

# Under Salted Earth

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By

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## ABSTRACT

*Under Salted Earth* is a novel that borrows from several genres such as the New Weird, prairie realism, and eco-fiction to explore the deleterious effects of industrial agriculture in rural Manitoba. The intergenerational plot, alternating between 1950 and the present day, involves the arrival of a beast based on the Bahkauv of German folklore, a creature from the city of Aachen which, according to legend, looked like a fanged calf and attacked intoxicated men at night. In my reworking of this old German tale, a similar beast travels to a village in rural Manitoba and demands massive quantities of food from its unprepared inhabitants. As such, the village – a mixture of inhabitants including settlers and members of Indigenous communities – must work together to appease it. Themes include displacement/dispossession, monstrosity and otherness, and the necessity of engaging critically with personal and regional histories to foster a more ecological way of being.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

Growing up in rural Manitoba, I was long aware that external economic pressures had forced my family to sell our farm. The nature of these pressures – the profit-driven, anti-smallholder ideology that underpinned them – escaped me until I began diving into provincial history through my work as a political analyst for the magazine *Canadian Dimension*. Learning about the growth and development of Canadian capitalism in the twentieth century, and industrial agriculture’s deleterious impact on rural Manitoban communities such as my own, informs the themes of my novel, *Under Salted Earth*.

*Under Salted Earth* explores, in a broad sense, the industrialization of Manitoba agriculture and the social, economic, and ecological ills that this industrialization has wrought. More specifically, my examination of Manitoba’s history and present incorporates themes of globalization, rural decay, grief and loss, and collectivity vs. individuality. In investigating these topics and themes, I borrow from several genres, including eco-fiction and prairie realism. However, the novel’s inciting event – the arrival of a mysterious drifter named Paul Bog in Oakbarrow – admixes an emergent genre with eco-fiction and prairie fiction. That genre is the New Weird, a burgeoning literary genre known to erode generic boundaries. In my novel, the New Weird is embodied by the folkloric monster that Paul Bog brings with him to Oakbarrow: a Germanic beast called the Bahkauv whose arrival, in keeping with New Weird conventions, brings destabilization and “dis/orientation,” but also potentially fruitful new modes of living. The novel argues that searching for such modes of living, and accepting the generative potentialities of dis/orientation, is crucial in the context of ecological crisis, economic malaise, and democratic deficit that characterizes modern-day Canada.

As all three genres I have identified require clarification and concretization, the primary focus of my artist statement will be to define these genres (eco-fiction, prairie realism, the New Weird) while explaining how my novel borrows from them to construct a political argument about the state of capitalist agriculture in Manitoba from the mid-twentieth century up to the present day, as well as its human and ecological impacts.

“Eco-fiction” as a genre classification first arose in 1971 with the publication of *Eco-fiction*, a short story anthology edited by John Stadler that consisted of environmental science-fiction short stories originally published from the 1930s to the 1960s. The genre has since spawned a multitude of subgenres including climate dystopia, Anthropocene fiction, solarpunk, and more. In the words of Lynne Feeley, eco-fiction’s diverse subgenres are united by an awareness that ecological crisis “[lays] bare certain ecological facts: the interdependence of all species, the porousness of bodies, the false separation between humanity and the rest of the nonhuman world, and the false exaltation of human modes of knowing” (*The Nation*). Eco-fiction’s diversity of modes is thus representative of a broader literary desire to grapple with, to elucidate, to render in striking ways the essential breakdown in ecological relations which, in humanity’s current moment, is typified by the climate crisis.

Although the sciences may seem the only discipline equipped to explore the complexities of ecological collapse, many theorists have posited that the social sciences and humanities are capable of broadening and enriching cultural discussions of eco-crisis for the simple reason that these disciplines “have long attended to the intricacies of social processes, the nature and capacity of political change, and the circulation and organization of symbolic meaning through culture” (Löschnigg and Braunecker 3). Literature in particular “conveys information in very distinct ways and affects emotion, attitude and agency in a manner quite different from other

media,” functioning as “a creative principle of [cultural] renewal” (4). In this sense, every contribution to eco-fiction is a contribution to a cosmopolitan cultural regeneration toward greater attendance to ecological issues. Equally important, however, is the production of literary works that attend to “the local specificities of regional and national contexts” (4). “The local makes the global tangible,” write Maria Löschnigg and Melanie Braunecker: “[p]aying attention to place...enables authors and critics to include the social, cultural, political, geographical and environmental particularities of a region into their imaginative or eco-critical engagement with Planet Earth” (4).

