

The City, the Country, and Toronto's Bloor Viaduct, 1897–1919

Ann Marie F. Murnaghan

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Article abstract

There are certain structures in cities that exemplify the grandiose designs of the city builders at the turn of the twentieth century. The Prince Edward or Bloor Viaduct is one of these structures crossing Toronto's key landform, the Don Valley, immortalized in Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. Plans to build the bridge emerged as early as 1897, although the construction did not begin until 1913. The Bloor Viaduct can help us consider the progressive era by examining how discussions of nature/culture and country/city were incorporated into the discourses of its planning and construction. Technically, the bridge was an engineering feat spanning three valleys, making east-west travel in the growing city more efficient, improving the transportation of food and lumber. Symbolically, this monument highlighted the ability to overcome nature with a bridge and bring an aestheticized nature to the city. This contradiction between overcoming and improving access to nature is built into the bridge's planning and construction history. By exploring the symbolic and material aspects of this bridge, the contradictions of nature in the process of nation building appear more striking.

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Ann Marie F. Murnaghan

There are certain structures in cities that exemplify the grandiose designs of the city builders at the turn of the twentieth century. The Prince Edward or Bloor Viaduct is one of these structures crossing Toronto's key landform, the Don Valley, immortalized in Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion. Plans to build the bridge emerged as early as 1897, although the construction did not begin until 1913. The Bloor Viaduct can help us consider the progressive era by examining how discussions of nature/culture and country/city were incorporated into the discourses of its planning and construction. Technically, the bridge was an engineering feat spanning three valleys, making east-west travel in the growing city more efficient, improving the transportation of food and lumber. Symbolically, this monument highlighted the ability to overcome nature with a bridge and bring an aestheticized nature to the city. This contradiction between overcoming and improving access to nature is built into the bridge's planning and construction history. By exploring the symbolic and material aspects of this bridge, the contradictions of nature in the process of nation building appear more striking.

Il existe certaines structures urbaines qui illustrent les conceptions grandioses des bâtisseurs de villes du tournant du XX^e siècle. À Toronto, le viaduc Prince Edward ou Bloor, qui en est un exemple, traverse la vallée de la rivière Don, l'un des éléments topographiques clés de Toronto, immortalisé par In the Skin of a Lion de Michael Ondaatje. Les plans de construction de ce viaduc ont été développés à partir de 1897, même si la construction n'a commencé qu'en 1913. Le cas du viaduc Bloor nous permet de considérer la mentalité progressiste de cette époque en nous donnant accès à la façon dont les discours de l'époque sur le rapport entre nature et culture et campagne et ville, se sont intégrés dans les discours entourant la planification de sa construction. Sur le plan technique, le viaduc était un exploit d'ingénierie enjambant trois vallées, qui facilitait la circulation entre l'est et l'ouest de la ville, ainsi que l'échange des denrées alimentaires et du bois de construction. Symboliquement, ce monument illustre la capacité des bâtisseurs de maîtriser la nature à l'aide d'un pont et ainsi de créer une image esthétisée de la nature au sein de la ville. Les plans et la construction de ce viaduc intègrent cette contradiction entre la maîtrise de la nature et l'amélioration de son accessibilité.

L'exploration du symbolisme et des aspects matériels de ce monument rend d'autant plus remarquables les contradictions à l'égard de la nature dans le processus de construction de la nation.

Introduction

The bridge goes up in a dream. It will link the east end with the centre of the city. It will carry traffic, water, and electricity across the Don Valley. It will carry trains that have not even been invented yet.

Night and day. Fall light. Snow light. They are always working—horses and wagons and men arriving for work on the Danforth side at the far end of the valley.

There are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution. The piers sink into bedrock fifty feet below the surface through clay and shale and quicksand—45,000 cubic yards of earth are excavated. The network of scaffolding stretches up.

Men in a maze of wooden planks climb deep into the shattered light of blond wood. A man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame. Drill smoke in his hair. A cap falls into the valley, gloves are buried in stone dust.

—Michael Ondaatje¹

Michael Ondaatje's novel *In the Skin of a Lion* vividly describes how class, gender, and natal origins are lived, and how the lives imagined from these origins enrich our understanding of the human experience in place.² Ondaatje uses an astounding amount of historical data to set this novel in Toronto in the progressive era of the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 of his novel is entitled "The Bridge" and refers to the construction of the Bloor Viaduct³ across the Don Valley. The main incident that occurs in this chapter is fictional, there is no nun named Alice Gull who gets swept off the incomplete viaduct and caught by the gifted bridge labourer Nicholas Temelcoff in the historical record,⁴ but the themes of labour, nature, and "progress" in Ondaatje's novel inspire in-depth analysis. Several authors use Ondaatje's writing to discuss both the geographical and infrastructural implications of the progressive era.⁵ Similarly Ondaatje's description of early-twentieth-century Torontonians has also been the topic of academic inquiry.⁶ These authors, and many others, note Ondaatje's complex understanding of

space, language, society, and historical specificity that has made him a key figure in Canadian and international post-colonial literature.⁷

