

The Laurie Ricou Files The Afterlife of Habitat Studies

“Tell me of what plant-birthday a man takes notice,” writes American nature writer Aldo Leopold, “and I shall tell you a good deal about his vocation, his hobbies, his hay fever, and the general level of his ecological education” (44). In *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949), Leopold reflects upon the July return of cutleaf Silphium to a graveyard near his Wisconsin farm, and on the annual return of *Draba*, which rewards anyone “who searches for spring with his knees in the mud” (26). In *Wolf Willow* (1962), Wallace Stegner, an American possessed of a Canadian childhood, searches the place he calls Whitemud, Saskatchewan, for the source of a smell “pungent and pervasive” that leads him back to his younger self. “It is wolf willow,” he writes, “and not the town or anyone in it, that brings me home” (18, 19). In *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* (2007), Laurie Ricou devotes an entire volume to a glossy Pacific Northwest understory plant, musing on place through the ecology, industry, and resonance that surrounds a single species. “If we learn the word salal,” he writes in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (2002), “and the story of its growing and harvest, then we will learn from a growing in place” (84). This “growing in place” reflects a unique approach to literary study that Laurie has shared, over many years, with numerous students and academic colleagues.

As three of Laurie’s former students, we share, in the critical reflections that follow, the ongoing impact of his teaching on our engagements with literature and place. The three of us met and became friends because of his unorthodox English class, Habitat Studies, which he taught at the University of British Columbia. This course asked (predominantly) literature students to research the science and culture of a single species for a semester, and to document the challenges and joys of thinking about place and region by focusing on a representative inhabitant, whether native or not. Maia (cinnabar

moth; *Tyria jacobaeae*) and Travis (American bullfrog; *Rana catesbeiana*) took the course as graduate students; Angela (rufous-sided towhee; *Pipilo maculatus*) took it as an undergraduate. This was around the time Laurie clarified his reputation as Canada's leading ecocritic with the publication of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* and *Salal*. Those two books shaped much of how the three of us (and scores of other students and ecocritics) learned how to attend to the world outside of the classroom, learned to learn, as it were, about ourselves as one species among many. The following sections represent our individual attempts to demonstrate how Laurie's teaching and scholarship have influenced our own thinking, writing, and research. We have each chosen texts or species that we consider to be part of Laurie's natural habitat, works that he has inhabited, as writer or reader, or that share similar geographical and ecological qualities with those he has inhabited in the past.

Each of these sections documents a different afterlife of Laurie's scholarship and pedagogy. In "Into the Thicket: On Guiding and *Salal*," Maia highlights the humble and open forms of guidance that characterize Laurie's teaching and emerge in his writing. She focuses especially on how a little-known understory plant guided Laurie's experimentation with method and form, and his evolving understanding of what might constitute a book. In "Notes from a Field Guide to Rain," Travis plunders several of Laurie's critical strategies—archives, field notes, files, rhizomes—to offer a reading of rain poems written about Port Hardy, BC. And in "The Practice of Homing," Angela provides further evidence of Laurie's influence as teacher, as guide, as seeker, first by exploring salmon's central role in defining home and then by sharing the transformative power of studying a single species from multiple, interconnected, perspectives. Taken together, as they point in myriad directions and occasionally return to strike Ricouian keynotes, these sections, we hope, help to confirm Laurie's contributions not only to the study of a bioregion and its inhabitants—literary and biological—but also to a scholarship that seeks direction from unexpected guides.

Into the Thicket: On Guiding and *Salal*

I have been always surprised at the connections a little-known shrub initiates.
—Laurie Ricou, *Salal*

One of the major components of Laurie Ricou's Habitat Studies seminar was the final report, which was to take, according to the course description, "a form . . . appropriate to your subject and to our evolving sense of how its habitat might be imagined" (Ricou, "Out of the Field Guide" 351).¹

Over the course of the term, as we developed our projects on our selected species, this directive invited us, prodded us, to think carefully and creatively about the relationship between form, method, and subject matter. What our reports ultimately looked like depended largely on how we encountered our species, our responses to those encounters, the cultural materials we discovered, what we decided to do with them, and, of course, the species itself.

