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‘Remapping External and Internal Terrains’ in Indigenous Canadian Literature: An Ecocritical Study of Select Canadian fiction

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Abstract

Native environmental literature is often misconstrued as empty praise of everything natural and that aboriginals are an integral part of nature giving them a holistic mode of subsistence. The interconnections between the natural world and the natives have been a part of numerous literatures, especially the ones that give voice to aboriginal expression. Canadian literature has often been caught between the Euro-centric appreciation of nature's beauty and the aboriginal expression of nature's essence. The present article explores various nuances of ecology as reflected in the select Canadian literary texts.

Keywords: Aboriginal literature, ecology, essentialism, eco-hybridity, topographies

Our very selfish motion, to heal ourselves, to tend to our own wounds, may turn out to be the most radical motion of all, one that heals not only ourselves but eventually all, and thus transforms the social order absolutely.
(Susan Griffin, 1979)

Native environmental literature is often misconstrued as empty praise of everything natural and that aboriginals are an integral part of nature giving them a holistic mode of subsistence. The interconnections between the natural world and the natives have been a part of numerous literatures, especially the ones that give voice to aboriginal expression. Many European explorers of Canada have written about the vast landscapes and the scenic beauties of the dark forest that lend an aesthetic plane to nature writings of the region. Robert Service portrays the North as a bounteous but desolate place that challenges men to conquer and exploit its resources. However, settler stories and first community stories such as those of Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie depict the Canadian landscape as descriptions of new species and with moral lessons

drawn from these natural elements. Canadian literature has often been caught between the Euro-centric appreciation of nature's beauty and the aboriginal expression of nature's essence. Essentially, Canadian Literature when studied from an ecocritical lens presents these five ideas: 1) humans as a part of nature; (2) a bounty of natural resources; (3) fear of an adversarial wilderness; (4) improvement of nature; (5) regret of environmental damage and perhaps despair of the future; and (6) love and respect of species and natural landscapes.

Northrop Frye (1965, p.247) "... everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world". Echoing this view, Littlejohn and Pearce (1973, 11) state that the main factor setting "Canadian Literature apart from most other national literatures...is the influence of the wild". (Margaret Atwood (1972a, 49) also supports this view: "...in a country with such a high ratio of trees, lakes and rocks to people, images from Nature are almost everywhere". Themes of nature have always played ambivalent roles in Canadian literary narratives. They have been explored to express fear, awe, warmth, love, respect etc. They have helped to shape the growth of the characters and at the same time lend a touch of environmental activism to the narrative. Giving an account of the influence of nature on Canadian literature Frye states:

To feel 'Canadian' was to feel part of no-man's land with huge rivers, lakes and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen... One wonders if any other national consciousness has had so large an amount of the unknown, the unrealized, the humanly undigested, so built into it. (Frye 1965, 220)

Frye has always associated a sense of terror and fear with the wilderness of Canadian landscape. Some critics consider this a typical Euro-centric sentiment arisen out of the Cartesian thought of duality or the nature-culture divide of the Enlightenment theory. His fear of the unknown, so predominantly visible in the literature of the west, overshadows his understanding of Canadian landscape. Though Frye has focused on highlighting the terror and 'garrison mentality' associated with nature, his critics have disagreed and placed terror as a component of the aesthetic experience of the sublime" (Glickman 1998, 39) MacDonald (1998, 48), another critic of Frye, asserts that all evidence points to an essentially affirmative view of the Canadian landscape" in literature of the 19th Century. Frye explains the notion of 'garrison mentality' and terror in Canadian literature as an embodiment of two complimentary aspects: (1)"the identity of the sinister and terrible elements in nature with the death-wish in man" and (2) the fusion of human life and the life in nature (Frye 1965, 246) In the second part, he hints at the kinship between

man, nature and animals that has a significant influence on Canadian literature. In fact, Frye is often misunderstood when seen not in placement with this second aspect. Frye extends the second thought to show that the theme of a “fusion” of humanity and nature converges into a triangular conflict of nature, society and individual” in which the “individual tends to ally himself with nature against society” (Frye 1965, 245) Margaret Atwood, a student of Frye, defines Frye’s thematic aspects in her diagnosis of ‘survival’ as an important feature of Canadian Literature. Atwood (1972a, 60) also includes a theme of an organic linkage with nature in her metaphor of survival:

The war against nature assumed that Nature was hostile to begin with; man could fight and lose, or he could fight and win. If he won he would be rewarded: he could conquer and enslave nature, and , in practical terms, exploit her resources. But it is increasingly obvious to some writers that man is now more destructive towards nature that nature can be towards man; and, furthermore, that the destruction of nature is equivalent to self-destruction on the part of man.

