point of view of Grey, yet this only creates another problem, since Grey is a Native-inspired supernatural creature, not a regular Native person. This lack

of credible Native characters in the novel upholds the settler-colonial practices of exclusion and silencing, which have been identified in the discourse of the Anthropocene.

Moreover, since the novel limits indigeneity to supernatural creatures, it perpetuates the colonial practice of depicting Natives as the Other, in this case a “fantastic Other” distanced from the everyday world. Becky Little has already aptly addressed this issue in reference to J.K. Rowling’s failed portrayal of Native people in *History of Magic in North America*: “problems arise when a race of people is constantly portrayed as magical, and therefore fictional” [Little 2016]. If an ethnic community is fictionalized too often, it cannot escape marginalization and reclaim sovereignty. In addition, the resolution of the novel’s main conflict is a failure from the perspective of Native interests. Minisino, a buffalo spirit, treats Anwatan’s death and the dispute over territories as an opportunity to gain fame. It takes a white girl, Christiana, to unmask his ambitions and prevent the interspecies war. Yet while the immediate outbreak of war is avoided, the heroes do nothing to tackle the original problem – the possession of land. When Hazel, a European fairy, expresses her dislike for Native spirits because they keep the land to themselves [Widdershins 2006], de Lint does not criticize such colonial rhetoric. The author generally espouses the need for cooperation guided by humility. Humility should indeed be pivotal in people’s response to the Anthropocene [Niemann 2017, 255]. Yet while the novel achieves temporary interspecies reconciliation, the author sidesteps the original problem of control over resources, perhaps because he is unable to properly engage with the demands of Indigenous sovereignty and offer a satisfactory solution.

Thus, *Widdershins* inarguably fails at fully decolonizing the Anthropocene. Yet it still fares better than many formulaic fantasy narratives in which whiteness is a default mode for character- and world-building. Straß-Senol argues that “the Anthropocene narrative represents the continuation of a Eurocentric/Western, oppressive ideology that disenfranchises other approaches to the more-than-human world, like the non-teleological, non-utilitarian ways of life inscribed in the histories, traditions, and practices of many indigenous peoples” [2019, 121]. The themes of non-human agency, species interconnectedness, reverence for the natural world, and Indigenous wisdom run deep not only in *Widdershins*, but in de Lint’s entire literary output. By creating characters who cherish nature, foster meaningful relationships with non-human species whose agency they respect, and generally try to improve the world they live in, the Canadian writer offers his (white) readers a template for a lifestyle which counters the damage of the Anthropocene. The presence of Native-inspired characters, traditions, and beliefs provides an alternative to the ideologies produced by Western cultures. When Straß-Senol writes that Thomas King’s novel, rather than nostalgically advocate a return to past Indigenous practices, posits “the cooperation between

indigenous and non-indigenous communities guided by an indigenous philosophy of interrelatedness” [2019, 132], her words apply also to de Lint’s *Widdershins*. In fact, this cooperation between communities could become, according to Christian Schwägerl, an opportunity for Indigenous people:

The Anthropocene could become a kind of forum in which all cultures have equal validity and all people are treated equally (...). By citing the “human being” as the agent of the Anthropocene idea, indigenous peoples would be included as modern agents who have equal rights and who play a part in the geology of the future instead of being just victims of anthropogenic change. (...) In that sense, the Anthropocene would not only be a physical description of the state of things; it would be construed as an ethical demand and guide, the beginning of an awareness-raising process. [Schwägerl 2014, 65-66]

This awareness-raising process includes the realization that Native tribes have already suffered the Apocalypse and live in a post-apocalyptic world in which they have to reclaim their identities and sovereignty [Gross 2014, 33]. Theirs is the experience of destruction and survival. Western societies fear that they will need to suffer a similar ordeal as a result of the Anthropocene. If that happens, Native memory might offer lessons on how to live in a world of lost species and relations. But a word of warning is necessary. If Western societies try to decolonize the Anthropocene by embracing Indigenous beliefs, they should guard against another colonial theft – this time not of land, but of culture. Commenting on the American society, Vine Deloria Jr. writes: “today it is popular to be an Indian. Within a decade it may be a necessity. People are not going to want to take the blame for the sorry state of the nation, and claiming allegiance with the most helpless racial minority may well be the way to escape accusations” [1997, 1]. Such superficial allegiance with Indigenous cultures would produce only another simulation of Native presence, so those involved in the process of decolonization must find a balance between appreciation and appropriation. This applies also to fiction written by non-Native authors such as Charles de Lint. Like *Widdershins*, their works might contribute to the decolonization of the Anthropocene – and postmodern society in general – by confronting white readers with Indigenous beliefs and problems, but they need to be careful not to reinforce the settler-colonial structures already present in mainstream culture.

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