In Canada, a surge of eco-fiction works has emerged in the past several years – including Michael Christie’s *Greenwood* (2020), Catherine Bush’s *Blaze Island* (2020), and David Huebert’s *Chemical Valley* (2021) – indicative of a broader cultural attuning toward ecological matters. While reading works of Canadian eco-fiction, Löschnigg and Braunecker’s notion that “the local makes the global tangible” echoed through my mind. When one investigates place in Canadian eco-fiction of recent years, for instance, one finds a notable lack of eco-fiction set on the prairies and concerned with prairie issues (although there is also a rich scholarship of ecocriticism in Western Canada, as the works of Jenny Kerber, Pamela Banting and Lisa Szabo-Jones show). Christie is from British Columbia, Huebert is from Nova Scotia, while Catherine Bush was born in Toronto and centres Newfoundland and Labrador in *Blaze Island*. All of these authors are rooted in place to various extents: the withering forests of Vancouver Island haunt Christie’s *Greenwood*; Huebert, though a Nova Scotia native, examines the toxic environment of Ontario’s so-called “Chemical Valley” in his title story; and Bush takes inspiration from Newfoundland and Labrador’s Fogo Island to craft her *Tempest*-inspired eco-fiction tale. Eco-fiction set in Western Canada – fiction concerned with “the interdependence of all species, the



porousness of bodies, the false separation between humanity and the rest of the nonhuman world, and the false exaltation of human modes of knowing” – has been comparatively slower to emerge, although Doreen Vanderstoop’s *Watershed* (2020) is an example of a recent novel that has applied an ecocritical lens to its Albertan setting.

Wherever they are set, literary works that investigate ecological crisis serve a crucial cultural function locally and globally – a function of renewal, offering new modes of relating to land and its human and non-human inhabitants. Renewal was a preoccupation of mine while writing *Under Salted Earth*. By addressing the specific political, socioeconomic, and ecological realities of Manitoba at two points in history (1950 and 2024), I hope to shine a light on the negative effects of industrial agriculture on the prairies, thereby enriching Canadian ecocriticism and, in some small way, contributing to global efforts to contend with ecological crisis through fiction.

In my novel, I attend directly to industrial agriculture’s destructive effects on Manitoba’s ecology, including through soil erosion, shelterbelt destruction, deforestation, devastation of wetlands, and fertilizers leaching into groundwater. Likewise, I explore how the settling of the prairies, the establishment of the family farm, and the rise of industrial agriculture represented a continuous process of dispossession for Manitoba’s Indigenous peoples. Such concerns were part of my efforts to construct a work of ecologically minded fiction, with global concerns, rooted in the specifics of the Manitoba setting.

While a variety of fiction writers and literary theorists inspired my engagement with eco-fiction, I also read a wide range of literature on prairie fiction while attempting to situate my novel in the broader historical sweep of the region’s literary productions. In colonial propaganda campaigns, the prairie landscape was always foregrounded: auric wheat fields, clear blue skies,

contented cattle grazing before muscly men at work. Similarly, the landscape has long been a dominant presence in literary theory on the Canadian prairies. Perhaps most influential was the geographic thesis, which posited that the single most important impact on prairie authors' writing – authors like Robert Stead, Frederick Philip Grove, Martha Ostenso, Sinclair Ross, and W.O. Mitchell – is the physical landscape itself. Influential texts of literary criticism that privilege landscape in their analyses include Henry Kreisel's "The Prairie: A State of Mind" (1968), Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973), and Dick Harrison's *Unnamed Country* (1977), while Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie Fact* (1989) argued that "on the prairie, the great fact *is* the land itself" (Calder and Wardhaugh 7).

