

WHERE HAS "REAL" NATURE GONE, ANYWAY?: ECOCRITICISM, CANADIAN WRITING AND THE LURES OF THE VIRTUAL*

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers an approach to ecocriticism in the context of contemporary English Canadian literature and culture. It analyzes definitions of the national identity in the past three decades in connection with Canada's real and/or imaginary wilderness. Following a period of dismantlement of such associations, a period characterized by the rise of a fundamentally urban multiculturalism in Canadian literature, the ascent of ecocriticism in the 1990s might be interpreted as a conservative move towards the recuperation of the unified national metaphor the country's association with the wilderness seemed to provide. But, is there anything Canadian about ecocriticism? What could Canadian writers and critics contribute to it? To answer these questions, the essay will scrutinize various moments of the metaphor in criticism and fiction, along with changing concepts, in the age of technology, of nature and of our relation to it.

KEY WORDS: Ecocriticism, Canadian literature, nation, wilderness, technology, feminism, post-colonialism, aboriginal writing.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo ofrece un acercamiento a la ecocrítica en el contexto de la literatura y la cultura anglocanadiense contemporánea. Analiza las distintas definiciones de la identidad nacional en las últimas tres décadas en conexión con la naturaleza canadiense real o figurada. Después de un período de desmantelamiento de estas asociaciones, período caracterizado por el auge de un multiculturalismo fundamentalmente urbano, la aparición de la ecocrítica en los años 90 pudiera ser interpretada como una reacción conservadora para recuperar la metáfora de unidad nacional que la naturaleza proporcionaba. Pero, ¿hay algo intrínsecamente canadiense en la ecocrítica? ¿Cuál sería la contribución de escritores y críticos canadienses al campo? Para responder a estas preguntas, el ensayo escruta varios momentos en el uso de la metáfora en la producción crítica y creativa, frente a conceptos cambiantes sobre el medio natural y nuestra propia relación con él en la era de la tecnología.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ecocrítica, literatura canadiense, nación, naturaleza, tecnología, feminismo, post-colonialismo, escritura aborigen.



In his interesting essay, “Beyond Nature/Writing: Virtual Landscapes Online, in Print, and in ‘Real Life,’” H. Lewis Ulman discusses the limits between the real and the virtual dimensions of contemporary life, presenting a challenging view of the real *as* virtual, and arguing against the common perception of virtual *reality* as a threat to *real* reality. Drawing on Braudillard’s notions of hyper-reality, Ulman argues that VR is increasingly becoming part of our daily life to the point of defining our contemporary experience of it. Moreover, the transformation of the physical world into a virtual one has been for long a common practice of any culture: “After all,” he writes, “belief in magic has in many cultures and times transformed the natural world into a magical place, occupied by the real (that is, material) talismans and (to those outside the belief system) imaginary presences” (344). This view, Ulman continues, has important implications for ecocriticism, since technology

behooves us to discover what imaginative and conceptual resources we need to construct ethical and healthy relationships between digital and material worlds, just as ecocritics have been working to establish such relationships between textual and material worlds. Indeed, the blurring and interanimation of symbolic and material worlds raises important questions for ecocriticism [...]. How do our experiences of material landscapes inform our experiences of symbolic landscapes—and vice versa? How do we distinguish virtual landscapes from real ones and establish ethical relationships in or to both? In sum, how can our symbolic approximations of the material world help us sustain relationships to that world that avoid disastrous or oppressive consequences for ourselves and the other species with which we live?” (Ulman 345)

By explicitly connecting the discourses of technology and ecology, Ulman is dismantling radical ecology’s typical claim to material reality, and therefore to the authenticity of experience, as well as probing technology’s frequent association with virtuality, and thus with a second-order dimension of experience. This conscious blending of ontological categories seems especially relevant in the case of Canadian literature and culture, where definitions of the national identity in the 1970s were often attempted in connection with Canada’s real and/or imaginary wilderness. Following a period of dismantlement of such associations, a period characterized by the rise of a fundamentally urban multiculturalism in Canadian literature, the ascent of ecocriticism in the 1990s might be interpreted as a conservative move towards the recuperation of the unified national metaphor the country’s association with the wilderness seemed, at least for some, to provide.

Yet, given the universal tone of much ecocritical thinking, it soon became unclear whether such an approach should retain a national focus. Or, in other

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words, is there anything Canadian about ecocriticism? What could Canadian writers and critics contribute to it? On the one hand, it may be argued that the rise of this critical school in Canada replicates the country's conflictive relationship with the United States. As Susie O'Brien has expressed, ecocriticism as such, despite (or because of) its globalizing impetus, *is* an American invention. On the other, the existence of a rich ecocritical tradition in Canada, which is in turn radically linked to the national, cannot be underestimated or denied: "By exploring this conjunction in a comparative framework," O'Brien argues, "it is possible to consider not just why some nationalist mythologies nurture ecocritical thinking more effectively than others, but also how the principles of ecocriticism might be adapted to reflect the importance of cultural context" (18-19). The aim of this essay is to analyze possible ways in which ecocriticism can provide a useful discourse to address, read and interpret literature and culture in contemporary Canada. I will scrutinize various moments of the wilderness as metaphor in criticism and fiction, along with changing concepts, in the age of technology, of nature and of our relation to it.

