

Introduction

Reading Ricou

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And it is especially about writing and reading a region.
—Laurie Ricou, *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*

In the summer of 1974, newly removed to Canada and just embarked on a graduate program at the University of Waterloo, one of us started reading Ricou. That person had already discovered Alice Munro and her just-published Vancouver-set story “Material” (1973), one that features unremitting rain, an overworked sump pump, and flooding as central plot elements. “Material” would later prove to lead to a lifelong reading passion just then beginning. But reading Ricou that summer would also lead to another such passion: his *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction*, published in 1973 too, held the keys to a coequal interest: the prairie west, prairie space, prairie history and literary culture. Following after Edward McCourt’s *The Canadian West in Fiction* (1949), Ricou’s book defined the prairie landscape as Canadian space, shaping a discussion that the Ricou reader had come to Canada to learn, and introducing that reader to a body of writers and texts which would prove foundation for the inquiry into prairie space that he ultimately did himself. And by reading Ricou then he “met,” among many others, Wallace Stegner, that most Canadian of American writers (Thacker). When this reader actually did meet Laurie Ricou, in April of 1978 while still a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, it was at a conference called “Crossing Frontiers,” the avowed purpose of which was to compare the cultural landscapes of the Canadian and the American Wests. Among its major speakers was Stegner, one of the very few present there then who actually understood what those

from each side of the border were talking about; not surprisingly, at this gathering there was a good deal of talking past one another's concerns across the border. Another person there who really got it was Robert Kroetsch—he gave a presentation called “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space,” one that, characteristically, caused a stir.

Ricou, having taught at the University of Lethbridge for eight years, moved that fall from his native prairies to the University of British Columbia, and so to Munro's rainy Vancouver, to “the Lower Mainland,” to “the Pacific Northwest,” to “Cascadia.” To another region. All new to him, it was a shock. As Ricou writes early in the *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, “high-gloss foliage (in January), saltwater tides, arbutus trees, and decidedly unhorizontal landforms riddled my sense of place.” But at the same time, he “felt almost immediately at home with evergreen mountains, and even mist.” So he “set out to read [his] way into that place and climate” (8). And read his way into that place and climate he has certainly done since.

Salt Lake City, October, 1994, and another region far from home(s) for the other one of us, although, being then the site of a Western Literature Association (WLA) meeting, it was actually *the* embodiment of academic home for both of us. And for this reader to meet Laurie Ricou there first as fellow WLA-er—as just another conference attendee—rather than through a text or the formal structure of a classroom, was to be struck and held by a unique presence. Over the years these conferences became annual occasions for expeditions in search of local evidences of Lewis and Clark, and especially in search of clumps of *Gaultheria shallon* (salal, a plant we once dared to overlook), to engage in conversations about Cather novels Ricou had allegedly never read, and about teaching, and about listening. Indeed, for this reader to learn as a graduate student what it means to value academic open-mindedness, as Ricou does, has been a career-shaping tenet. Ricou notes with pleasure that “when the history of the Western Literature Association is written, it will be a story of writing. In this organization we seem less likely to divide into critics and writers, scholars and writers, academics and writers. . . . We will allow an opportunity for an academic, molded by twenty years of post-PhDism, to try her hand at the personal essay, to act in a play, to read aloud his first short story—to give a plenary address long on feelings and short on footnotes” (Ricou “Extra”). As that value system has shaped Ricou the teacher, the writer, the mentor, the friend, and the scholar, it also explains in large part the reasons Ricou

scholarship itself operates on an extra-academic plane. Nicholas Bradley recently wrote that “Ricou is generally regarded as the leading scholar of literature and environment in Canada and recognized as having inaugurated ecocritical approaches to the study of Canadian literature” (118). Bradley also quotes the citation for Ricou’s election to the Royal Society of Canada: “the foremost Canadian scholar and cultural observer in the field of ecocriticism” (118). These readers encounter such effusions with a sense of pleasure at the recognition, but at the same time a sense of frustration. To describe Laurie Ricou as an ecocritic misses the point, we think, of the insightful, incisive, inclusive work that ambles gently but definitively past critical theory and genre convention.

Ricou called his 1996 Past-President’s address to the Western Literature Association “Extra West,” asserting that “an extra West is always layered in writing about writing about place. Its history is openly, self-consciously mediated in metaphor and myth.” He offered these comments after being the first Canadian president of the Association, the first to bring the group to Canada (and in 2014 as co-president he is about to do so again by bringing us to Victoria). In *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* Ricou calls Gary Snyder “the most influential advocate of ecocritical thinking” (54) and, while that may well have been the case when he was writing, the same may be said of Ricou now. But beyond such distinctions, there is no doubt that reading Ricou reading leads us to see him as the leading ecocritical voice of the Extra West in the British Columbia/Pacific Northwest region. Beginning with his readings of Emily Carr and others in his *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (1987), continuing to unpack an affecting, place-derived poem by David Wagoner through his *A Field Guide to “A Guide to Dungeness Spit”* (1997), to his audacious but ecocritically demanding dualisms in the making and structuring of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, Ricou’s critical trajectory has been one of reckoning, understanding, finding, and comparing “the layers in writing about [his] place.”

And then there is *Salal*: there is more to reading *Salal* than reading *salal*; while Ricou wants the reader to *see* those glossy dark green leaves in the vase next to the flashier flowers, to notice them in the median strip of the suburban roadway in Tacoma, Washington, and to hear the voices of those who live and work with *salal*, the work of that text, in part, is to get the reader out of her chair and out of doors to notice her regional *salal* equivalent, those “fine details,” in Kim Stafford’s words, “accumulating for miles.” In writing a narrative in which the literary warmly encompasses

both the horti- and eco-cultural, and inviting the voices of interviewees to resound within that text in an almost unmediated frame, Ricou suggests that teaching others to see and listen requires a multiplicity of approaches. Crossing borders and boundaries, both Ricou's writings and writings on Ricou open doors, suggest re-readings and re-visionings, and invite deeper reflection, better knowing.

The essays that follow here speak clearly and eloquently to the ongoing effects and wide-ranging influences of Ricou's research and writing. But more than that and, frankly better than that for those of us who see ourselves as teachers, some of these essays recreate Ricou in the classroom—carrying and using that (mostly empty) attaché case on the first day of class to create the course atmosphere sought—and ultimately making courses which, palpably, have had life-altering and career-directing effects on his students. Together, as most of these writers make sharply clear, he is still teaching them and—coequally—they are still teaching him. And us. What better might be said of him?

Reading Ricou reading British Columbia, reading the Pacific Northwest, reading Canada, reading the United States: Cascadia, Dungeness Spit, Arbutus/Madrone, Salal. Ricou.

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