My approach to eco-fiction is both local and global, and similarly, my novel aims to represent rural Manitoba as a landscape shaped by both regional and global factors. The Manitoba of *Under Salted Earth* is not one in which land determines character, but one in which individuals are moulded by social, political, and economic factors of both local and global provenance. I view this approach as a continuation of, rather than a break from, the conventions of Canadian prairie fiction, as prairie literature has long been focused on technological change, modern politics and social concerns, and cultural shifts. This is especially true of prairie realism.

As the name would suggest, prairie realism is defined by its regionalism. Alison Calder writes: "[p]rairie realism is, by definition, regional; it is *prairie* literature...Regional literature, at least in Canada, is defined as being both realistic and referential. Its value resides in its ability to mirror a specific environment" (52). Calder outlines the stereotypical characteristics of Canadian prairie realism as follows:

The land and climate are everything. The prairies exist in a permanent, drought-produced dust storm, the tedium of which is broken only by the occasional blizzard. It is always circa 1935. There are no colours and no animals, unless you count domestic livestock that freeze or smother. Human beings die natural deaths only in that their deaths are caused by nature: they freeze, suffocate, drown, burn, or are driven to suicide. There are no urban centres; the ones that do exist are immeasurably far away from the isolated farm houses where the works are set. Even when there is a town, no one speaks to another; no one has any friends. There are vicious rivalries but no politics. Sex, when it occurs, is frequently adulterous, and usually followed by death (55).

According to mid-century literary criticism, events like these are the inevitable outgrowth of environmental factors. Prairie realist stories are thus taken as representative of their region, while their content and thematic concerns are accepted as inevitable given the deterministic power of that region's environment. The human relationship to the land, meanwhile, is treated as "resoundingly negative," with the landscape even serving as a "malevolent force" locked in an "adversarial relationship" with the stories' characters (57).

In truth, prairie realism can be far more multifaceted than this strictly geographical approach would suggest. Some authors, namely Frederick Philip Grove and Vera Lysenko, are deeply concerned with interactions between the prairie setting and larger global trends including the upheavals of industrialization. As Colin Hill notes, "[the] prairie realists...frequently raise the dominant and contemporary social issues of their day" (95). He adds: "Like the Canadian urban and social realists...and numerous international modernist writers, prairie realists express ambivalence about technological change and reveal it to be a liberating and threatening force,

associated at once with twentieth-century notions of progress and dehumanization” (92-93). In other words, the relationship between the urban and rural, the “modern” and the “traditional,” are sites of destabilization and “a constant if peripheral concern for the prairie realists” (95).

Focusing on the prairie environment, and the antagonist relationship between settler and land eschews these broader social and economic concerns. In Hill’s words: “the geographical thesis, with its emphasis upon human struggle solely in relation to a threatening *natural* environment, denies the prairie-realist concern with a number of the most fundamental and modern subjects of the twentieth-century novel” (95).

From the 1990s onward, theorists including Alison Calder, Robert Wardhaugh and Hill have sought to fracture the totalizing presence of the land in prairie literary analysis, including by analyzing the various ways in which Canadian prairie fiction has engaged with global social and economic change. As Hill writes, works like Grove’s *The Master of the Mill* and Vera Lysenko’s *Yellow Boots* were not simply about the impact of the land on characters’ interior lives – they were also concerned with how global economic trends dis/oriented life on the prairies.

In *The Master of the Mill*, Grove provides a global frame for the changes wrought by mid-century industrialization:

“[The mill’s] image lay on the mirror-smooth water like a fairy palace inverted...that mill stood as a symbol and monument of the world-order...of a ruthless capitalism which had once been an exploiter of human labour but had gradually learned...to dispense with that labour, making itself independent, ruling the country by its sheer power and producing wealth” (Hill 93-94).

Likewise, Lysenko's description of a factory in *Yellow Boots* connects to the global economic trends of the mid-twentieth century, directly likening the industrialization of the prairies to the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution in Europe: "The factory...was a modern one, well-lighted, with big panes of glass and modern machines...Some of the older workers recalled songs they had sung...regarding exploitation within the European factories – the terrible speed-up, the whip of the foreman, the child labour" (Hill 95).