Twenty eight years have already gone since D.M.R. Bentley, in his famous essay "A New Dimension: Notes on the Ecology of Canadian Poetry," called for an ecological approach to the national poetic forms and techniques which would "cast into a new relief its fabled 'mapleness' and 'mooseness,' to demonstrate that poetry written in Canada, like the flora and fauna (not to say the people) that have migrated, survived, and evolved here, displays morphological qualities that are both distinctively regional and distinctively Canadian" (Bentley 4). At the time, such a proposal meant both a continuation of and a reaction against Northrop Frye's well-known construction of Canadianness in terms of the fear of the landscape. It implied a continuation in that Bentley's argument seemed to stress and confirm the validity of the search for a national(ist) identity and to acknowledge the centrality of the Canadian landscape in such a project. Like Frye's notion of the national identity, Bentley's was based on an intrinsic connection between the country and its nature: the Canadian wilderness in a *real*, literal or material, sense. Most importantly, it acknowledged the great power of a mythical dimension of Canadian nature, a dimension that has proved tremendously productive for the national culture and literature and often more powerful than the real one: the Canadian wilderness in a *virtual*, figurative or metaphorical, sense.

It is at that level of the virtual or metaphorical, where Frye's well-known conclusion identifies "a tone of deep terror" in Canadian poetry's recurrent representations of nature, a fear which is not produced by the actual dangers and discomforts of the wilderness (of which there are, I am sure, many), but rather by the poet's emotional response to it, "a terror of the soul at something that these things manifest" (1965, 830). And in this, Bentley's call for an ecological approach to Canadian literature may have represented a radical break with the dominant discourse about the national, putting forward an altogether new relationship to the Canadian wilderness based as much on confrontation and survival as on the possibility of identification with the natural landscape. The central question was: How do we define Canada other than as a country of "vast and empty spaces"? (Gorjup).



In his search for alternative metaphors to approach the Canadian mind, yet without losing sight of the real and metaphorical powers of Canadian nature, Bentley may have initiated the discourse of ecocriticism in Canada. Preceding Bentley, although often unacknowledged, were the works of very many Canadian writers who did not contribute to create an image of Canadianness as either void of meaning or filled with unknown threats. Following him, works by younger authors, and especially by women (Thomas, Marlatt, Michaels) and aboriginal peoples of Canada (Armstrong, Brant, King, Robinson) are consciously writing against that tradition in ways that escape the paradox (Gorjup). In fact, the 1980s marked the beginning of a new Canadian production that clearly moved away from the strong nationalist import and into international, transnational or even post-national arenas.¹

Against hierarchical and oppositional models of relationship with nature, then, critical, creative and theoretical alternatives have sprung in the past three decades that point to a reconfiguration of the national literature. And in that context, ecocriticism, a discourse that searches to break the anthropocentrism leading to the commodification of nature, has become unquestionably prominent. As an approach to literature, it would involve not only the study of the representation of nature in literary works, but also the application of an ecological perspective to literary studies.² Additionally, ecocriticism can be located right at the center of the discourse of sustainability that is becoming central to all disciplines, including politics and economics. Today, as Linda Hutcheon suggests (“Eruptions of Postmodernity”), Frye’s fear of nature has turned into a fear for nature, and the literary and artistic production of contemporary Canada shows a high degree of ecological concern, often enacting self-conscious discussion of environmental issues and proposing different alternative ways towards nature. Finally, its advocacy of a spiritual approach to the environment has placed it in the foreground of alternative forms of thinking both nature and literature other than as resource. It is by definition a hybrid form of criticism and calls for high interdisciplinarity.

In the larger context, a number of difficulties, however, need to be addressed. In the first place, one must admit that the question of methodology is still a soft point, and it is rather unclear whether ecocriticism should be associated with a “unified, ecological field theory” for literature (Bentley 4), with identifiable interpretative procedures and techniques. Most importantly, does ecocriticism imply, by

¹ Yet, for some critics, the 1980s represent the end, rather than the beginning, of an era. In his edition of Jack McClelland’s letters, Sam Solecki, for instance, regrets the post-nationalist mood of the period and mourns for the nationalist impetus of the 1960s, which had by then become “either a spent political force or had been co-opted by the feel-good North American multiculturalism” (260). From this perspective, Bentley’s proposal could also be interpreted as a conservative move to rescue a dying nationalism from the rising multicultural force.

