The Mountain in the Lake: Reflections of the Inner and Outer Landscape in the Writing of Northern British Columbia

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Abstract
This paper responds to the view of naturalist author Barry Lopez that there are two landscapes: the one we see and perceive, and the reflection of it that we carry inside of us. Through the work of several British Columbia writers who live and work in the North, or who have worked there in the past, this paper explores the effect of the outer landscape on our internal landscape, as is revealed by writing from the region. The strong link between landscape and literature is clearly apparent in the poetry and prose of Eden Robinson, Jacqueline Baldwin, Christie Harris, and Susan Musgrave. Ultimately, these authors discover that they share a deep emotional and physical connection with the landscape, which manifests itself both in the language and content of their writing.

Life in Northern British Columbia is inextricably linked with the land. We build islands of civilization, towns clinging to the coast or huddling at the bottom of steep mountain valleys, light them with streetlights, fill them with grocery stores, link them with highways, but still, the landscape invariably reminds us that we exist here only because it grudgingly allows us to. Always it sends reminders of its power, sometimes subtle, sometimes sweeping and unmistakable. Carefully landscaped gardens are grazed by deer that casually roam the city streets, and wolf packs trail the deer, their paw prints marking the gardens’ freshly turned earth. Streetlights go out with the power in winter storms, plunging towns into the gloom of long winter nights. The storms also attack the highways, cutting off the tenuous link of asphalt from town to town, and the bright, shiny shelves of grocery stores slowly empty, the trucks destined to stock them trapped further south on friendlier roads. A town is still largely defined by the natural resource it exploits: a fishing town, a logging town, a mining town. The people who live in Northern BC are constantly forced to be aware of the landscape that they live in.

Barry Lopez, an American writer and environmentalist, suggests that there are two landscapes, the landscape outside of the body, and the landscape inside. Lopez sees these two landscapes as closely linked. The first landscape he describes is “the one we see — not only the line and colour of the land and its shading at different times of the day, but also its plants and animals in season, its weather, its geology, the record of its climate and evolution.” The landscape of Northern British Columbia is powerful. Mountains tumble into the sea and sweep upwards to claw at turbulent storm clouds in the winter or to caress the Northern Lights in the summer. The coast is a series of flooded mountain

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The animals and plants are diverse and resilient, capable of capturing the imagination. For Lopez, the second landscape is “an interior one, a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape.” People adopt the characteristics of the outer landscape they inhabit, integrating it into their interior landscape. We can apply this model to the people of Northern British Columbia. In a region where the outer landscape is so dramatic and such an integral part of daily life, the projection is extremely strong. The inner landscape of Northern people is marbled with the characteristics of the region they live in.

For writers, their interior landscape is in turn integrated into their writing, so that ultimately, their writing is a reflection of the landscape. This integration can be conscious or unconscious, and can range from the smallest quirk in the writing that mirrors some aspect of the landscape to the near complete translation of the landscape that is apparent in Northern British Columbian writing. Jacqueline Baldwin is a poet who has lived outside of Prince George since 1969. Like all things in Northern British Columbia, my information from Baldwin travelled a long distance. I contacted her after reading some of her poetry while I was living in Prince Rupert, 718 kilometres to the west of Prince George. So began a series of letters and e-mails, during which she shared her thoughts about the influence that the landscape of Northern BC had on the area’s writing. She said that for herself “it is a deep influence; in fact I would say it was and remains the guiding influence on my writing. Everything in my mind comes back to the land, eventually.” The influence of the outer landscape on the inner is evident in the writing of other Northern British Columbian authors as well, thanks to the intimate relationship that the people share with the region. The writing of Northern British Columbia captures pieces of both the outer and inner landscapes. It is characterized by simplicity and honesty of language and diction, a detailed knowledge of the land, and a deep respect for it.