Bridges are arguably “the most metaphorical and political of technologies.”⁸ This article will argue that the Bloor Viaduct was indeed a political and technological symbol and artifact.⁹ Materially, the viaduct brought the country closer to the city by improving the local transportation network for natural resources from York Township, while simultaneously distancing the city from the “bad” nature, of the river, mud, and steep hills. The viaduct became a conduit for the metabolism of the city and a symbol of the rationalization of nature. The argument begins with the importance of nature and culture in discussions of infrastructure. The history is developed with a detailed reading of the newspaper record from the period, planning reports, and technical journal articles to elucidate the politics of the planning and construction of the bridge, starting with the first references to it in 1897 and ending with its renaming in 1919. The language and images used in these discourses highlight the tension between nature–country and culture–city, and the ensuing class conflicts that emerge from the bridge’s spatial location. By considering the contradictions that are inherent in “needing” nature in order to build the bridge, construct buildings, feed, clothe, and produce the city, and “conquering” nature in order to rationalize the urban landscape to allow the movement of the goods to flow more quickly, the article illustrates the interconnections between symbolic and material nature/culture in a historical Canadian urban context. Ultimately notions of progress and nation run throughout this narrative and illustrate how integral the discourses of nature and cities are in the construction of the image of empire.¹⁰

Nature and Culture in the Building of Infrastructure

An important characteristic of infrastructure is its tendency to be taken for granted. Maria Kaika and Eric Swyngedouw, among others, have described the naturalization of metabolized and urbanized water in modern cities and how this has enduring effects on cities and human relationships with nature.¹¹ They employ Ondaatje’s discussion of men tunnelling, disturbing ground, and modernizing the city with pipes and sewers to allow for the speedy and beautiful flow of water that we expect when we turn on our taps.¹² Naturalization—that is, taking human constructions for granted and assuming they are “natural”—hides the power dynamics that create these constructions and make winners and losers in the struggle for access to water, and indeed to nature, such as in the form of healthy environments.¹³ However, a bridge is a technology different from that of a sewage treatment plant, dam, or fountain, which actively and materially touch the “nature” in question. Bridges help to avoid contact with “bad nature.”¹⁴ In the present case, the bridge helped people avoid an “uncontrollable” river, muddy trails, fog, and steep hills. While the avoidance documented here is material, the distance from the metabolized nature that is created with a bridge further increases the symbolic work

the technology does: remote objects often seem less real, and nature moves further towards image.¹⁵

The rate of change in the built form is different from that of nature, and while the built form is not unnatural,¹⁶ it “grows” nevertheless through an uneven development that serves specific political and social actors.¹⁷ By naturalizing urban “growth,” one relinquishes the power to illustrate how social inequities are produced.¹⁸ Dealing with material infrastructures can help to reveal how the political-economic context, coupled with (classed) cultural and aesthetic interests, is important to move projects temporally by slowing down construction dates or influencing projects’ spatial locations. While the debate about the Bloor Viaduct foreshadows the NIMBY politics of nearly a century later, one can see how political and social groups formed around class interests and local places, and how they used familiar tropes to promote these interests.¹⁹

The argument here is not meant to reimpose the binary of nature and culture, but to show how the spatial implications of this dialectic are played out as the differentiation between city (town) and country (township).²⁰ Country and city are excellent spatial correlates to the nature/culture divide that has long been discussed by feminists, a divide that is premised on the supposed naturalness of the country and the unnaturalness of the city.²¹ In this view, any form of nature, such as an urban park, appears as *what always was*, even if it is constructed by humans for humans.²² Complex and contradictory class hierarchies are embedded in ideas about the city and the country: the wealthy live in both the leafy enclaves on the inner city’s edges and in country homes while the poor reside in the crowded inner cities or eke out existences as rural farm labourers. Canadian collective identity is largely premised on a valorization of nature, thus carving out the histories of the relationship between nature and culture in urban places is uniquely important.²³

Historical Context: Toronto’s Politics and Infrastructure

In 1897 the City of Toronto was only sixty-three years old, although the official British colonial settlement of York dates back to 1793. According to the 1891 census, Toronto’s population was 181,216, and the majority of this population was born in Canada and lived in the central parts of the city, west of the Don River.²⁴ This number would rise and fall significantly between 1901 and 1911 as immigrant labourers arrived and then left on temporary worker programs, mainly to work in the construction industry helping to roll out the infrastructure for a growing nation.²⁵ By 1921 the population had risen to 521,893 and sites to the east of the Don River were increasingly being settled.²⁶

