DOES THIS PLACE REALLY EXIST?

Authenticity and Identity in British Columbian Writing

RICHARD J. LANE

Tom Thompson’s Shack
Harold Rhenisch

West by Northwest: British Columbia Short Stories
David Stouck and Myler Wilkinson, editors
Victoria: Polestar, 1998. 286 pp. $18.95 paper

You’re on the Air
Sallie Phillips

Re-writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature
Conny Steenman-Marcusse

The centre of the universe is in British Columbia, on a grassy slope above Vidette Lake. As Harold Rhenisch elaborates: “To the south of the centre of the universe, the Thompson River flows around old ranches, ginseng fields, mobile home parks, a pulp mill, two rail lines, and a massive feedlot stinking up the highway for miles” (35). To get coordinated we must observe that, “to the west of the centre of the universe is a vast wrecking yard,” (ibid.) while to the east there is more Thompson River. Rhenisch approaches from the north and promptly gets lost, so he tries again from the south, finding traces of his previous lost self. Finally, he gets there, noticing, thirty metres from the centre of the universe, “the ruins of an old cabin; someone lived there once, his front door looking east over the scarred edges of the old lava flows that formed the plateau – ochre, snaking lines meeting the white horizon. So. Some trapper had known where he was” (36).

As a dislocated critic, shuffling back and forth between British Columbia and London, I have no problem with this Buddhist sense of place, of centredness (although I make the centre of the universe Gambier Island, but that’s another story): the old colonial, modernist cities have long since given way or have lost their
authority to the energy and vitality of
decentred, postmodern urban spaces
such as Los Angeles or Vancouver, or
to postmodern eco-regions, or to
visions of rural utopia. The paradox
of decentred centres, and the blurring
between city and hinterland, has been
explored in a notoriously irritating
way by Jean Baudrillard in his travel
book America, and far more satisfyingly
by Paul Delany and others in Vancouver:
Representing the Postmodern City.

As I have noted elsewhere, post­
modern cities attempt to consume
their surrounding land in a kind of
self-replication process whereby the
binary opposition city/countryside is
dissolved: finally, from this pers­
tpective, there are no more cities, and
there is no more countryside, just a
hyperreality beyond the old modernist
divides (Lane 2000). It is precisely this
hyperreality that Rhenisch resists in
Tom Thomson’s Shack, where he also
deconstructs the city/countryside
binary without coming to the same
conclusions as Baudrillard and com­
pany; instead, Rhenisch realizes that
he is anchored in place, that the colonial
experiment known as “farming” in
British Columbia has produced valuable
lessons, or, at least, a body of know­
ledge based upon action, upon being
in the world, that is as powerful, if not
more powerful, than the knowledge
grids produced within the cities.

Rhenisch deliberately uses the
metaphor of the grid to align his
vision of Toronto with the image of
an electronic circuit board, a machine,
because he reminds us that rural
British Columbia can be subdivided
like a city (the previously mentioned
replication of the postmodern city),
with a resulting hyperreal countryside
composed of “golf courses” and so on.
In Tom Thomson’s Shack, Rhenisch
shuttles the narrative back and forth, be­
tween British Columbia and Toronto,
creating a visible dialectic upon the
page, weighted in British Columbia,
but also powerfully balanced by his
visit to Kleinburg, the site of the
Group of Seven artist Tom Thomson’s
studio and the Group of Seven’s vision
of a place called “Canada.” As with
any well constructed dialectical argu­
ment, thesis and antithesis give way
through a process that Hegel called
“sublation,” a new position being
reached, a new level of consciousness;
and Hegel is an apt reference here,
because his Phenomenology of Spirit is
about human struggle for survival, for
self-recognition through work, for
self-knowledge. Hegel reaches Absolute
Knowledge in philosophy, Rhenisch
reaches Insight in an orchard, a poem,
an in-between space, a boundary, with
the work of work, with land, with fly­
fishing: “The work of a fly-fisherman,
fashioning a grasshopper out of deer
hair and walking miles along the
curbsanks of the Thompson River
north of Lytton, among the old,
abandoned villages with their graves
and dead fruit trees, and casting out
through the blue air so the hopper lies
like a breath upon the cool water, is
the basis for building a culture” (218).