² Many critics have recently demonstrated ways of thinking ecocritical practices other than in purely thematic terms (see, for instance, Laurie Ricou, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files and Salal*).

definition, a rejection of the post-structuralist tenets? Does it mark, as some critics have argued, “the return of the referent”? These questions are of special interest in Canada, where it was the irruption of postmodernism that finally brought its literature to (inter)national recognition (Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern*), and where the most prominent instances of ecocritical writing in the country seem to embrace postmodern indeterminacy and have often adopted a deconstructive tone (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, Marlatt, *Taken*, Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*). In looking at the possible encounters between ecological thinking and literary studies, Dominic Head identifies an initial incompatibility between the principles of deep ecology (essentialist by nature) and post-structuralism (with its anti-essentialist thrust). Head concludes that ecocriticism “can intervene only in current debates about literary studies through a direct response to the implications of postmodernity”. Yet this happens at a price, for “such a response would seem to necessitate a compromise on ecocentric values” (38). Head’s view, however, is based on a common but arguable identification of postmodernism as complicit with environmental degradation in its abandonment of the “real” and its exclusive focus on the textual, an argument to which I wish to turn briefly.

The concept of “textual pollution” provides an interesting pivotal point to discuss the possible associations between ecocriticism and postmodernity, since many well-known ecocritics have accused the latter, and post-structuralism, of having provoked it, with its tendency to textual narcissism (see, for instance, Buell, *The Future*): “This aspect of semiotic excess,” writes Will Slocombe in this regard, “buries the real world under a pile of words” (493). Slocombe elaborates further:

To use a parallel from economics, the ‘referential’ market has been flooded by an unrestricted supply of symbols until all symbols are devalued: the distinction between sign and referent collapses into a rampant textuality that no longer signifies anything. This is ‘symbolic pollution’, not in the sense that the pollution is not real, but in the sense that it is very real and symbols cause it. (Slocombe 495)

From that perspective, the assumption that ecocriticism is free from producing sign pollution seems as naïve as the belief in its unobtrusive access to essence, authenticity, to the “real” thing. Ecocriticism’s self-claimed connection to the real world, Slocombe maintains,

fails to account for the fact that academic literary discourse —the practice of writing about texts— is always already a second-order image in Baudrillard’s terms, masking and ‘de-naturing’ a profound reality. Relating ecocritical literature to ‘socially-constituted systems’, a recurring tenet of ecocriticism, therefore ignores the fact that nature is itself reified within those social systems, and that ecocriticism is merely another social (academic) system and merely another reification of nature. We do not access the truth through academic discourse; we merely theorize another, better model of simulating it. (Slocombe 502)

There is no other way, that is, but the way of language. Besides, given its undeniably interdisciplinary nature, ecocriticism could (and *does*) swiftly draw for



its methods on other contemporary critical discourses. That is in fact the case in Canada, where much ecocritical production is linked to theoretical discourses that, although stemming from and exploiting the postmodern dissolution of the Cartesian subject, thus representing a challenge to anthropocentrism, intersect at the same time with social movements which vindicate a revaluation of otherness, and thus, at least implicitly, move towards biocentrism. Ecofeminism, seen as the confluence of ecology and gender issues, occupies one of those positions. Ecological postcolonialism, especially in these times of postcolonial “descent” (Slemon), and particularly as it relates to aboriginal approaches to nature, represents another. They make two of the various contesting grounds from which contemporary writers and critics are exploring notions of nature and Canadianness.

That Northrop Frye’s construction of the national identity was fraught with his own biased reading of Canadian poetry has been sufficiently discussed and well argued by feminist and ecofeminist critics today. According to Diana Relke, for instance, Frye’s almost total reliance on Canadian poetry by men, and particularly on E.J. Pratt’s, marked by the poet’s harsh childhood in an isolated turn-of-the-century Newfoundland village, determined his seminal theory of Canadian identity. “As a young man,” Relke notes,

Frye fell under the spell of Pratt’s work and regarded it as the sum of all that had gone before it; as the years passed he also began to see it as the prophecy of all that came later. However, Canadian poetry by women tended overwhelmingly to refute Frye’s terrifying view of nature as “other” and irreconcilably opposed to human consciousness; hence the work of women poets either remained on the peripheries of Canadian myth criticism or was subjected to the imposition of this dualistic way of knowing nature. (Relke 25)

A gender perspective of Canadian literature would have definitely revealed a different approach to nature and, therefore, alternative national myths. Relke’s proposal consists of an archival exercise of looking back at the Canadian tradition with an open mind to rewrite it, searching for the rich ecological projection of the works of such poets as Isabella Crawford, Dorothy Livesay, Phyllis Webb, and the more contemporary Daphne Marlatt:

In short, these poets offered intersubjective ways of seeing and knowing the world and new ways of resolving the conflict that arises out of a perception of reality as turning on an infinite series of hierarchically arranged oppositions, the most fundamental of which is the opposition between male and female and, by extension, between culture and nature. In this way, these poets are the inheritors of a tradition that began with Crawford. (Relke 33)