Later, my work as a research assistant for *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory* allowed me to observe Laurie engaged in this same process of adapting method and form in relation to subject of study. My expectations of literary scholarship were repeatedly overturned as I watched and helped him assemble his text according to a profoundly ecological logic of association—as he tried to capture on the page the physical and cultural ecosystem that nurtures (and sometimes threatens) an oval-leafed, glinting-green understory plant. In the published version of the book, a chapter about the practice of picking salal leaves—for example—illuminates a range of complicated, often unexpected, relationships as it shifts from musings on terms for picking, to news stories about salal “poaching,” to an interview transcript from a picking field trip, to close readings of literary fiction about brush-pickers and tangled thickets of salal. The book as a whole takes its form in relation to Ricou’s effort to “pay attention to salal as continuing: a process, a complex of connections going on” (*Salal* 3). Short but often dense chapters about salal ecology, propagation, and cultivation rub up against others about field guide descriptions, early European botanizing, and flower arranging. Ricou is careful to articulate relevant links throughout the chapters, but he is also interested in acknowledging disjunction and leaving the book open to associative possibility: the many quotations scattered in textboxes throughout *Salal* contribute to all three of these functions.

Salal was not, of course, the first book project in which Ricou experimented with method and form. Both *A Field Guide to “A Guide to Dungeness Spit”* and *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*—Ricou’s two earlier studies of the Pacific Northwest—are also the product of such activity. A study of David Wagoner’s poem “A Guide to Dungeness Spit,” *Field Guide* contains only short essayistic passages of writing by Ricou, placed alongside a range of contextual materials, including excerpts from archival documents, newspaper articles, guidebook descriptions, photographs, and Wagoner’s poetry. While *Arbutus/Madrone* is characterized by a more sustained essayistic form, each chapter is interspersed with textbox quotations in the same manner as *Salal*. And Ricou asks us to imagine his chapters as “files,” each file assembling readings of literary texts

that are connected, sometimes closely, sometimes more loosely, with the file's "label"—salmon, raven, rain, Sasquatch, island, intertidal, and more. "Dividing my reading notes into files implies *collecting* rather than systematic linear argument," Ricou explains, "stories and words and discoveries clustered according to some shifting set of associations" (*Arbutus* 2). The book concludes with twelve "afterfiles" (one for each file): originally bibliographic essays, they ultimately became what we might call the afterlife of the main text, a place where Ricou continued to make new associations and connections (2-3).

In a recent study of *Field Guide*, Nicholas Bradley² has attended closely to the relationship between form and method in Ricou's work. Bradley describes Ricou as a "curator or . . . bricoleur. He selects and assembles explicatory and contextualizing information, fabricating through the juxtaposition of fragments a polyphonic text that is neither conventionally argumentative nor narrative but instead associative, suggestive, and unresolved" (132-33). Stronger elements of narrative and argumentation return in *Arbutus/Madrone* and *Salal*, but the emphasis on assemblage, interrelationality, and open-endedness remains. Bradley also focuses on the way that, for Ricou, "a sense of surprise" functions as "a strategy for reading" both literature and place (119, 132). This is so in Ricou's engagement with Wagoner's poem—Bradley notes that Ricou is open "to be[ing] led by the poem into unfamiliar territory" (132)—and in his hopes for the contextual materials that he gathers together. As Ricou himself observes in a discussion of *Arbutus/Madrone's* textbox quotations, his aspiration is that, "when next encountered, [a quotation] will surprise me, and the reader, into some as yet undetected connection" (*Arbutus* 2). The willingness to be surprised is part of an overall stance of humility that is integral to Ricou's ethic as a reader, researcher, writer, and teacher.³ Wagoner's poem and Ricou's book both present themselves as guides, but they ask us to reconsider what it means to guide and be guided. When Ricou takes on the role of guide himself—a guide for Dungeness Spit, for a poem about Dungeness Spit, for the region and culture of salal and arbutus/madrone—he does so humbly, as Bradley notes, with a degree of irony, "assisting the novice but still learning" (134).

Picking up and briefly expanding this exploration of Ricou's approach, I want to emphasize the role that salal played in its ongoing development and articulation. Because it seems that at a certain point the plant itself became—like literary figures such as Wagoner, Robert Kroetsch, and Kim Stafford—a guide for Ricou. Time and again, in the "Salal" file and afterfile of *Arbutus/Madrone* and, especially, in *Salal*, Ricou displays what might be described as

an empathic understanding of the plant.⁴ He attends to salal not simply because he wants to learn *about* it, but because the plant seems to express itself in the landscape in a manner that provides a descriptive language for, and encourages an enhancement of, Ricou's approach to apprehending the world.