On a long-haul flight between
Vancouver and London I managed to
write one coherent sentence: “as long
as Harold Rhenisch keeps writing,
there is hope for this world.” Rhenisch
writes from that riparian space occu­
pied most famously by Malcolm
Lowry; Lowry haunts, or casts a long
shadow over, the stories in West By
Northwest: British Columbia Short
Stories (edited by David Stouck and
Myler Wilkinson). As a proto-post­
modernist, or high modernist (and
that is not a reference to excessive
alcohol consumption), Lowry did
some deconstruction in his own way:
his utopian vision of British Columbia is constituted by the awareness that
dystopia was just around the corner, 
be it through a process of eviction or 
the destruction of the environment.
Lowry’s protagonists in “The Bravest 
Boast” are hopelessly romantic, his 
story tying them together with a 
pathetic tale of a boat and message 
cast to sea, yet the couple have en-

dured unspoken “storms,” to use his 
word, that tinge the descriptions of Lost 
Lagoon, Stanley Park, Vancouver, and 
the enframing environment with a 
realism beyond romanticism, a vision 
rooted in some force that exceeds the 
human subject: “when the full force 
of the wind caught them, looking from 
the shore, it was like gazing into 
chaos. The wind blew away their 
thoughts, their voices, almost their 
very senses, as they walked, crunching 
the shells” (70). The editors of West 
By Northwest: British Columbia Short 
Stories, argue that, like Emily Carr, 
they wanted stories not of the Old 
Country, not of “Canada” or the 
“Western Provinces,” but “about this 
part of the world that we know as 
British Columbia” (8):

Our first concern has been to 
find stories from the different 
regions of this diverse province: 
stories from the sea and the 
islands, from the coastal cities, 
the mountains and the valleys 
and northern rivers. We hold 
with Patrick Lane when he 
oberves that “the land itself is 
the frame for ... writing,” and 
with Ethel Wilson when she 
 wrote that “the formidable 
power of geography determines 
the character and performance 
of a people” ... Even stories set 
in Vancouver depend for their 
drama on the details of the city 
landscape: English Bay, Stanley 
Park, the woods along the 
North Shore, the Lions Gate 
Bridge. (8)

Place intersects with diversity of 
peoples: the editors claiming “to collect 
here histories of the different peoples 
living in this province” (8). But how far 
has this aim been achieved? Does the 
opening story, “The Raven and the 
First Men,” which appears to be 
rightly set in place within the col-

lection, suffice to explain what later 
happened to indigenous voices under 
colonialism, under the residential 
school system, for example? Can the 
backing up of Haida myth with 
Pauline Johnson and Emily Carr really 
suffice to explore First Nations culture 
and story-telling? Critics have noted 
the problematic relationship between 
Carr and Sophie, for example, and 
how this relationship mirrored a 
bigger project of appropriating First 
Nations aesthetics. Susan Crean 
argues that, in Carr’s version of her, 
“Sophie is an enigma dressed as a 
stereotype” (Crean, 390). Further, 
“Her representation of the inter-
actions between the two of them are 
stylized and two-dimensional: Sophie 
disappears behind a haze of platitudes 
and invented jargon, jargon that gets 
so mannered that Emily herself ends 
up speaking fractured Chinook to 
Sophie’s English” (Crean, 389). Else-
where I have argued that Johnson’s 
“The Two Sisters” has a problematic 
relationship with the Potlatch (See 
Lane, 1999). This is not the place to 
expand upon such arguments, except 
to note, in defence of Stouck and 
Wilkinson, their inclusion of the 
dynamic, powerful voice of Eden 
Robinson, later in the collection. As 
a whole, the stories in the collection 
interweave location, myth, and per-
sonal experience; there is much shuttling back and forth, as with Rhenisch to some other place, other non-BC environments; but some centrifugal force keeps bringing character, story, vision back to British Columbia. Some of the stories — perhaps the “weakest” in the sense of the editors’ aims — just happen to be set, say, in Vancouver, or a small BC town; but for the most part a sense of uniqueness permeates the collection.