After the rapid industrialization, urbanization, and migration of the nineteenth century, urban living environments had been radically altered, and the social problems of crime, vice, and disease were becoming more obvious in increasingly dense city settings. Reformers tried to return to an ideal of urban life that had been “lost” in the industrializing years. These reformers

were romanticising a mythical sylvan past but trying to create it through a new urban future. As Mariana Valverde notes about reformers in English Canada, proponents of this reform often employed tropes of light, air, and water as natural elements that could “correct” the image of the supposedly crowded, dark, stale, dirty, city “slums.”²⁷ They used nature’s symbolic order as a model for righteousness. This project of “moral and social reform” focused on the newcomers and working-class people living in the inner city and attempted to change their living conditions, habits, and lifestyles in order to change the broader social situation.²⁸ A coincident project of urban reform considered improved municipal sanitary conditions, segregated land uses, and the strengthening of civic institutions as essential to the “progress” of the city, the nation, and the empire.²⁹ This scheme sought a mastered nature through “improving” disordered or mixed-used sites. The social and environmental conditions of the city were considered in symbolic and material terms by these wide-ranging social movements that were taking hold across North American urban centres.³⁰

Toronto’s municipal reform of 1895 transformed a loosely regulated system of urban governance, where many politicians had financial stakes in expanding the city limits, to a system with provincially legislated power invested in a Board of Control.³¹ The influential Citizens’ Civic Reform Committee, foreshadowing the local incarnations of the City Beautiful and City Functional movements in Toronto, was also created in this period. The South African War of 1899–1902, and more significantly the First World War from 1914 to 1918 also influenced the context of life in Toronto, the prospects for growth, and the need for infrastructure at home to help “the boys” overseas and defend the British Empire.

Originally, the bridges used to enter and exit the city to the east were located close to the lake, where the elevation differences between the banks of the river were the least. Both ice jams and the spring thaw were responsible for floods that destroyed several of the bridges over the Don River, and their reconstruction was a costly venture. The spring flood of 1850 destroyed the two bridges in the Toronto area, effectively halting east-west ground transportation until accommodations could be made.³² On 14 September 1878 the largest flood was recorded in the Toronto area. Twenty bridges south of Thornhill, a village thirty kilometres to the north, and all five bridges over the Don River (at Don and Danforth Road (present day Pottery Road), Don (Gerrard) Street, Don Bridge (Queen Street), South Park Street, and the Grand Trunk railway bridge (near Ashbridge’s Bay) were demolished in what must have been an awesome display of the force of flowing water (figure 1).³³ The cost of this reconstruction for the damage that occurred around the Don was estimated between \$200,000 and \$400,000.³⁴

Under the auspices of an urban engineering scheme known as the “Don Improvement”, the Don River was fully channelized by 1890 and the meanders in the lower half of the river were destroyed.³⁵ Although the Don Valley is the main topographic irregularity in the region, the Rosedale Ravine also separates



Source: Charles Sumner, *The Don Valley and Its Historical Landmarks* (Cardinal & Falgout, 1919).

Figure 1: Map of Toronto’s bridges before the turn of the twentieth century.

the core of the city from the affluent Rosedale neighbourhood to the north, which was accessible by several bridges: Governor’s (now a pedestrian bridge), Glen Road, and Sherbourne Street. As a result of the geography of the area by Bloor Street, in order to bridge the Don Valley, another bridge would cover Rosedale Ravine to the east. Until the Bloor Viaduct was built, the only way to get out of the city to the east was to either go north of the valley or south to Gerrard Street, or to descend into the valley, cross the Don and Danforth bridge, and continue along Don Mills Road (now Broadview Avenue), which climbed the east side of the valley. This route was often treacherous, especially

with the spring mud, and the still intermittent flooding of the Don River.

The Don Valley now socially structures the city into east and west sides. The historical settlement of York began to the west of the River Don on Lake Ontario. This site was sheltered by the “Toronto Island,” a peninsula formed from debris from the same retreating Wisconsinan glaciation that created the Don Valley.³⁶ While the French had established posts along the Humber River to the west in the eighteenth century, it was the Don Valley that created the favourable conditions of an enclosed harbour that were useful for security, and later shipping and industry. At the turn of the century the east side of the Don River was still underdeveloped, and several important families like the Davies and Playters had their cottages and country homes there.³⁷ By 1908, only the St. Lawrence ward extended to the east of the river. Population densities were still very low, although the downtown core on the west side was relatively densely settled. The villages of Chester and Todmorden on the east side of the valley were lightly populated with fewer than a thousand residents, and the main eastern thoroughfare in the northern area, Danforth Avenue, to which Bloor Street would connect after the viaduct's construction, was “a muddy and lightly used farm lane.”³⁸