Thus, as soon as humanity begins to attain dominance, the survival metaphor switches to Nature, keeping in mind, the onslaught of industrial development and technological advancement. Another ecocritic, Katherine Morrison (2003) declares that: “Since the 1960s, the theme of nature has remained strong in Canadian literature, in spite of greater urbanization and less sense of nature as something encircling and threatening” Grady (1992, 10) also discusses the contemporary identification of humans with nature, stating that it is a “ return to an aboriginal North American sense of wholeness, a knowledge that as human beings we are simply one of the creatures in the forest, and that what happens to the forest happens to us.”

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) from 2007 highlights that “respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment” (UNDRIP, 4). In connection with aboriginal literatures of the county it is often construed that “the fundamental lesson taught by native peoples was that man is a part of nature” (Morrison 2003, 85). However, numerous historical and anthropological references have shown that providing such generalizations may be an exaggeration of the facts. There have been numerous incidents of mass extinctions of animals and mass extinctions of large-bodied fauna on aboriginal land caused by the colonization of aboriginal cultures. It can however, be safely presumed that historical indigenous cultures may not always live in harmony with nature, but nature does play a significant role in their lives. "Indeed, interactions between aboriginal communities and nature take place on both spiritual and physical levels-according to many cultures, personifying spirits are embedded not only in humans, but also in animate and

inanimate elements of the natural world" (Bierhorst 1971). Nature is not only a part of their narrative or in the setting of their stories, but use of many animal sounds and natural sounds are key characteristics of literature from aboriginal cultures (Astrov 1970). Since the inception of this literature is in the oral traditions of relating stories, the naturalistic features transpose in the world of words to lend an indigenous flavour to the narrative.

... words were beings in themselves, incantatory, with spirits and bodies. Stories, songs, visions, and names lived empirically in the world, and people could seek the for power, identity, beauty, peace, and survival. (Lincoln 1983, 18)

A statement from Sioux heritage divulges the intricate relationship of the Amerindian Literature with the natural world:

We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To you symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves-the earth, the sun, the wind and the rain, stones, trees, animals, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning. (Lame Deer and Eroles 1972, 109)

Traditional aboriginal stories were heavily embedded in oral traditions and much of Mi'kmaq literature is bound by such traditions. There are a few poems eulogising the beauty and power of nature such as in the poetry of Rita Joe, Lindsay Marshall, Shirley Bear and Teresa Marshall; and a few fictional accounts of tryst with nature in novels like Lorne Simon's *Stones and Switches*. Mohawk literature has been first known through E. Pauline Johnson (1861-1913) an Ontario woman partly of Mohawk descent who became the first indigenous Canadian to have her writing published in Canada (Government of Ontario 2002). Johnson is also known as the "Mohawk Princess" and writes about aboriginal legends, issues facing First Nation peoples, her pride in Indian heritage, and harmonious relationships between humans and the natural world (McMaster University Library 1996; Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000). Her writings present a prominent theme that "nature does not betray those who love her" (Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000, 154). Much of Amerindian Literature talks about the dual struggle of the natives as Euro-Canadian identities or as aboriginal identities. In this struggle, lies inherent in their relationship with nature that also sees a struggle between "original subsistence lifestyles and traditional knowledge and the materialism and modernity of present-day Canada" (Petronne 1998). From the Ojibway literature, Richard Wagamese's novel *Keeper'n Me* (1994) presents this dilemma through the male protagonist, a young man named Garnet, who after being raised in foster homes in Toronto

revisits his Ojibway heritage and is healed through traditional practices. Keeper, a male elder, teaches Garnet about Ojibway culture and explains their relationship with nature:

The animal that got's the most respect from his animal brothers an' sisters...is the mole.on account he lives in constant touch with Mother Earth. All his life always stays in touch with her. That way he gets wise. Gets wise so that even though his eyes are bad he learns to see another way. The way of the spirit. (Wagamese 1994, 151-152)

Us we see power in everythin' except ourselves. Them trees an' rocks an' things are all blessed with power comin' in. Us we gotta look for it. So we go to the land an' see where the real power is. Get humble an' respectful in the middle of it all. (Wagamese 1994, 182)