While the landscape has often dominated in discussions of prairie literature, in fact, the region's literary output has long been more global-facing than it has received credit for. As with eco-fiction, the concerns of prairie realist texts are both local and global; by depicting the particularities of prairie life at a specific moment in time, these works broach and explore issues of national and global relevance. Of primary relevance to my novel is prairie realism's engagement with technology, specifically, prairie realist texts' depiction of technological innovations as sites of destabilization similar to the New Weird concept of dis/orientation – in other words, technology as a site of both destructiveness and possibility.

The third genre which influenced my novel is an emergent one: the New Weird, commonly associated with writers like China Miéville, K.J. Bishop, Steph Swainston, and Jeff and Ann VanderMeer. The New Weird is difficult to define – it is a "radically multiple genre" that produces "label-resistant works" influenced by fantasy, science-fiction, horror, and more (Turnbull, Platt and Searle 1211; Reyes 208). Generally speaking, however, the New Weird is a revival of classic weird fiction (including H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur Machen, and Ambrose Bierce) that takes a very different stance toward otherness than its predecessor.

Mark Fisher defines of the weird as "constituted by...the presence of *that which does not belong*" (61). In an interview with Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy, China Miéville

describes the weird thusly: “[a] sense of disenchantment, a yearning, a sense of trauma, of ontological insecurity, of the antihuman universe, of nihilism, of bad awe and the balefulness of the numinous—all these characterize the weird” (Miéville 207). Put more succinctly, weird fiction is predicated on characters feeling estranged from reality due to an encounter with a weird presence of some kind. In weird fiction texts, the weird entity or object or phenomenon disrupts characters’ notions of reality, their preconceived categories of thought and understanding. The weird thing – be it a Lovecraftian cosmic entity or the floating icebergs of Miéville’s short story “Polynia” – is, in Fisher’s words, “so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here” (15). Yet the weird thing *does* exist, and the story’s characters are forced to reimagine their relationship to their environment to make sense of its presence. “The weird thing is not wrong, after all,” writes Fisher. “[I]t is our conceptions that must be inadequate” (15).

In classic weird fiction, characters respond to the weird element with horror and revulsion. The New Weird alters this convention. As Jonathan Turnbull, Ben Platt, and Adam Searle write: “Unlike the Weird’s early iterations, which expressed horror towards ‘that which does not belong’, the New Weird contains a ‘useful ambivalence’ towards difference and change” (1209). Put differently:

The New Weird can be characterized as a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming. In contradiction to Lovecraft’s horror at the alien, influenced by his racism, the New Weird adopts a more radical politics that treats the alien, the hybrid, and the chaotic as subversions of the various normalizations of power and subjectivity (Noys and Murphy 125).

For VanderMeer and VanderMeer, this means “entertaining monsters while not always treating them as monstrous” (Turnbull, Platt and Searle 1211). This approach to otherness shaped my depiction of the Bahkav in *Under Salted Earth*, and the townspeople’s response to the destabilization of the monster’s presence: namely, their adopting new forms of community organization and cooperative farming that prove less ecologically harmful than those of the NutriSky agribusiness.

The concept of “dis/orientation” coined by Turnbull, Platt and Searle is one way of encapsulating the New Weird’s ambivalent attitude toward otherness. Conceptually, the inclusion of the slash is key. The authors write: “Our use of the slash...pertains to the tension we would like to hold in place: to feel disoriented, but also in the process of re-orientation” (1212). The concept of dis/orientation emphasizes both the initial disruption of the weird encounter, but also the process of restoration by which the observer renders their environment explicable once more. “[Dis/orientation] is tentative, cautious, unstable, yet imbued with potential,” they write, adding that a “dis/orientated state is open to becoming, to encountering difference... as the undoing of connections and relations [it] simultaneously affords opportunities for forging new ones and building new, more socially and ecologically just worlds” (1212, 1215).

While preparing my thesis, I found that conventions borrowed from the New Weird, prairie realism, and eco-fiction complemented one another surprisingly well in the space of my novel. The notion of disruption, frequently utilized in New Weird and prairie realist texts, proved most fruitful to consider. While the disruption (and dis/orientation) in New Weird works relates to the presence of a weird thing, the disruption in prairie realist texts often emerges from the imposition of industrial technologies that reconfigure rural lifestyles in various ways. In the New

Weird as well as prairie realism, characters must re-orient themselves in changing worlds, rethink their engagement with their community, try to find their footing amid shifting surroundings. For this reason, I found the interweaving of these two seemingly disparate genres to be highly generative, especially when overlaid with eco-fiction's emphasis on ecological interdependence and the limitations of human modes of knowing. When applied to the setting of rural Manitoba, these genre concerns (dis/orientation, industrial technologies, the limits of human knowledge) manifested in two forms: the Bahkav monster and the NutriSky agribusiness.

