

# DOES THIS PLACE REALLY EXIST?

## *Authenticity and Identity in British Columbian Writing*

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### *Tom Thompson's Shack*

Harold Rhenisch

Vancouver: New Star, 2000. 264 pp. \$19 paper

### *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

Victoria: Sono Nis, 2000. 213 pp. Illus. \$21.95 paper

### *Re-writing Pioneer Women in Anglo-Canadian Literature*

Conny Steenman-Marcusse

Atlanta, GA: Amsterdam, 2001. 246 pp. US\$43 paper

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, postmodern 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 perspective, 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 company; 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 knowledge 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 argument, 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 cutbanks 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 occupied 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-postmodernist, 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 endured 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 observes 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 collection, 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 interactions 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). Elsewhere 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.

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