The Planning and Construction of the Bloor Viaduct

The history of the Bloor Viaduct began in 1897 when Alderman Thomas Foster, “gentleman” of the second ward directly to the west of the Don Valley, claims he introduced the idea of extending Bloor Street eastward in Toronto City Council.³⁹ This motion did not exist in the council proceedings. However, its discussion in the newspapers signals that this idea was possibly not novel, but the next logical or “natural” thing to do in the growth of the city. Extending Bloor Street to meet Danforth Avenue with raised viaducts appears in the city council record in 1901, and consistently in the *Globe* and the *Star* newspaper record from 1906.⁴⁰ After 1906, the idea came up yearly in the aldermanic nominations and city council meetings and was consistently a contentious issue between Toronto and the surrounding York Township.⁴¹ The cost and its distribution between the city and the township were the most commonly used arguments against the bridge. The issue was raised in the *Globe* in 1906: “Ald. Chisholm asked that his work during the past four years be recognized in regard to the proposed Bloor street viaduct, the speaker states that it would improve lands in the country to a greater extent than those in the city, but legislation was now being sought by which the city and the country might each pay a part and if apportionment were made he thought the viaduct would be built.”⁴²

Chisholm argued that the city would pay more than the township (country), but the country would benefit more from the increased access to the market in the city. Territorial politics were important here: Chisholm was the incumbent of the first ward located directly to the east of the Don River, at the south end of the city. A viaduct to the north would diminish his ward's importance in the city by moving traffic flows away from the

traditional routes out of the city along the lake. A similar argument was made a year later:

At the recent conference of the City Board of Control with representatives of the township of York on the subject of the proposed viaduct along the Rosedale Ravine on the line of Bloor Street, very little progress was made toward a practical solution of a difficult problem. As Toronto would get no more traffic over the proposed bridge than it would get by other routes in its absence it is not at all likely that the City Council will ever incur a heavy expenditure for a public work of which the cost would far outweigh the utility. The chief part of the burden must, therefore, fall on the township, and, as its representatives at the conference inclined to the view that the expense should be met by those who are directly benefited, it would ultimately fall on a comparatively small area of country. Those who have equally good access to the city by other routes would certainly object to paying for this one.⁴³

The language in this second argument is particularly indicative about the characterization of the city and country, where the township is seen as benefitting from the bridge more than Toronto. The author noted that this problem was difficult, pointing to ongoing discussions about the bridge as a political issue that could define an election, and argued for a practical solution. The reference to the “small area of country” that would benefit from the bridge points to a static sense of the city, far different from the visions of planners were ready to unveil. Some technical planning aspects of the project were taken into account in these editorials, although the distribution of the costs of construction was given priority.

In 1909, recently elected Mayor Joseph Oliver named “the bridge over the River Don” one of the key “problems” in his tenure.⁴⁴ In his single year in office, the city also annexed the village of Chester, an area from Broadview to Donlands Avenues north of the Danforth. This set the stage for further urban growth as an important site of British immigrant settlement on the east side of the valley. On New Year's Day, 1910, the Bloor Street Viaduct By-law was “hopelessly beaten” in the annual ballot on budgetary spending, with a 77 per cent majority of 19,474 voters against the project.⁴⁵ The same vote ushered in Mayor George R. Geary, who, along with the Board of Control, contracted the New York engineering firm of Jacobs and Davies, Inc., to produce a report on the viability of a subway in the city to improve the flow of goods necessary for an expanding urban centre.

In the resulting report, *Street Railway Transportation in the City of Toronto*, Toronto was set in the context of London, Paris, Glasgow, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Montreal, among others, in terms of area, population, and how transit was used and funded.⁴⁶ There were three schemes in this report, and the first two highlighted the importance of subways in the transportation networks of growing cities. Both schemes included a steel viaduct as an integral part of the transit line and discussed a “double deck”: a level of bridge below the road surface where a track would serve a subway line and would have long-term savings as Toronto grew.⁴⁷ This vision of a growing city contrasts against the political discussions of limiting infrastructural development as a result of residential location. An extensive subway

plan was described in the report, but the only marks on sixth ward alderman F. S. Spence's copy are sums that calculate the cost of a Yonge Street subway that would run north and south, between Rosedale and the business district, without using the viaduct route. The report estimated the cost of the Viaduct alone at \$2,613,000.⁴⁸

Urban growth was naturalized in the report, which employed several metaphors like "healthy growth of the city," and suburbs as a "natural outcome" of a city's "stage of development," indicative of modernist planning, urban reform, and the City Beautiful and Functional movements. The report also provided perhaps the strongest ties to the moral reform movement's assertions about the troubles of crowding, and modernists' views of the benefits of suburbanization: "The borough of Manhattan in New York City has an average density of 150 [persons] per acre and a maximum of 700 per acre in the lower East Side, but this borough of the city is in a sense the antithesis of Toronto and almost devoid of true home life and to preserve and continue this condition in Toronto it is probably better to build transit lines than large apartment houses."⁴⁹

If Toronto wanted to avoid the urban moral crisis of a lack of a "true home life" that the authors saw in Manhattan, they should build out, not up. The evidence presented in the Jacobs and Davies report, through thirty-four figures in five appendices, with pages of detailed budgeting from an internationally known New York engineering firm, seems to be the hinge upon which opinions about the viaduct swung.