In fiction, I would add, female writers in Canada from all regions and backgrounds, from Marian Engel to Aritha van Herk, from Daphne Marlatt to Kristjana Gunnars, from Gail Anderson-Dargatz to Eden Robinson, have repeatedly and very self-consciously undermined the oppositional, androcentric model of the “Canadian imagination,” articulating, in its turn, a myriad of possible ways of



thinking the (female) human as natural and in nature.³ This, however, does not necessarily imply an uncritical celebration of “women in/as nature.” Most of the writers I have mentioned seem aware of the dangers of feminist practices that idealize the natural/maternal connection, as well as of the possibility of inadvertently reproducing patriarchal patterns of relationship with nature. It is interesting to point out, in this context, how a novel such as Marian Engel’s *Bear*, initially celebrated by nationalist critics as paramount instance of such an identification between women (as the national subject) and the Canadian wilderness, is now rather seen as conveying the very impossibility of such an ideal identification, since the protagonist, Lou, and the bear ultimately fail to build a satisfactory relationship of equality. Instead, a gender reversal of roles happens between them which ironically replicates the abusive patriarchal/imperialist rapport to woman and nature: “He served her. As long as she made her stool beside him in the morning, he was ready whenever she spread her legs to him. He was rough and tender, assiduous, patient, infinitely, it seemed to her, kind” (Engel 119).

Already in the 1980s, women writers and critics were rereading the initial interpretations of Engel’s book, writing back with further ideas, footnoting and opening the enigmatic novel up to different meanings about the foresaid relationship between women and nature. A radical contribution to this debate, Aritha van Herk’s *No Fixed Address*, for instance, plays a metafictional game by introducing a woman and a bear in its plot. The novel follows the life of its protagonist, Arachne, in her different phases of breaking with patriarchal structures/strictures of behaviour and thought. The argument moves from the social to the natural as Arachne escapes from her urban existence and drives to a wilderness setting whose description resounds with a platonic identification between the female and the natural, and whose climax is found in the episode of the Wild Woman, a woman-shaped stone “spread to infinite sky, to a prairie grassland’s suggestion of paradise, a woman open-armed on the highest hill in that world” (van Herk 232).

Everything seems to point out to a profound, unquestionable connection between the female protagonist and the wild landscape, explicitly symbolized by the woman-shaped stone. Yet the fusion is just momentary, Arachne moves on and drives north until she disappears from the story, literally becoming the missing subject of the novel’s four “notebooks.” With this radical ending, the novel breaks not only the reader’s expectations about the above identification but also its underlying binarism. It is time, the novel seems to argue, to look for alternative ways of approaching female subjectivity in society, nature and beyond.

Ecofeminism may well represent one of those alternative options, and, in fact, the alliance between ecology and gender issues has proved to be one of the

³ The essays contained in the groundbreaking collection *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, edited by Shirley Newman and Smaro Kamboureli, and published in 1986, represented such an incredible variety of feminist approaches to nature within the national literature.

most fruitful in recent years, producing an important body of theory, criticism and artistic practice aimed at dismantling the structures of (and the subtle complicities between) imperialism, anthropocentrism and patriarchal thought (see Garrard 23-27). In Canada, the recent publication of works such as *This Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment* (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands) has set an incredibly rich ground for the combined analysis of gender and the environment across a wide range of disciplines and fields. As the editors affirm in their introduction:

In the midst of an environmentalist critique of resource exploitation and toxic imperialism, then, feminists have an important role to play in issuing a reminder about the complex gendered dimensions of Canadian environmental history, literature, and economics. An understanding of the complex and diverse relationship between women and the natural environment will contribute to a deeper understanding of the environmental challenges facing Canada. (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands xii-xiii)

Many contemporary texts by Canadian women contribute to this type of research by scrutinizing the gendered dimensions of environmental history. Gail Anderson-Dargatz's *The Cure for Death by Lightning*, for instance, a novel about the life of a homestead family in the British Columbia interior during World War II, probes to its very exhaustion the patriarchal approach to both women and nature in pioneer societies as "'resources' for male exploitation, overused, undervalued, and denied full subject status" (Hessing, Raglon and Sandilands xiii). The idea is clearly expressed in the text through the character of the father, his view towards his wife, daughter and farm animals. By warning his daughter to stay away from bulls and male dogs at the time of menstruation, his animalization of the female body turns against himself and becomes a sign of his own wild uncontrollable impulses. But the most graphic instance of the aggressiveness of his farming methods, as well as of his reduction of the female species to the reproductive function, is to be found in the painful episode leading to the death of the cow Gertrude, an episode, moreover, which illustrates well the environmental implications of misogyny, uncannily foreshadowing the risky manipulations of nature into which the meat industry has entered today.⁴

If the confluence between ecology and feminism promises to become a productive field, so has the potentiality of a convergence between postcolonial and ecological projects in the specific Canadian context been put forward with convincing arguments (see, for instance, Hutcheon). On the one hand, an ecocentric perspective on past and present forms of colonialism would push the traditional