"What if I tried to listen to . . . the ways in which salal speaks? What would I hear?" Ricou asks at the beginning of *Salal* (2). Ricou will go on to suggest that salal "does a kind of writing on the landscape. It highlights the edges, marks the shade, insulates the base of Douglas-firs. Then there are . . . the growth patterns, the underground rhizomatics" (205). But before turning to these means of "expression," I want to pause and consider that initial question with its apparently obvious answer—that salal cannot speak, that Ricou will hear nothing (unless one counts—as Ricou certainly does—the birds and pickers' fingers rustling the plant's leaves, or the stories of those who grow, harvest, sell, study, or simply notice the plant). There is, to be sure, an apparent ridiculousness to the question, which demands, if we are to continue to read along with Ricou, that we abandon preconceived expectations and reconsider our mode of engagement.

The verb "to listen" has its roots in the Old English, *hlysnan*: "pay attention to." For Ricou, the act of listening is a mode of attention, and the question that opens his book is a means of articulating the wondering that inflects his attentive approach. With salal, Ricou extends and deepens the stance of humble, open attentiveness that he cultivated in his earlier work, pushing toward "deference and absence" in the presence of an apparently voiceless subject (206). Importantly, too, the laconic guide (Bradley 125) who, in *Field Guide*, steps back and lets contextual materials speak, returns in *Salal*—especially in Ricou's handling of the interviews that he gathered as part of his fieldwork. "I decided," Ricou explains,

that the salal-tellers should "talk" with a minimum of mediation. I wanted the voices to be heard in their own distinctiveness. They appear in an alternate typeface, and with very little of the question-and-answer primness often found in printed interviews. This format attempts to disperse authority, allowing the integrity and specialness of different actors with concerns, commitments, and interests very different from mine. (3)⁵

We might say that Ricou becomes plant-like in his own reticence, seeming to recognize and nurture a tendency toward silence as he attends to the quiet plant and its little-known stories.

Ricou reports from his reading of forest science papers that salal thrives best in thinned stands of timber—sunlight slanting into shadow—and will

only disappear in extremely low light (52-53). Its presence in the darker corners of the forest, and its knee- or hip-high bushiness, encourage a particular kind of looking in and movement through the physical landscape—off the path, into the shadows, beneath habitual notice. Multiple times in *Salal*, Ricou describes the displacement, discomfort, and fumbling ineptitude that mark the experience of the literature professor turned novice salal picker or forest ecology student, but the term “understory” becomes a bridge, for him, between his work as a literary critic and his learning in the new realms of salal. The understory plant that thrives in low light, the “uncharismatic” species that, despite its ubiquity, tends to go unnoticed (2), the many uncelebrated makers and keepers of salal stories: the “writing” that salal does in the landscape not only provides a metaphor for Ricou’s work as a regional critic, for his devotion to the edges of culture—it also expands and complicates that work. Ricou’s focus on salal demands that he step off the literary critic’s path into a tangled undergrowth, physical and cultural, that he does not know how to read or understand. He gets lost, rediscovers the path, and steps off it again. This becomes the approach, and *Salal*—its form emphasizing process, acknowledging unknowing and learning, and now and then finding the more comfortable (yet still surprising) space of a poem—its articulation.

And it is from salal—not, initially, from a theorist—that Ricou learns to describe the form of his book as rhizomatic. Salal grows and spreads using a system of underground stems (or rhizomes), from which it shoots out aerial stems (*Salal* 49). An important moment for Ricou was his encounter with forestry researcher John Tappeiner, who uses a thick bundle of salal rhizomes as a teaching aid (50). The tangle of salal stems seems to have concretized for Ricou the concept of largely unpatterned but integral interconnection that is foundational to his approach. Salal helps Ricou see and understand how, as Kim Stafford once put it, “coherence is born of random abundance” (31, qtd. in *Salal* 16). Ricou begins with salal, and only then turns to theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and their “proposal that *book* is a rhizome” (*Salal* 49, Ricou’s emphasis). “They note,” Ricou explains, “that the rhizome ‘connects any point with any other point’ (77). . . . A book—I’d like to think they’re talking about this book—is ‘an arrangement, it exists only in connection with other arrangements’ (3)” (*Salal* 49-50). Ricou’s task as curator-bricoleur, as arranger, is to carefully gather and trace salal connections—“[s]eedman to picker to winemaker”—indicating without reducing their complexity (205). It involves “identifying, even creating, the knots”—the possibilities for future surprise in the system, for “[u]nexpected salal connections” to reveal