By the end of 1910, after four years in the headlines, the newspapers' editorial stances on the viaduct struck a clear divide. On one side, the *Globe* represented the views of elites, while on the other, at least according to the *Globe* itself, the *World* represented working-class, "public" views: "*The World* says: 'It would be of great interest to the ratepayers if *The Globe* and *The Star* would discover the real reasons of their opposition to the Bloor street viaduct. Whose ax is being ground at the expense of the Toronto citizens? What interest finds it necessary to line up the organs against the public?' The vote on the Bloor street viaduct by-law will be a sufficient answer to that insinuation."⁵⁰

In 1910, the plan failed to get budgetary approval. A year and another plan later (although the bridge was still to be made entirely of steel), the vote failed again. The influential, Rosedale-based Civic Guild "opposed the plan on the grounds that it would destroy the *natural* beauty of the area, impair the value of many existing properties, and be an inefficient link between the two localities [of the city and the township]."⁵¹ In many ways linking Rosedale to the township would be an affront to their elite sensibilities that rested on being distant from the business district to the south, and from the country to the east. Again, the *World* attacked opponents of the bridge: "The hostility ... [to the viaduct] is due to the influence of a little clique of members who live in Rosedale, and who imagine that its stately quiet is to be invaded."⁵²

After some budgetary, design, and planning changes, Toronto's

1912 New Year's Day by-law vote saw the Bloor Street Viaduct, with a publicized cost of \$1,783,333, approved by a slim margin of 1,319 votes out of a total electorate of 20,061.⁵³ On the same ballot a by-law was approved that would put a civic car line (streetcar) along the Danforth. After a recount reversed the approval, it turned out that the citizens of Toronto and the township had to wait another year for their bridge.

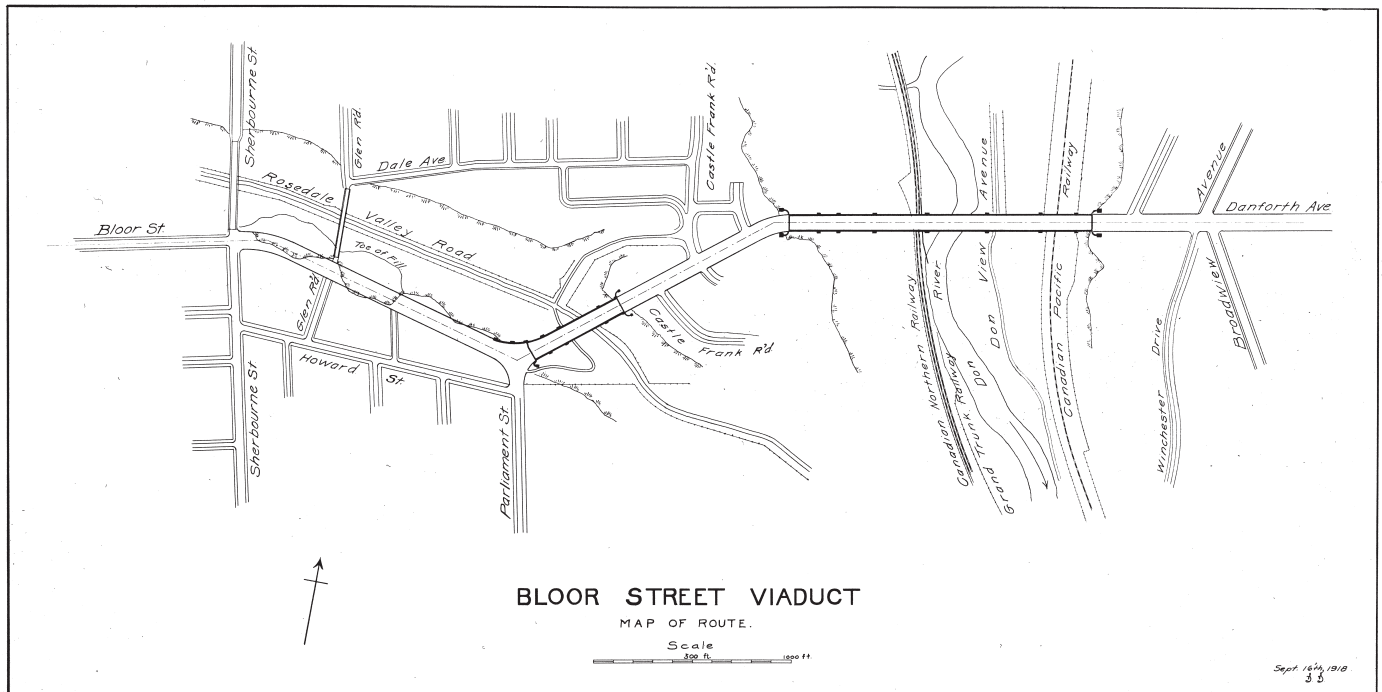
In June 1912, Roland Harris became the city engineer and public works commissioner. He was a popular administrator, whose presence in municipal politics in the period was widespread.⁵⁴ His vision for a modern city included the creation of the city photographer's office where he placed Arthur Goss, a key figure in memorializing Toronto's past through photographs illustrating monuments and everyday life.⁵⁵ Many of Goss's photographs have come to symbolize the modernizing city and were part of the archive that informed the image of the growing city.⁵⁶