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of these implications in Anderson-Dargatz's novel, see my essay "Blood Road Leads to Promise." Additionally, a remarkable fictionalized account of such manipulations can be found in Ruth Ozeki's *My Years of Meat*, a must-read for those of us interested in the intersections between ecology, feminism and literature.

postcolonial anthropocentrism to the consideration of often-ignored biocentric issues. On the other, approaching ecocriticism from a postcolonial position would introduce a much-needed cross-cultural understanding of environmental issues, as well as undermine the potential neo-imperialist intention often hidden behind ecology's universalistic claims (Huggan). The sound success in the market of two relatively recent Canadian novels, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) and Barbara Gowdy's *The White Bone* (1998), may be symptomatic of the public acceptance of such a biocentric turn in postcolonial studies. Set in India, in the Pacific Ocean, in the African plains or in Canada, these novels directly aim at the anthropocentric system of thought by introducing the narrative point of view of animals as the central characters (Gowdy) and/or as central plot-makers (Martel).⁵

Recent postcolonial-oriented research on aboriginal cultures has also contested the traditional vision of Canadian literature, unveiling it as the mark of white male anxiety about feeling constantly out of place in the new territory. Frye's garrison mentality has been seen, in this context, as a metaphoric way of expressing the white settler's sense of alienation from the land, and probably, the sense of guilt derived from it (see Francis 233). And in this issue, both Frye and Bentley, who talks exclusively about imported and transplanted forms, display at least a telling obliviousness, if not a clear bias against, the cultures that preceded them and that had figured the wilderness before them. Today, we are gradually learning how the different aboriginal cultures of Canada approached nature in their own terms. In the metaphorical plane, traditionally unfamiliar with a Cartesian division of the world between subject and object, or with the Enlightenment separation between nature and culture, they have always lived by a holistic, pantheistic notion of life *in* nature. In the material plane, the present debates about Canadian natural resources, about sustainability and the preservation of the environmental richness of the country are not only economic debates, but have also become moral issues, especially after the consideration of aboriginal demands for self-government and land rights (Hutcheon, "Eruptions" 147).

Whether they choose to represent the aboriginal subject in a perfect harmony with nature, thus sometimes playing with and/or reproducing (white) stereotypes of aboriginality, or to figure the Canadian wilderness as a rich ground for gothic possibilities, with which they write back to and rewrite the so-called foundational myths, the number of First Nation writers who self-consciously include an ecocritical perspective in their work has always been outstanding. They are "writers who, either through mythic, psychic, or geographic channels, have identified a landscape or environment as intrinsic to their own conceptualization of the self" (Drees 2002, 3). This process has to do with the external as well as with the

⁵ Still, whether they are effective in their attempt to destabilize anthropocentrism, or rather achieve a postcolonial-oriented revival of the fabulist genre could be a matter of discussion elsewhere.





internal, with the real and with the imaginary place. Accordingly, they “have initiated a movement toward a form of literary decolonization and environmental awareness in which the healing process involves remapping external and internal terrains” (Dreese 21). Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* (2000) is worth commenting at some detail in what follows, since it offers a rich example not only of this alliance between the literary and the environmental, but also of the possibilities presented by transcending the Manichean conflict between Natives and colonizers and focusing on a land-based transcultural approach to contemporary aboriginal identities. “Eden Robinson is not writing back,” argues J.A. Wainwright in this sense, “but *on*” (117).

On the one hand, with its analysis of gender relations within a small Haisla community of the West Coast, this novel works from the local to the global to reveal the extent to which women in traditional rural cultures have a privileged knowledge of the natural environment they live in, since, as Carolyn Merchant has explained:

As producers and reproducers of life, women in tribal and traditional cultures over the centuries have had highly significant interactions with the environment. As gatherers of food, fuel, and medicinal herbs; fabricators of clothing; planters, weeders, and harvesters of horticultural crops; tenders of poultry; preparers and preservers of food; and bearers and caretakers of young children, women’s intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life in every global human habitat. (Merchant 16)

Through the character of the narrator’s grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, who teaches the narrator the secrets of wild berries, medicinal plants and oolichan grease, the transmission of traditional knowledge seems guaranteed. Thimbleberries, Lisa learns from her grandmother in her berry picking trips, come out a little later and have a sharper smell than salmonberries, which have “[s]errated, raspberry-like leaves unfurled as the shoots became stalks, then bushes” (Robinson 76). On the other hand, Ma-ma-oo ancestral ecological knowledge lives side by side her addiction to popular North American TV serials, “The Young and the Restless,” “All My Children” or “Dynasty,” the passing of botanical information or traditional cooking tips often interspersed in the narration with comments on the televised plot:

“Lauren,” [Ma-ma-oo would] shout at the TV, “leave him, he’s no good for you! *Na’*. What a crazy woman.”

“Mother,” Mick would say, “It’s only TV. Everyone’s stupid on TV.”

“I know. I know. *Wah*. She’s taking him back.” She shook her head sadly.