The Bahkav arrives in the fictional town of Oakbarrow in the 1949-1950 section, attached to the mysterious drifter Paul Bog, and promptly destabilizes the community's social and production dynamics. After the Red River flood of 1950 makes the townspeople aware of the monster's presence, the farmers reorganize agricultural production away from individualism and toward cooperativism via the covert network known as the Bite. The 1950 chapters depict the initial horror and violence of the Bahkav's arrival (farm animals killed, crops destroyed, people eaten), but also the possibilities that emerge from reorganizing production toward more communal ends (shared purpose, the continuance of tradition, more ecological farming methods). At the same time, the novel highlights the complexities that persist into this mode of living, namely, the grudges and misogyny with which Euthenia Maas is forced to contend. As such, the Bahkav's arrival is an example of dis/orientation: the novel presents both the initial destabilization that results from the weirdness, but also the reorientation process by which the townsfolk reconfigure their lives and worldviews around the weird presence.

In the 2024 section, the NutriSky agribusiness represents another dis/orientation, but the townspeople struggle to re-orient themselves around its presence. The primary difference between the arrival of the two monsters, and the crisis of dis/orientation that follows, is that



locals are able to construct a new and sustainable mode of living around the Bahkauv. This is because the Bahkauv is a conventionally weird presence. It is monstrous, out of place, fitting with Mark Fisher's definition of the weird as "constituted by...the presence of *that which does not belong*" (61). However, the weirdness of the Bahkauv makes it tangible; it is a physical presence around which Oakbarrow's residents can adapt themselves. By contrast, the agricultural system, represented by NutriSky, is omnipresent, ungraspable. Rather than being weird, it is an eerie presence. The eerie, writes Fisher, "is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*...there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing where there should be something" (61). NutriSky's eeriness results from the fact that it is a capitalist enterprise, and as Fisher writes, "Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity" (11). Though the locals can manage the physical threat of the Bahkauv, the tangle of social, economic, and ecological threats posed by NutriSky prove more daunting, as capital – eerie, invisible, insatiable – is an entirely different beast.

In the novel's conclusion, Euthenia's son Arlo – a journalist who had convinced himself, following the Bahkauv's killing of his son, that the monster is the town's ultimate evil – comes to realize that the dangers posed by NutriSky are much greater in terms of ecological degradation, depopulation, and the sundering of community. By this point, it is too late: the Bite resistance network has been disbanded and Arlo, Euthenia, and the Bahkauv are stranded together in the tunnels underneath Oakbarrow as Canadian authorities hunt for Bite "terrorists" on the surface. While Euthenia chooses to remain underground until her death, Arlo and the Bahkauv flee north in search of a new town that can reorient itself toward satisfying the monster's hunger. To Euthenia and Arlo, the Bahkauv has come to represent the most positive qualities of Oakbarrow's

dis/orientation: a sense of kinship, shared purpose, protecting local ways of being in the face of outside encroachment. They believe that if the Bite can be replicated elsewhere, then the resistance to industrial capitalist agriculture as represented by NutriSky will go on. Whether or not the resistance continues remains an open question at the novel's end. As such, *Under Salted Earth* ends on another destabilization of the kind that is common to the New Weird, prairie realism, and eco-fiction. The reorientation, however, is left unresolved.

My novel examines content and themes that have been relevant to my life from the very beginning: namely, rural decay, the collapse of family farming, and industrial agriculture's role in ecological collapse. By wedding the genres of New Weird, prairie realism, and eco-fiction into a text that examines issues of urgent relevance to the present moment in Canadian and world history, and by using the specifics of the rural Manitoba setting to access broader socioeconomic and political questions, *Under Salted Earth* aims to contribute to the growing number of works that prove literature can be a mode of cultural renewal in an era of crisis.

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