In October 1912, Mayor Geary resigned from office and the runner-up in the 1910 election, Horatio Hocken, took over. In November, Harris came up with a revised version of the viaduct plan that included the double deck for Hocken's subway project that he hoped would be installed in his term.⁵⁷ One of the key differences in the 1912 plan was the influence of the City Beautiful movement through its local incarnation: the civic improvements committee founded in 1911,⁵⁸ and the Civic Guild, which had been offered the plan for comment and adjustment after it had panned the 1911 plan. This project was one of the very few instances where the committee and the guild, supported by local Rosedale elites, had any influence on the urban landscape.⁵⁹

John M. Lyle, one of the committee's designers, is credited with the "Terrace Plan," whereby the material from excavation for the foundations of the bridge in the Don Valley was used to change the topography of the valley where the Bloor section (first) was built, thus opening a more efficient and direct route across the valley (figure 2).⁶⁰

The new plan for the Don Section of the bridge involved a combination of concrete and steel, which satisfied both Harris who was vehemently against an entirely concrete bridge for engineering reasons, and the Rosedale residents who were sensitive to the appearance of their neighbourhood. The *Contract Record*, a Canadian technical engineering journal, noted the importance of design in 1914: "The character of the development of the district adjacent to this viaduct is a matter of great importance to the city, as the location forms a very desirable site for high-class residences. The adjoining district of Rosedale is occupied entirely by this type of residence and ranks high among the best residential districts of Toronto. In such a district it is essential that the architectural features of the structure be given the closest consideration."⁶¹

The implication of this argument was that a "low-class" area would not require an architecturally interesting or pleasant-looking bridge. It also buttresses the argument that Rosedale residents felt themselves superior to the township. The best



From 1918, submitted in series 172, fonds 200, City of Toronto Archives.

Figure 2: Map of Bloor Viaduct route, December 1918.

residential district in the city was not to be ruined through invoking moral reform language or accusations of poor character. The vote passed on 1 January 1913, but as a result of the recession that year and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, ground was not broken for the viaduct until 16 January 1915.⁶² This was a momentous time for the city: “At last Toronto was able to get on with the largest public works project ever undertaken by the city up to that time, and perhaps since.”⁶³

A consultant on the 1913 plan, Toronto architect Edmund Burke, is credited with the architectural design of the Don Section of the bridge: a five-arched Beaux-Arts style with broad sidewalks, two traffic lanes, two sets of streetcar rails, niches for lookout points, and the double deck for the subway (figure 3).⁶⁴ The engineer was Thomas Taylor. The construction of the bridge was not without its own share of politics, with the costs increasing slowly to \$2,480,349, more than \$700,000 over the original estimate. Tenders for the contract to build the Rosedale Section appeared in the *Contract Record* in 1914, where the suitability of a “noisy” steel bridge was discussed. The engineering of reinforced concrete was still in its infancy at the turn of the century, and several tenders were put out for designs in concrete for the viaduct, but the rumour was that this action was a ploy to illustrate how unviable an entirely concrete bridge would be.⁶⁵

In 1917, Arthur Keelor produced a lithograph for war bonds that depicted the Bloor Viaduct under construction in the background, and several brawny men hard at work in the foreground.⁶⁶ The poster is vividly coloured, there is scaffolding around the concrete piers of the viaduct, smoke rising from machines on the valley floor, and several other men are digging

with their shirt-sleeves rolled up and wearing suspenders (figure 4). “Buy Victory Bonds ... for Industrial Expansion,” the poster urged, exemplifying the shift of the discourse around the bridge from being merely about the transportation of local folk from the township to the city to being of national importance for the nationwide transportation of goods needed for the war effort. During the later years of the bridge’s building, the discourse about overcoming nature in the name of progress for the city slipped into one that asserted that modernity was essential for the empire.⁶⁷ Rational knowledge and command of landscapes was integral to the project of empire and the process of imperialism. The *Canadian Engineer* reported that this new bridge was “probably the largest viaduct in the Empire,”⁶⁸ and the bragging rights to a bridge of this importance were very important to an insecure city of Toronto.