Northern BC is rough. The landscape offers up infinite reminders of nature’s realities, even for city dwellers, since they are at best precariously perched on the edge of wilderness. It is impossible not to be aware of the ecological relationships and environmental pressures of the area. Jacqueline explained that her “life on the land has been full of experiences of deep intimate connections with the stark realities of living close to nature and the wilderness.” The bluntness of a landscape that does not hide its harsh realities engenders a similar directness in its writing. This directness is sometimes shown through the simplicity of the language used to portray dark events. Northern writers often avoid metaphors and euphemisms, relating events simply and bluntly. Eden Robinson’s writing is especially tough. Robinson holds no punches when describing an attack on a chicken coop by a hawk: “A chicken ran through the yard with its guts trailing behind it, flapping its one wing, shrieking. A hawk plunged. . .squashed the screeching chicken. . .and pecked its eyes.” She does not shy away from the brutality of the

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2 Ibid.
3 E-mail to author, April 13, 2009.
4 Ibid.
situation, and makes no effort to cushion it with language. Robinson’s depiction of the hawk is as direct as the animal’s attack, mirroring the hawk. The Lower-Mainland raised poet and novelist Tim Bowling’s treatment of death by contrast is much more stylized: “Guilty men skulk along the dyke carrying burlap sacks/of mewling kittens. . . .The tossed sacks throb like hearts as they sink.” Bowling’s use of metaphor lends a dreamlike quality to his description of death that is absent in Robinson’s depiction.

Robinson is not the only Northern author who makes use of simple language to starkly and effectively depict subject matter that other authors might tip-toe around. Jacqueline Baldwin even quotes the voice of a dying deer: “with the coyote in hot pursuit/she left blood on the snow / a message that read / I am destined to die / I will never leave this valley.” This simplicity is not limited to representations of the animal world either. Human life is often described with the same blunt pen. Death is a reality for people as surely as it is for animals. For Northern writers, humans return to the earth the same as everything else, and there is nothing to be squeamish about. Robinson tells us to: “Pick wild blueberries when you’re hungry. . . .Realize that the plunpest berries are over the graves.” The juxtaposition of simple language with complex subject matter serves to ensure that the reader’s full attention is dedicated to the subject. Like the landscape, Northern British Columbian authors often force an awareness of life’s realities, using language as natural, and sometimes as rough, as the landscape itself.

Life in Northern BC often provides writers with a collection of technical and instinctual knowledge of the landscape. Living closely with the land engenders a deep understanding of it. Technical knowledge arises from needing to understand the life and land you live so closely with, while instinctual knowledge comes from wanting to understand it. This technical knowledge has always been evident in First Nations stories. Even children’s stories read like an ecologist’s observations, assessing the complex links between the seasons, the land, and the animals. Children’s author Christie Harris writes in Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads, “The sun was shining on ice rimming the river; eagles were circling overhead; and far downriver there was the bellowing of the sea lions who — like the seals and the seagulls and the people — were following the crowded tribes of tiny oolachans into the river.” Northern writing continues to be typified by an understanding of the history, geography and ecology of the landscape. From the Romantic period of Byron onward, writers elsewhere have had too predictably an undifferentiated, stylized view of nature, as in Byron’s description of wilderness: “There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, / There is a rapture on the lonely shore, / There is

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7 A Northern Woman, (Prince George, BC: Caitlin Press, 2003), 116.

8 Monkey Beach, 82.

9 (Vancouver: Rainforest Books, 1979), 35.
society, where none intrudes, / By the deep sea, and music in its roar.”

A forest is a forest, the shore is the shore. For Northern writers like Eden Robinson and Baldwin a forest is a collection of “spruce and cedar groves,” and the shore is where “you [can] watch crabs skittering sideways over discarded clam and cockleshells, and shinies flicking back and forth. Kelp the colour of brown beer bottles [rises] from the bottom, tall and thin with bulbs on top.”

Susan Musgrave’s writing epitomizes the mixing of concrete knowledge with a yearning for still greater understanding typical of the region’s writing: “After the great earthquake in Alaska, fishermen began catching halibut that were full of stones. The fish had...ingested the stones to ballast themselves against the shocks...What did the stones feel as they were gulped down into darkness?”

