This dissertation explores how Trans-Canada Air Lines (1937-1965) built, maintained, and subverted what I call the “modern envirotechnical nation” in its public-facing discourse. Euro-Canadian national identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been rooted in both the environment—Canada was imagined as very big and very cold—and communications technologies that allowed settlers to traverse long distances and transcend harsh climates. At first blush, these appear both contradictory and self-reinforcing. How can we, for example, celebrate Canada’s size while at the same time technologically annihilating distance? Although clearly commensurate, environmental and technological nationalisms must work for that commensurability, especially in modern, high modern, and late/postmodern Canada. I refer to this work, as well as the discursive products of that work, the “modern envirotechnical nation.”

I work mainly with the airline’s public-facing material, including advertisements, publicity images, media reports, press releases, and speeches by executives and sympathetic politicians to explore this phenomenon. As a state airline, TCA was beholden to taxpayers and worked with government advertisers, which meant that it forwarded something of a state-sanctioned narrative of environment, technology, and nation and used its discourse to express larger anxieties about what it meant to be a modern Canadian. TCA worked throughout its first two decades to maintain the modern Canadian envirotechnical nation in this material. Ultimately, it was unable to reconcile the role of air travel in creating new relationships between space, place, time, and the everyday experience of mobility with this paradigm as high-powered jets took Canadians faster and farther than the “modern envirotechnical nation” would allow. I treat air travel in Canada as a high-modern megaproject, a state enterprise designed to forward collective visions of nature, technology, and nation through the implementation of large-scale infrastructure. Therefore, this dissertation brings together the historical study of modernity, business, and the relatively new field of “envirotech.” Bridging environmental history and the history of technology, “envirotech” sits at the nexus of nature, culture, technology, and power, allowing for a multivalent analysis of technological systems as mediators for human experiences with their environments. I push the boundaries of “envirotech” by interrogating the role of technology in changing perceptions of the environment; TCA’s public-facing articulations of the “modern envirotechnical nation” represented Canadian environments not just how they were, but how it ought to and appeared to be to the airline’s passengers.