On 29 October 1917, the Rosedale Section of the bridge opened for traffic. A year later, on 18 October 1918, the Don Section opened for vehicular traffic, but with limited fanfare and publicity because of the war. Similarly, the festivities were cut short as public health officials were concerned about the crowd and the contagious Spanish flu, another *natural* aspect of the city, which was reaching epidemic proportions and caused a ban from all “places of amusement.”⁶⁹ The first streetcar crossed the viaduct on 12 December 1918. The entire viaduct project was completed on 23 August 1919 when workers macadamized the Sherbourne Section.⁷⁰ As Canada’s ties to Britain were still strong, at least in a cultural sense, when Prince Edward toured Ontario in 1919 the city controllers decided to honour him by officially changing the name of the bridge to the Prince Edward



Bloor Viaduct, Don Section, 19 November 1923, item 882, subseries 10, series 372, fonds 200, City of Toronto Archives.

Figure 3: Juxtaposition of nature and culture in the construction of the Bloor Viaduct.

Viaduct.⁷¹ However, this was a symbolic effort, as the prince was not in Toronto for the dedication, and in the newspaper and popular usage the bridge was, and is still known as the Bloor Viaduct.⁷²

Local Implications of Discourses of Nature and Culture

In Ondaatje's novel *R. C. Harris* is portrayed as a city builder with grandiose visions, akin to Gilgamesh in his lion's skin, although by reputation he was a much meeker man. Although Toronto's elite probably thought of their city as ascendant, in the period Toronto was still known as a country town, with some urban excitement, but nowhere near the dynamism of Chicago or New York. "Dealing with" nature in the process of urbanization has been the hallmark of the last 150 years in Canada. In a country whose national imaginary is so strongly tied to the idea of a pristine nature,⁷³ the concept of urbanity seems often misplaced or contradictory. Yet this presence of both symbolic and material aspects of city and country, or culture and nature, is where urban lives were lived and urban forms constructed.

Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* is both a historical referent and artistic inspiration to tease out the implications of discursive formations and notice how nature and culture were reconciled in the life of a labourer. Reading Ondaatje's passage that opens this article illustrates how this bridge blended ideas about nature, culture, and labour, and crystallized them into a monument that remains in the landscape and has both symbolic and material implications. First, the bridge was symbolic of progress, a massive engineering project that in its grand scale and advanced architectural style and beauty represented the fantasy of modernity: "The bridge goes up in a dream." The fantasy of empire was also premised on dreams and projections reproduced through discourses and material instances.⁷⁴ The Bloor Viaduct was also essential for the transportation network of "traffic, water, and electricity" and "trains that have not even been invented yet," indicative of a modern city with quickly moving goods, which were material manifestations of the more quickly moving capital.⁷⁵ Likewise, empires were dependent on transportation and shipping back from the colonies in order to maintain their control and wealth.⁷⁶ Food and raw materials from

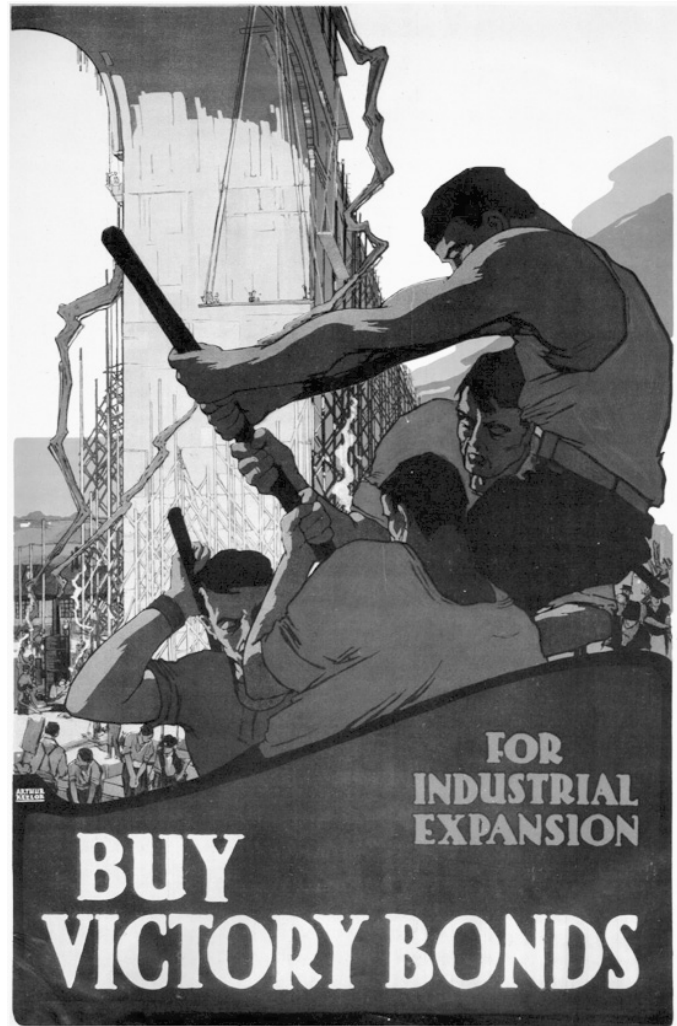
the country could be more easily brought into the city for consumption by the increasingly large working classes and used in manufacturing processes of the urban industries.