themselves (48, 120). And it is, finally, to repeatedly gesture beyond the text to where salal and its network of stories continue to grow and spread and change, to die back, to regenerate. For Ricou, if *book* is a rhizome, it might also be a habitat—“an imagined habitat, a thicket of words, within which you read yourself into place” (*Salal* 118). In *Salal*, Ricou’s experiments with method and form create a book-space where readers do not simply learn about salal, but rather wander and wonder along with Ricou as he is guided into relationship with the plant in and across locations and contexts. In the *Salal* thicket, reading becomes an encounter with a guide engaged in—and encouraging—an ecologically mindful mode of inhabiting.

Notes from a Field Guide to Rain

To write in the Northwest is to write about rain.

—Laurie Ricou, *Arbutus*

Organizing *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*—a critical appreciation of a beloved, adopted region—as a series of files, Ricou attempts “to signal slightly less than precise organization and editorial discipline” (2). The book’s twelve files “suggest variety and overlap,” a recognition of the structure’s imprecisions, and they also leave room for what remains “unventured” (4). This critical strategy can be traced, I think, to Ricou’s interest in and research among archives. Something about the archivist’s venturing into the unventured, despite the textual nature of most archives, has helped to shape Ricou’s approach to the connections between literature and ecology. A library basement might seem to be a far cry from the ecological fieldwork that has become a hallmark of Ricou’s twenty-first-century scholarship, but the archive represents field inhabited by cultural jetsam and flotsam—not just metaphorically but literally, that is, the archive mirrors the entropy and possible interconnections of an ecosystem. The epigraph Ricou chooses for “Patricia Blondal’s Long Poem,” an essay about his work with the late Winnipeg writer’s papers in the University of British Columbia’s Special Collections, indicates the position he accepts as researcher. From Timothy Findley’s celebrated book *The Wars* (1978), a novel framed by an archivist’s ruminations on historical documents, the passage reads: “As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you’ll never find. This is what you have” (Findley 4). Having, for the archivist, the critic, the ecologist, always already admits not having enough to pretend completion. Though Blondal’s papers fit “in one file box” (Ricou, “Patricia” 291), and thus appear to be few enough to manage, to coax narrative coherence out of hiding, their sparseness poses more

questions than answers. However, “[a]s with any such collection—but perhaps here exaggerated by its confined size—the gaps frustrate and tantalize” (291). To be frustrated and tantalized. To be challenged and invited to explore, comfortable enough that some—many—gaps will remain unfilled. To work with what little you have. With archival as well as ecological fragments, the scholar’s choices are limited; but as happens when locating intertextual routes of reference between discrete texts, the scholar can move laterally in directions suggested by pieces and gaps alike.

In the spirit of collecting fragments imperative to Ricou’s scholarship, I want to venture into some unexamined territory. Instead of suggesting a new file, though—Banana Slug File? Harbour Seal File? Non-fat De-caf Latté File?—I offer some notes lateral to Ricou’s “Rain File,” the fourth entry in *Arbutus/Madrone*. Had they been published a decade or more ago, many of Basma Kavanagh’s poems from Vancouver Island, including the sequence “Taxonomy,” which I discuss here, would, I think, have found space in the Rain File, which occupies a scant amount of space in spite of a full page of epigraphs from four different sources. The Afterfile: Rain, too, is brief (one page). Most of the three-and-a-half pages of the “Rain File” quote and discuss works by American authors—no real surprise given the book’s cross-border, bioregional focus. Still, the imbalance might say more about west-coast Canadians’ tendency, as locals, to “not so much as glance” at the drenched phenomenon otherwise “worth gawking at” than it does about those writing from the American northwest coast (Ricou, *Arbutus* 61). This resident tendency to overlook the weather, whatever its impetus, opens the coastal wetness to scrutiny from outsiders, for whom such precipitation is perhaps less ubiquitous, less defining as a regional characteristic. Kavanagh’s efforts to gather observations about and categorize Vancouver Island rain reflect a long-term visitor’s perspective on what it means to experience not just rain but rains.