After picking out the bugs, leaves and twigs, Ma-ma-oo would transfer all the berries to a clean bowl and mulch them all together. She added a few tablespoons of oolichan grease, stirring all the time, then added a sprinkling of sugar. She’d leave the bowl in the fridge for another hour to let the flavours meld and we’d watch some more TV until the salmonberry stew was ready, then we’d go into the kitchen and Ma-ma-oo would give me a little dessert bowl. We’d eat in respectful silence, Ma-ma-oo closing her eyes in ecstasy as she ate. The grease makes the

berries sinfully rich, as thick as cheesecake. We'd split the stew, and I'd take my half home, so full I felt sleepy. (Robinson 77-78)

Written from the point of view of its 19-year-old narrator, the narrative consciously avoids essentialist reifications of the aboriginal subject, for the recuperation of a nature-based Haisla way of life happens only inasmuch as it is counterpoised by the acceptance of the “white” attributes as well as the incorporation of technology in contemporary Native life: Robinson's are characters who go berry picking and oolichan fishing when in season, who use the traditional methods to smoke sockeye salmon and make oolichan grease, who travel by motorboat, eat Kraft dinner, popcorn, have TVs and DVDs. The required contact with nature appears therefore ambiguously represented, as Lisa's description switches back and forth between the ideal and the co-opted. Paradigm of such indecisiveness, the figure of the *b'gwus* or Sasquatch appears as the object of both spiritual/mythical significance and commercial profit, since “[h]is image is even used to sell beer, and he is portrayed as a laid-back kind of guy, lounging on mountaintops in patio chairs, cracking open a frosty one” (Robinson 317). That this *b'gwus* invariably fails to meet the characters' and readers' expectations could be symptomatic of a failure to perform as stereotypical aboriginal subject, and thus appears connected to the narrator's own failure to interpret the signs of her culture (Appleforth 96). Similar strategies are deployed in the transformation of *Weegit*, the Raven, into a “respectable” urban bachelor, living in a comfortable downtown condo: “Yes, he admits, he did steal the sun and the moon, but he insists he did it to bring light to humankind even though he did it so it would be easier for him to find food[...] As he sips his low-fat mocha and reads yet another sanitized version of his earlier exploits, only his small, sly smile reveals how much he enjoys pulling the wool over everyone else's eyes” (Robinson 295-296). The textual place occupied by the above extract in the novel, opening the part entitled “In Search of the Elusive Sasquatch,” contributes to its intended confusion of expected images of aboriginality, sending the reader to look for meaning elsewhere.

Disappointing as the text may result for a reader keen on finding cultural authenticity behind the author's signature, the protagonist is not familiar with Haisla traditional knowledge or even the language (much of the novel's movement is her own journey into the culture she had forgotten), and when she asks her mother or grandmother, they disown their tradition, refuse or are unable to give her useful information or guidance in the culture maze: “All the people knew the old ways are gone,” the grandmother tells a thoroughly disappointed Lisa, “[...]Best not to deal at all if you don't know what you're doing. It's like oxasuli. Tricky stuff” (154). Lisa thereby doubts and fails to interpret the significance of her visions, with which their cultural significance, if any, is relativized or even lost:

Robinson demonstrates, and exploits, to poignant effect on the level of plot and character development, the desire and fear the contemporary Aboriginal subject experiences as she confronts what she cannot (but feels she must) know. Thus, Lisamarie's ultimate failure to “really” discover the fate of her brother Jimmy on



Monkey Beach is also the failure to engineer Haisla culture, to discover its certainty amidst the confusing signs that forestall such a discovery. (Appleforth 96)

Monkey Beach provides us with a move forward in its approach to aboriginality as *essentially* hybrid (Howells 183-198), filled with uncertainty (Wainwright), and thus breaking expectations and stereotypes of the kind Kateri Damm complains about when she writes: “In Canada, First Nations writers are often expected to write about certain issues, to share certain values, to use certain symbols and icons, to speak in certain ways [...] And when we write, we are expected to draw on this knowledge in writing poetic “tales” about shamans and tricksters and mighty chiefs” (15). I would further argue that, in its self-conscious dismantling of cultural stereotypes, Robinson’s novel transcends received as well as self-assigned definitions of aboriginal literature as a writing of “resistance.”⁶ Paradigm in this context of stereotypical thinking, the “traditional” connection between Natives and Nature (capitals intended) is addressed and probed in the novel to unsuspected limits.

That an uncritical support of that connection between aboriginals and the wilderness may contribute to a reproduction of the very colonialist discourse it intends to overthrow has been amply documented by postcolonial critics. Past and present official definitions of the Canadian wilderness take this element (the human presence) into account, and picture aboriginal peoples as an integral element of the wilderness, and thus subject to colonization and exploitation. Besides, the contemporary lives of aboriginal peoples in Canada may be conditioned as much by technology as it is by nature. It is unquestionable that much of Canada’s natural spaces are home to First Nations and that they may often enjoy a harmonious non-intrusive relationship with the environment—in fact, they are often upheld by ecological groups as example to follow. “However,” Atkinson objects, “this begs several questions, for should their technology change, so that the impact on the habitat or species becomes ‘enduring’, then wilderness will be threatened. Thus the use of high-powered rifles, spotter planes, snowmobiles and power-boats in hunting by Aboriginal Peoples would be a matter of concern” (236-7). At present, the “traditional” connection, therefore, should not be taken for granted.