The working classes are important to Ondaatje. He notes that progress takes time—"day and night"—and labour—"they are always working—horses and wagons and men." The passage suggests how technology, nature, and humanity are fused in the mantra of the construction of the bridge. Similarly, this work is counted, photographed, and commodified: "45,000 cubic yards are excavated" and "4,000 photographs" are taken, as the underlying mechanism behind modernization is economic advancement by those who have capital invested in the construction industry. As Mona Domosh has discussed about the American economic empire, images are often essential in the construction of a transcendent vision and help in the promotion of a singular discourse across space.⁷⁷

Finally, humans are manipulated in the process of progress as the boundaries between them and their equipment fades: "A man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame. Drill smoke in his hair. A cap falls into the valley, gloves are buried in stone dust." In this process of becoming their labour, and throughout the rest of the chapter, we see how the labourer Temelcoff is aware of the space he inhabits as he builds. Ondaatje writes that Temelcoff "knows the panorama of the valley better than any engineer. Like a bird. Better than Edmund Burke, the bridge's architect, or Harris, better than the surveyors of 1912 when they worked blind through the bush."⁷⁸ Temelcoff represents a move back to nature. He sees himself as a bird, removed from the calculating mental labour of the engineers, planners, and politicians who saw the bridge as a monument to their investment in the development of modernity, and the gross masculinity that accompanied that project. The skilled labourers on the other hand, as we can read throughout Ondaatje's novel, saw their participation in the construction of the bridge in much different terms. Their alienation seems less, for they seem more in touch with the material world that they are using to create the infrastructure projects that distance the rest of the city residents from nature. While Prince Edward's name was attached to the bridge, it operated in the field of a symbolic class gesture between the royalty of the empire and the elite controllers of the colonial city, whose citizens did not even participate in an opening ceremony or see the news widely publicized in the papers.

Conclusion

This article has examined the context in which the Bloor Viaduct was built, using the planning and newspaper record, paying particular detail to the language in these sources in order to illustrate how the bridge was effective in both dividing and bringing together the country and the city. The symbolic and material domination of nature by culture allowed the "progress" of empire to be made. This case study contributes to the historical work in urban political ecology literature by examining a technology more spatially distant from "nature" than other infrastructures, such as dams, sewer treatment facilities, and tunnels.⁷⁹ Similarly,



Reproduced in Marc Choko, *Canadian War Posters 1914–1918, 1939–1945, 1959–1945* (Ottawa: Meridian Canada Communication Group Publishing, 1991) 123

Figure 4: Reproduction of Arthur Keelor's "Buy Victory Bonds for Industrial Expansion" (1917).

documenting the historical constructions of nature and culture in urban places is significantly underrepresented in the Canadian urban context.⁸⁰ Emphasizing the spatial complexities of these concepts through the narratives of politicians and labourers through history and imagination provides a richly textured account that can help us to question our assumptions.

Likewise, this research has added to the literature on the use of architecture and infrastructure in the construction of empire through cities. By highlighting how this bridge became a symbol of the conquering of nature, this article shows that the colonial domination of the "land" did not stop with the exhaustion of the bulk of the natural resources, such as timber and furs, that first attracted the imperial powers to the country. The dedication of the bridge to Prince Edward as an afterthought is in line with the influence of the First World War on the connections between Toronto and the metropole of London. These arguments were accentuated with Ondaatje's lyrical prose and his discussion

of the beauty in space, and the connections between manual workers and nature (their lack of alienation) serves as an interesting avenue for further research.

Ultimately, this project was the beginnings of unravelling a very complicated knot of ideas that surround the urbanization of nature, the metabolism of urban nature, and the ways that people treat or define nature in the context of modernity, or even postmodernity. Examining these ideas through places within the city and the country, or town and township, can provide evidence for understanding current sentiments towards nature and culture. By dealing with the material realities, and the multi-layered histories with attention to different voices, and using different analytical methods, we can start to see where threads have been woven into the urban fabric which remain, and also where the threads have been pulled out. If a more inclusive urban historical story is to be written, and if we are to imagine new potential futures, we should start with infrastructure, and examine how it became taken for granted, and how it actually holds fragments of answers to questions about nationalism, identity, and place.

Notes

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- 14 Kaika, *City of Flows*, 10.
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