Perhaps writers in the North include detailed descriptions and explanations about the region and all its life because they are motivated to share the influence of the landscape with those who cannot live in it. In response, Baldwin says: “For example if I am writing a story about children playing in a schoolyard in the city, I feel sad when I notice that there is a disconnect between the children’s feet and the land because they are playing on pavement...They do not have the luxury of looking up through leafy branches of trees to the beautiful Northern sky.”

The urge to share the landscape they live in is compelling for Northern writers.

Many North Americans have a tendency to deify wilderness, an untouched nature, completely separate from human influence. This habit, passed down to us from the Romantics and American essayists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, is evident in the popularity of eco-tourism and the pervasiveness of our search for the ultimate “wilderness experience.” However, a lack of understanding of actual landscapes often leads us to superficially worship an imaginary nature, untouched, remote, and distant. We are awed by the Amazon, but we ignore the forests just outside of our cities. Or we only admire our forests until they suffer the smallest human impingement. The moment we fell the first tree, the forest loses its fairytale quality, its majesty, and our awe; as well our desire to protect the forest falls along with that first tree. This is the problem with the deification of pristine nature: it removes our ability to respect nature in all its forms, which makes us complicit in the degradation of all but a few last great strongholds of what we imagine to be wilderness. For American author Wendell Berry, this is a terrible failure on our part. He says that “There is simply nothing in Creation that does not matter...We cannot be improved — in fact, we cannot help but be damaged — by useless or greedy or merely ignorant destruction of anything.”

Northern writers

13 *You’re in Canada Now. . .* (Saskatoon, SK: Thistledown Press, 2005), 59.
14 E-mail to author, April 13, 2009.
agree with him. This is evident in Musgrave’s writing: “A single grain of sand is as worthy of our praise as the open white flowers of the shining summer plum; we should beware when too much light falls on everything because if we are blinded by darkness we are also blinded by light.”\textsuperscript{16} She encourages us to appreciate and respect the small, obscure and often ignored aspects of nature and landscape, as well as the more obviously beautiful parts that we already respect. If we fail to do so, we are more likely to accept its destruction. As Louis Owens, the Native-Irish American writer explains, unless “all human beings can learn to imagine themselves as intimately and inextricably linked to every aspect of the world they inhabit…the earth simply will not survive.”\textsuperscript{17} This view is echoed in the stories of the Haida people. In one story, the cruel killing of a simple frog brings pitiless retribution: “Like burning oil, fire flamed even on the water. And there was no escape for the people who had forgotten their respect for the world around them, the world of creatures and spirit beings.”\textsuperscript{18} In Northern British Columbia, respect for the real landscape, the landscape you learn “not by knowing the name or identity of everything in it, but by perceiving the relationships in it,”\textsuperscript{19} infuses local writing. Northern writers’ respect stems from an understanding that “the land doesn’t belong to us / we belong to it.”\textsuperscript{20}

This respect often manifests itself as a link between Northern speakers and the land. The link is a mix of awe and reverence that the writers have for every piece of the land, a sense of stewardship towards it, and a comfort that the inner landscape draws from the outer landscape. Northern writing often reverberates with wonder about the landscape, great and small. Musgrave writes: “A beach pebble unadorned, a river rock licked into an egg — the wild, tumbling-free stones — are the ones most precious to me. Stones pulled by the tides, polished by the moon.”\textsuperscript{21} The writers are capable of evoking in the reader a child-like awe for details of the landscape that most readers have long forgotten, encouraging us, like Baldwin does, to “gently touch the hard-curved edges of the lichen on / surrounding rocks and stones or admire the / sponginess and intricate patterns of the moss / exclaiming over the colours and shapes of / tiny flowers that peek through it / like hidden jewels suddenly revealed,”\textsuperscript{22} and in doing so also encourage us to rediscover our reverence for these details. This reverence is then translated into an awareness of our responsibility to the landscapes we inhabit.