In *Monkey Beach*, the natural environment does not only provide the most powerful rhetorical elements but also becomes, in true naturalistic fashion, central to narrative plot and characterization. As Bridgeman suggests:

Life in Kitamaat Village is evoked beautifully and honestly, without being prettified. The incredibly beautiful land and seascapes, places where worlds entwine, are not merely backdrops or stages for action. Alive, home to other living creatures, the place is a breathing character, fully integrated with other elements of the novel.

⁶ Texts, according to Armand G. Ruffo, which are written “from an Aboriginal perspective and address colonialism in all its guises [...], rais[ing] difficult textual questions with far reaching social-political-cultural implications” (8). Very many critics seem to agree with this definition of aboriginal literature (see also Emberly, Angus).

Lisamarie's world teems with life, including the life of supernatural beings who communicate with her in dreams, visions, soundings and sightings. (Bridgeman, n. pag.)

Yet the importance of the natural world does not imply, by any means, the novel's buying into the *Natural Native* stereotype. The title, *Monkey Beach*, already sends the reader a clue in that direction, for as Wainwright observes: "what have monkeys to do with Indians?" (115). In a less humouristic tone, J.M. Bridgeman complains that Robinson's title is misleading, for it "sends the reader in the exact opposite direction, away from Haisla territory, with a name from other cultures centered elsewhere. It must be a trickster's inside joke" (n. pag.). That the novel is titled after a place name, Monkey Beach, "a reputed sasquatch hang out," seems no coincidence in this context, since it refers to the place of the narrator's childhood and, thus, stands for the lost origin, the initial moment that needs to be revisited, for Lisa thinks that by returning physically there, she will be given the answer to both the disappearance of her brother and her own identity search. However, neither plot materializes at the end, the much expected and sought-after Sasquatch never turns up, and nature fails to produce any meaningful signs. Hence the extremely ambiguous ending, in which (the illusion of?) the sound of the Sasquatch's mythical howl is muffled by the very real sharp sound of a speedboat: "The howl echoes off the mountains. In the distance, I hear the sound of a speedboat" (Robinson 374).

How are we to interpret this enigmatic ending? What does it make of the relation between the aboriginal subject and the land? The threat of meaninglessness seems a strong possibility at this final moment, especially when the novel comes to the difficult project of representing aboriginal cultures between co-option and essentialization. Still, Lisa's motorboat trip in the last chapter reads like a modern version of the Spirit Canoe to the Land of the Dead of traditional west coast mythologies and could even be interpreted as a homage to them (Bridgeman). In that context, the superimposition of sounds that close the novel, rather than implying the triumph of technology over traditional belief, may argue for the changing hybrid nature of traditions and cultures, putting forward the impossibility of constructing aboriginality as "transcendental truth" (Appleforth 85). "So what is it that Lisa is holding on to through her Weegit irony?" asks Wainwright in this regard. And he answers: "an empowered interaction with that 'larger social complex' where history and myth, in all their techno-variety and complexity, can shape-shift faster than a raven can fly" (Wainwright 121)

Accordingly, the threat of cultural extinction as figured through the elusive Sasquatch is paradoxically undercut by its virtual (albeit false or inexact) location, the narrator tells us, at www.sasquatch.com.

At the centre of the debate is our access to and interpretation of the natural world. Robinson's novel implicitly argues for the constantly shifting character of our experience of the "real" world. "The fact that the world exists is beyond dispute to all but the most ardent nihilists (which postmodernists and post-structuralists are not)" Slocombe explains; "what that world means, however, is another question

—one that we can never answer. Perhaps this is the real ‘lie of the land’: in literary terms, the land is itself untrue, the real itself unreal” (504). This by no means implies or justifies the abandonment of responsible engagements with the natural environment. Rather, the awareness of the virtual (metaphoric) character of all our experience should prompt us in the search of larger than the self connections and identifications between human and non-human worlds, a crucial recognition that would facilitate the shifting of the anthropocentric basis of our approach to nature (Rozelle 1).

In literature, as I have been arguing, ecocritical practices may in fact contribute to that necessary change. In the specific Canadian context, the question still remains, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, of whether the very application of an ecocritical framework would diffuse the national category pushing the analytical focus towards the more global issues affecting climate change. However, some critics have contended, while ecology in fact transcends and must transcend national borders, the territories in question are always circumscribed within their national governments, with their very specific environmental laws and regulations (O’Brien 21). In Canada, for instance, the global trend for environmental sustainability has resulted in a federal economic policy under the *Canadian Biodiversity Strategy* (1995), that proposes a Canadian “society that lives and develops as a part of nature, values the diversity of life, takes no more than can be replenished and leaves futures generations a nurturing and dynamic world” (quoted in Wylynko 128). Whether the practical implementations of the Strategy still need to be developed and improved, a blurring of national borders into the global melting pot (pun intended) may run the risk of effacing such important initiatives and thus erasing the different national approaches towards the environment.