His subsequent novels, *A Quality of Light* (1997), *Dreamwheels* (2006), and his most recent novel, *Ragged Company* (2008) have explored the notion of existence amidst cultural diversity and oppressive natural history. Wagamese promotes the blending of old and new to recreate vital, living traditions that maintain their connections to both past and present realities of Native experience. As the anthropologist Robin Ridington has pointed out, “Oral tradition and narrative authority are not confined to a ‘pristine’ aboriginality and orality. Indians who eat pizza and write novels do so in ways that are true to their traditions” (221). Wagamese’s writing highlights the dilemmas of the aboriginal or native within the context of both contemporary indigenous reality and experience. Ridington describes the power of such literature in this way, “First Nations oral and written literatures enact a mode of discourse based on shared experience and mutual understanding. First Nations literature now exists in and about a variety of contexts” (223). Cultural identity and understanding, Wagamese suggests, come about through story, and perhaps even more specifically through the ability of a story to reframe personal and shared experience. The story functions at once as both catharsis and catalyst. Wagamese, a talented oral storyteller as well as a writer, often begins his storytelling circles with the same words; he says, “There was once, for all of us, a fire in the night . . . To talk, to tell our stories, to teach each other, is as necessary to our growth as water. We’re all storytellers. We always were. But most of us have forgotten that . . .” (15). Dreese believes that "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” (Dreese 2002, 3). Indigenous Canadian Literature is often seen as a reconciliation between the real world and the imaginary world, the real self and the imaginary self. 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). 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).

Another literary narrative that addresses the question of reconciling with the self is Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* (2000). It reveals the extent to which women in traditional and rural cultures have extensive knowledge of the natural environment they live in. The protagonist, Lisa, is not familiar with Haisla traditional knowledge or even the language, 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). Robinson demonstrates, and exploits, this dilemma of the contemporary aboriginal who confronts what she feels she must know but is unaware of its significance in her life. 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). Finally, the ecological transmission of knowledge is undergone 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. 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). The distinctive feature of the narrative is the juxtaposition of ancestral ecological knowledge with her love for popular TV Sitcoms like, “The Young and the Restless,” “All My Children” or “Dynasty”. Thus, the writer does not present Ma-ma-oo as a creature of the past clad in traditional clothes reminiscing on past knowledge but as a character of the present times, which is aware of reality and celebrates the coexistence of ecological knowledge with capitalistic consumption. The narrative depicts the childhood and adolescence of Lisamarie Michelle Hill, a Haisla teenager from Kitamaat in British Columbia. The plot revolves around a maritime quest with the protagonist's younger brother Jimmy missing at sea. The narrative constantly moves

from one childhood scene to the present state, juxtaposing the past with the present and the original self with the constructed self of the protagonist. The plot of the novel is closely tied to the sea, a strong metaphor in Haisla tradition. Lisa dedicates substantial parts of her narration to the ocean as a nourishing resource, describing traditional knowledge about the harvesting and cooking of cockles (26), crabs (98), clams (317), halibut (99), oolichan grease (85-86), the catching and smoking of salmon (149) and numerous other kinds of fish, especially as it is safeguarded by her grandmother: “whenever I went to her house, I could count on fish stew, fish casserole, fish cakes, steamed fish, canned fish and dried fish. If it wasn’t salmon, it was halibut, rock cod, lingcod or the occasional trout” (239). As Katja Sarkowsky has argued, the novel is based on topographies of places, relationships, histories, and bodies – all of which “coexist, comment on one another, draw on one another, and thus form a web of cultural references and codes” (332).

In *Monkey Beach*, the natural environment does not only provide the most powerful rhetorical elements but also becomes, in a true naturalistic fashion, central to the narrative plot and characterization. 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 in as much 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. 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). *Monkey Beach* provides us with a futuristic vision of “essentially hybrid” aboriginal existence (Howells 183-198), filled with uncertainty (Wainwright), and thus breaking any stereotypes and essentialism of the kind. Kateri Damm complains about it 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) “Ecological issues,” Ursula Heise writes, “are situated at a complex intersection of politics, economy, technology, and culture; envisioning them in their global implications requires an engagement with a variety of theoretical approaches to globalization, especially, for ecocritics, those that focus on its cultural dimension” (2006, 514). Aboriginal and indigenous Canadian Literature dwells between the guilt of white screens and highly marketable icons of the eco-Indian, engaging with both and creating an eco-hybridity where coexistence without any kind of essentialism can be envisioned.

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