In Northern British Columbia, there is a struggle to strike a balance between resource extraction and conservation, between economics and emotion. The writing of the region captures this struggle. In Baldwin’s \textit{A Northern Woman}, two poems are placed consecutively. First, she tells us the story of a logger, who “tired, triumphant / would put

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{16}] You’re in Canada Now. . . , 55.
  \item[\textsuperscript{17}] “The American Indian Wilderness,” \textit{Saving Places}, 68–71.
  \item[\textsuperscript{18}] Harris, \textit{Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads}, 128.
  \item[\textsuperscript{19}] Lopez, “Landscape and Narrative.”
  \item[\textsuperscript{20}] Baldwin, \textit{A Northern Woman}, 111.
  \item[\textsuperscript{21}] You’re in Canada Now. . . , 54.
  \item[\textsuperscript{22}] Baldwin, \textit{A Northern Woman}, 132.
\end{itemize}
his pay-cheque on the table / say to [a] mother:/for you my darling."\textsuperscript{23} In juxtaposition with this poem, the next describes a man’s reaction to logging activity outside his childhood home: “he cried when he saw the clearcuts / saw the forest was gone from the hillsides / he made wailing sounds / howled at the sky / shaking his fists in despair.”\textsuperscript{24} In her letters, Baldwin explained the effect she feels the alteration of the outer landscape in this way affects the inner landscape: “I have observed how the landscape of a clearcut is destructive to those who have the sad experience of seeing it, or living within these areas, or worse, actually working to make their living from destroying the forest in this way.”\textsuperscript{25} Where does the right compromise lie for the two men in Baldwin’s poems, representative of so many others? For the Haida, the balance rests on respect. They have a long history of meeting all their needs by hunting and harvesting the land and the sea. They balance these practices by offering the landscape their respect in return: Christine Harris notes in her story about Mouse Woman that “They would always be ready with gifts of berries and mountain goat fat; they would always be ready to waft eagle down reverently over troubled waters; they would never, never spit in the sea.”\textsuperscript{26} This respect is evident in the work of Northern British Columbian writers.

Respect for the landscape also stems from an appreciation for the calm it sometimes provides us. For writers in Northern BC, living in a region where the landscape is woven through the experiences of every day, chances to gain calm through the land are endless. The writers often refer to the sense of quiet and rightness that the region affords them. Musgrave tells us that: “In this timeless place, where the ravens speak in tongues as the tides rise and fall, my own life and times begin to make sense to me.”\textsuperscript{27} It is often when exploring this power of the region that writers most effectively demonstrate the think between the outer and inner landscape. Lopez suggests that “the shape of the individual mind is affected by land.”\textsuperscript{28} Nowhere is this so clear as the writing of Robinson: “As I was drifting off to sleep. . . I felt light, free, as if a warm wind blew through me. . . I was filled with a sense of calm, peace, and I saw Kitlope Lake, flat and grey in the early-morning light, mirroring the mountains.”\textsuperscript{29} The similarities between the inner and outer landscape are striking. First, the speaker feels light and free, like the breeze she imagines blowing through her. Then, the description she provides of the lake, so quiet that it mirrors the mountains, is obviously a description of a lake completely calm and at peace, just like the speaker at that moment. The lake not only mirrors the mountain, it mirrors the speaker’s inner landscape exactly. Northern writers’ recognition of the influence the landscape has over their feelings deepens their respect for it.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{25} E-mail to author, April 13, 2009.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Mouse Woman and the Muddleheads}, 50.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{You’re in Canada Now}. . . , 50.
\textsuperscript{28} “Landscape and Narrative.”
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Monkey Beach}, 176.
The links between the inhabitants of Northern British Columbia and its landscape are complex. They are linked by proximity and by the landscape’s tendency to interlace itself with the lives of the people. More importantly, they are linked by a reflection. The outer landscape, the region itself, is reflected in the inner landscape of the people. The influence of the outer landscape over the inner landscape is particularly strong in Northern BC because of the many ways the population is tied to the landscape. Through writing, the shape of the inner landscape is revealed as Eden Robinson writes: “A bear — a hazy, dark brown figure in the distance down the shore — paws at seaweed. It raises its head, stands on its hind legs, and for one moment, as it swivels around and does a rambling walk into the woods, it looks human.”

The inner landscape in Northern British Columbia is one that has completely taken on the shape of the outer landscape, so that the divide between the two, between the human and the non-human, between the self and the landscape, has all but melted away.

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30 Ibid., 136.