Rather than offer this reading of “Taxonomy” as an addendum to the Rain File, I want to position it as an offshoot of Ricou’s “claim for a texturing and linkage, for a pushing of the climate cliché that writes a complex balance of rain, and temperate rain forest . . . a gas to breathe, a filter through which to see, and an Aboriginal vision time” (*Arbutus* 63). The botanical metaphor deliberately evokes Ricou’s complementary work, *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*, in which he meticulously “listens” to the history, culture, literature, and ecology of the rhizomatic *Gautheria shallon*. Taking Deleuze and Guattari’s refusal of the dominant metaphor of the tree—as in, for example, Charles Darwin’s evolutionary tree of life—and embracing

their focus on “underground stems and aerial roots, the adventitious and the rhizome,” Ricou’s book-as-rhizome is “made not of units, but of dimensions, or rather of shifting directions” (Deleuze and Guattari 33, 77); the organism and the metaphor offer “special allure” (*Salal* 50) not only for what they contribute to Ricou’s book, but also for how the book, as an “arrangement,” gestures toward and links to “other arrangements” (Deleuze and Guattari 3). So, borrowing the rhizome metaphor from *Salal* and the file metaphor from *Arbutus/Madrone*, I offer this file on Kavanagh’s rain as one possible destination for the rhizome (one of many) cultivated in the “Rain File.”

Although a resident of Kentville, Nova Scotia, at the time of composing, Basma Kavanagh grounds her first poetry collection, *Distillō* (2012), firmly in the Pacific Northwest. As much as the sodden ground will allow, that is. The book’s opening sequence, “Taxonomy” (16-21), identifies six different species of rain, which the poet observed while in Port Hardy, British Columbia:

Distillo inlumino
Distillo silvestris
Imbris micans
Imbris delapidato
Pluvia pertendo
Pluvia densa

To name rain in this way is at once to be complicit in the empirical history of naming and to be alert among other namers. Each entry in the sequence functions much the way Ricou’s files do, albeit in a different generic register. As poetry, “Taxonomy” perhaps resembles David Wagoner’s “A Guide to Dungeness Spit,” the subject of Ricou’s *A Field Guide to “A Guide to Dungeness Spit”* (1997), which Maia Joseph discusses in her contribution here; as Ricou acquiesces “to be led by the poem into unfamiliar territory” (Bradley 132), I accept the speaker of Kavanagh’s sequence as a guide whose familiarity with Vancouver Island at once reveals her status as outsider and revels in her careful lyric observations. An epigraph informs us that in 2005 Port Hardy received 2184.7 mm of rain during 242 total days of rainfall.⁶ The book title hints at the opening sequence’s idiosyncratic structure—two of the rain species are named *Distillo*—while the enigmatic diacritic denoting a long (or heavy) vowel—the macron over the lower-case o, which does not appear in the species’ names—presages both the length of time rain dominates Port Hardy and the immense weight so much rain adds to such quotidian activities as running errands, cleaning the toilet, and walking.

Each short lyric in “Taxonomy” names a species of rain using the standard

binomial system of identifying genus and species. The scientific name is followed by brief characteristics to complete the poem's title or header. These names, of course, are invented by Kavanagh, and so in a sense parody scientific naming, simultaneously acknowledging the empirical value of names while engaging in a subtle critique of the practice. The poems themselves enact a descriptive mode vulnerable at once to a range of rainy clichés and the vicissitudes of individual experience. That both cliché and experience reside in the imaginations of outsiders complicates Kavanagh's task by inviting west-coasters' special scrutiny. The descriptive mode I'm reading in "Taxonomy" gestures toward more than purely functional descriptive language. Noting the rain enough to delineate six different types, despite the sense Ricou shares that rain permeates a Pacific Northwest consciousness, marks Kavanagh as coming from elsewhere. In the Pacific Northwest, "you're supposed to learn not to notice the rain" (Ricou 61), perhaps as a survival mechanism—describing and/or complaining only serves to reinforce what the body already knows. The careful observer, despite the risks, can offer fresh insights that even the most saturated local might appreciate.