Jean Baudrillard opens one of his most famous essays on the hyperreal with a reference to Borges’s fable “Of Exactitude in Science,” where “the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly” (Baudrillard 1994, 1). In other words, the map becomes indistinguishable from the real (second-order simulation); I’m reminded of this fable by Sallie Phillips’s 1950 broadcast on “The Challenger Relief Map.”

Maps and mapping have long been part of the colonialist project of British Columbia, but this one attempts to do more than trace land, sea, and power relations expressed through settlement, trade, and other modes of colonization. The Challenger Map, like a prototypical virtual reality program, reproduces visibly the dimensions and interconnections in a totality:

It’s not easy to convey to you just how the relief map gives one such a greater understanding of what our province is like. But when you see it, it’s impossible not to be aware of the height of our mountains, of the way in which the rivers wind through the deep valleys, of the immensity of the Chilcotin rangelands, of the fjord-like ruggedness of our long coastline ... each level [of the Challenger Map] is formed of separate and individually cut pieces of plywood, ingeniously glued and nailed together, until the required altitude of each and every little rise, every hill and mountain and plateau and plain, has been reached. (90)

This broadcast contains a marvellous combination of facts: that the map is practically home-made, a family affair, yet, its educational aim is reinforced by Mr. Challenger’s background in making maps for mining, logging, and engineering projects within British Columbia; we learn that the map is looking for a permanent home for visitors to Vancouver; and there is even a comment about the map from H.R. Macmillan, who had a sharp eye for business.

Sallie Phillips’s collection of radio scripts, You’re On The Air, is worth its weight in gold; she argues that her choice of scripts “best reflect life in a particular time and place — mid-century British Columbia. They seem to fall into two groups: those which show us how much things have changed in fifty years, and those in which we see that some things haven’t changed at all!” (11). The scripts represent a world before editing, taping, splicing; in this, they are unique because they not only precede television, but they also precede what we think of as radio today. The scripts are an open, accessible archive, consisting of five main sections: Portraits, All Around Us, Outings, Here and There, and Histories. Phillips begs not to be judged by contemporary ideological standards in relation, in particular, to reference to First Nations peoples, yet this is hardly necessary, as the book documents for the contemporary reader historical differences, perspectives, and opinions. To my mind, the book’s most valuable contribution to BC history and narrative is in its intimate
analysis of women's lives in a province that often prioritized men's stories; the author herself explodes stereotypes through her life's work as mother, wife, writer, broadcaster, and public relations worker.

“Pioneer” women are explored in Conny Steenman-Marcusse’s Re-Writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature. The focus on British Columbia comes in Chapter 4, with “Daphne Marlatt’s Ana Historic: Mrs Richards versus Annie Anderson.” Steenman-Marcusse's book is obviously a far more academic study than are those above, starting out with a survey and analysis of postmodernism, post-colonialism, and feminism in Canada; however, resisting the hyperreal once more, she also posits notions of authenticity and identification: “Shield’s, Marlatt and Swan give their readers a sense of identification with themselves and their characters. This is important as it endorses women’s efforts to gain knowledge about their identities, identities which they themselves construct. Women are seen as agents of their own histories and as authors of their own stories” (52). As with Sallie Phillips's work, there is a sense of re-claiming identity here, and the assertion of female authorship and control. Steenman-Marcusse’s account of Marlatt’s work is fairly conventional, interweaving biography and criticism to locate not just the authorial voice in place, but also the body and different notions of sexuality and experience, expressed by Marlatt in poetry and prose. Reference is made to her important work of BC writing, the prose-poem Steveston, as well as numerous other writings. Ultimately, while Steenman-Marcusse does not really provide the reader with an original reading of Marlatt, it is the grouping of “Pioneer Women” that matters, the re-casting of stories from a feminist perspective.

I have suggested that, in various ways, all of the texts under review resist, or perform a critique of, postmodern notions of hyperreality and media-constructed, international (dis)locations of culture; such a strategic way of writing may be consciously or subconsciously articulated. All four texts grapple with the relationships between representation and reality, between history as narrative, and history as empirical fact; they articulate a strong sense of uniqueness, of local lived experience and knowledge, and of social, rather than corporate, commodified, existence. Furthermore, these texts, through varying but related approaches, all distinctly theorize British Columbian value-systems with an awareness of the need for dialogue, and debate, with the wider world.

OTHER WORKS CITED