A further issue to be considered regarding the possibilities of combining ecological and national interests would be the increasingly urban nature of Canadian life today, the fact that most of the population, Canadian-born or recent immigrants, lives in cities or large towns. On the one hand, these numbers would seem to overthrow the traditional connection between the country and its wilderness, be this real or imagined, figured as terror or as pleasure. On the other, this reality is pushing the subject of ecocriticism towards the encompassing notion of *urban nature*. Already in 1995, Lawrence Buell argues that a truly ecocritical work is that in which “the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (*The Environmental* 7-8). The environmental in this scheme, as developed by Buell in a later work, should include the natural as well as the human-made realities, the artificial or the transformed natures (Buell, *Writing* 3).⁷ Timothy

⁷ In the last work of his ecocritical trilogy, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell develops this idea, unquestioningly extending the notion of environment to human-made habitats (see also Heise’s discussion of Buell’s contribution to ecocriticism).

Taylor's novel *Stanley Park* comes to mind as an excellent instance of the possibilities of the contemporary negotiations between the urban and the wild. Significantly, for Taylor, the city of Vancouver and the wilderness, figured by Stanley Park, are not opposed categories, but each is contained within the other, overlap with and advance on each other in such a way as to create in the reader an awareness of their strong interconnection. The city and the park are both real and virtual landscapes, spaces of the mind whose metaphorical power relies on our shifting definitions of the urban and of the wild.

A further effort to break our structures of thought is needed, though, in ecocritical practice to finally reverse the rhetoric of fear and exploitation and embrace the lures of the virtual/real wild. We must resist what Wylynko calls "the quest of permanence", at work, for instance, in the common act of fencing natural landscapes (137). Wylynko's argument is worth quoting in full:

The alignment of trees, for example, into ordered, manicured rows represents a human fear of the change that occurs naturally in a true forest. In place of such fear, ecocriticism offers the alternative of approach literature in such a way as to bring human understanding to the enjoyment of nature's evolving character and diversity, and to enhance the pleasure of those vital moments that include an awareness of the earth. Many writers and critics have already shown the way down this path. It remains for Canadian literary scholars to embrace and foster the methodology that asks whether artistic works show an appreciation, or scorn, for nature's attributes. To reveal how a work of literature renders the sound of the loon's haunting cry in the spring, the taste of fresh wild fruits in the summer, the sight of the changing colours of fall, and, yes, even the feeling of winter's biting chill, is to assist not only in the protection of animals and plants, landscapes and sky, but also in the liberation of the human spirit itself. Stories of environmental decay continue to mount—horror stories of closed beaches, undrinkable water, polluted air, and converted landscape. With each wound nature endures, the mission of ecocriticism becomes ever more critical. It is time to heed the call of the wild. (Wylynko 137)

In this essay, I have showed some moments in which ecocriticism in Canada can be effective in the above sense. My argument has tried to avoid essentialist views of nature while retaining the social and political bases of ecology and literature, assessing the possibilities for land and language to *virtually* become one. In Anne Michaels's poem "What the Light Teaches," a writer's notebook, buried in the garden, grows orchids and weeds. It is to that reversibility of process, land into language, language into land, to the unthinkable or the *virtually* impossible that we need to turn. After all, the word *virtually* in the above sentence introduces a nuance different from the technological usage to refer to something not physically existing as such, but *appearing* to do so. Here, it shifts the meaning of *impossible* towards the *possible*, although just barely so. The recent release in book and film format of *Being Caribou*, in which, in order to raise awareness of the threats to the caribou's survival, environmentalist Leanne Allison and wildlife biologist Karsten Heuer follow a herd of caribou on foot, across 1500 kilometres of rugged Arctic tundra, repre-

sents a striking instance of the potentiality of the unthinkable. The authors describe their goal as follows:

[T]o go beyond the quick visits of past media coverage and arm's length science to live life as a caribou for seven months. We will swim the same rivers, plow through the same snowdrifts, and endure the same clouds of insects, cold nights, and miles of endless travel on an annual migration. We will go deep into the life of the herd, encounter the same grizzly bears, wolves, and eagles that they do, and witness the daily struggles that lead to birth and death. And when we return from the experience seven months later, we will have a truer understanding of what's at stake. (Allison and Heuer, n. pag.)

It seems to me that the possibility of being caribou, of becoming animal, in a very literal sense, opens up an incredibly fresh perspective on our relationship with the non-human world, turning it inside out, and melting the iron-framework of the binary division between subject and object. It is to those ideas, with their potential for transformation, that we should turn our attention to in the years to come, for it is "time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories—for probing around" (McLuhan and Fiore 10).

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