While "Taxonomy" evokes a Linnaean natural history, and thus a scientific register inspired by fieldwork, its entries avoid unnecessary reduction on the way to celebrating dynamic, sensuous taxa. Members of the genera *Distillo*, *Imbris*, and *Pluvia* might not be organisms per se, but the language with which Kavanagh writes these rains activates a kinetic process implicating the rains as scriptive element (if not as elemental script). For Ricou, Ivan Doig's "visible rain is a form of writing" that "literally graphs the óros, writes the mountains. It has its own voices" (*Arbutus* 62). Mountains in Kavanagh's sequence remain underwritten, presences slowly shifting behind a deliquescent palimpsest. Rains as polyphony. Kavanagh's rains are active, the words she chooses to describe them predominantly verbs. *Distillo inlumino*, for example, "adorns," "shines," "glints," "glosses," "slicks," "lights," "gilds," "polishes," "films," and "bronzes" in quick succession. Kavanagh characterizes *D. inlumino* as "an illuminating drizzle; uncommon" (15). This, perhaps, is the rain David James Duncan writes about, which "soothed and softened everything," "hummed on the river pools and pattered on new paddles" (252). Duncan's "whispering sibilants" (Ricou 61) pre-echo the "wet whisper" Kavanagh insinuates in the midst of describing *D. inlumino*—a description of a description. "Taxonomy" pulses with such sibilance, assonance, and consonance. Alliteration alerts us to rain's—this rain's, all rains'—gratuitous grammar. (I'm not sure whether to thank or to blame Laurie for that last sentence.) Unlike Pacific Northwest

writers who tend, in Ricou's analysis, to answer the question of "how to write rain" with some "notion of the uninsistent" (Ricou 62), Kavanagh makes no qualms about realizing how rain inheres in the poet's fieldwork. The entries in "Taxonomy" write rain the way Ricou observes it, as "repetitive, redundant, and unremarkable" (63). Her verse embraces the repetition, animates the redundancy, and dissolves the unremarkable's negative prefix.

Consider how the sequence's final entry slips into using a single, unremarkable descriptor, as if to note the remarkable insistence of *Pluvia densa*, "a true rain, heavy and penetrating; common in autumn and winter" (20-21). Finally, Kavanagh succumbs to the most common rain verb: "The wall of water / falls / uninterrupted," she writes, providing no break from "thirty relentless days" (20). By this point, after six entries, the poet's thesaurus has run the gamut (and likely become waterlogged beyond use). Having relentlessly fallen, the rain has produced a singular condition best described with a word both succinct and accurate: "slogging, with wet hands, wet / gloves, wet shoes and socks, // I lift wet glasses off, smear wet lenses / with a wet cloth" (21). The resulting verse muddles spondaically, recapitulating the "swampy, saturated" ground, the inefficient acts of walking—"every step a labour"—and wiping away the rain's "rotten, ragged, sodden" effects.

Earlier, the poet's meditation on *Distillo silvestris* locates a specific "Here, deep in the gorge / at Marble River, beneath great trees at Quatse, / among graves near Ronning's garden, / on the silent, sandy trail to San Jo Bay" (16). Names can provide comfort, marks on a map describing a region, so that even the trees can be known simply—reverentially—as "great." The trees, one senses, have had their due, and their names tend not to affect the rain's behaviour. *D. silvestris* democratically "runs / the runnel / of every leaf" in the forest. Its presence—the header indicates that it is "generated within the rainforest"—articulates otherwise invisible rhizomatic links between various organisms (and thus connects in similar fashion to Ricou's books of the Pacific Northwest); working with gravity, *D. silvestris* can be seen

Fanning from needles
 onto herbs bent double with its weight,
 swelling fungus,
 rousing humus,
 blooming bracken,
 teasing moss and lichen,
 washing
 down
 nutrients . . . (16)

Again, the verbs in this passage tell the rain's status as active link: it not so much describes the various plants it touches—as rain for Doig graphs the mountains, say—as activates them in ways core to their individual being. In *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Tom Robbins suggests that “A seeker can go into the Great Northwest rain and bring back the Name he needs” (71). Kavanagh, a seeker from another coast, has inhabited a particular corner of the Pacific Northwest and come out with many names. Whether she (or we) needs them matters less than how she attends to the rains she encounters and organizes in verse. Let this be a further entry. File under, among, perpendicular to, rain.

The Practice of Homing

On the banks of the Goldstream, I sensed you could define a place in salmon. The migration of the Pacific salmon marks the limits of an eco-region.

—Laurie Ricou, *Arbutus*

In the opening lines of his “Salmon File,” Laurie Ricou describes witnessing the migration of salmon in the Goldstream River as “a rite of passage, an initiation into a new home” (*Arbutus* 99). Three years after moving from the coulees of southeastern Alberta to the lush coast of southwestern British Columbia, he and his family found themselves immersed in an ecological phenomenon that has defined not only home but homing for many who have witnessed and retold the story of salmon. “The place finds its form in the awesome migrations of the salmonid,” he writes, “that ancient story happening many times” (100). Ricou invites readers to explore the myriad stories framed by the epic migration of salmon as he incorporates accounts from First Nations cultures, environmental history, works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and the visual arts. As he considers various tributaries of the salmon story, this file reveals how the observation of a local phenomenon can extend into reflections on the broader ecological, economic, and cultural contexts salmon inhabit.

The “Salmon File” captures the significance of salmon in sustaining the Pacific Northwest, physically, spiritually, and imaginatively. As Ricou conveys, the salmon's influence is reflected in the central place of this species in ceremonies and rituals as well as in visual art and story. The first salmon rite, for example, a ceremony practiced in some form by many Indigenous nations of the Pacific Northwest, reveals the centrality of salmon to the First Nations of the region. This ceremony honours the annual return of salmon through a community feast, and as Ricou explains, “Whatever the variations

in the first salmon feast among greatly varied cultures, all ceremonies, in basic form, recognize the sustaining ecology by returning all or part of the remains of the salmon to the river/sea” (104). By combining a feast, prayers, and the return of salmon bones to the waters that brought them, these ceremonies acknowledge the importance of allowing some salmon to return to their source in order that the migration might continue.

Given the significance of salmon as a food source, their migration has helped to map the settlement of the Pacific Northwest. As Terry Glavin explains in *The Last Great Sea*, when salmon species “arose from their Ice Age refugia and headed into the North Pacific,” their annual return to the continents allowed human societies to settle with the assurance of a reliable food source (79). Both Glavin and Ricou note that salmon inspired settlement not only at the mouths of rivers, where they were in the best condition, but also in the Interior where the salmon were leaner, and dry winds allowed for long-term preservation (Glavin 79-80; Ricou, *Arbutus* 109). These settlement patterns illustrate Ricou’s assertion that “[r]eading the place bounded by the salmon story recognizes a region that is both salt water and fresh (and has a life both *in* and *out* of water), of rain forest and desert, of metropolitan centre and hinterland *inter*-depending” (104). This interdependence is central to Ricou’s depiction of the Pacific Northwest as a region spanning ecozones and political boundaries to encompass a rich diversity of species, stories, and communities. “Salmon do not recognize the international boundary between Canada and the United States,” he writes, “in swimming either through the Strait of Juan de Fuca or up the Columbia River system” (113). Salmon are emblematic, therefore, not only of what it means to make one’s home in a place, but also to explore and expand its boundaries.

Emerging from a myriad of streams and tributaries, salmon migrate to the ocean, where they remain for one to six years, depending on their species, some travelling as many as sixteen thousand kilometres before returning to the streams of their birth to spawn (Taylor 5-6; Bowling 159). Viewers who catch a glimpse of this circular journey cannot help but reflect on the astounding homing instincts it requires. Ongoing speculation surrounding the means of navigation, however, lends an intriguing element of mystery to the salmon migration. This is both a local story, as each salmon seeks the precise riverbed of its birth, and one that encourages us to question whether a region containing such an impressive journey can be bounded. Defining a place by salmon, as Ricou proposes in the epigraph of this section, suggests a

region bordered by the fluid lines of a riverine story, rather than by political boundaries that ignore the ecological or geographical nuances of place. Such a definition conforms to one of the primary tenets of bioregionalism—the delineation of place according to ecological rather than political criteria.

In the foreward to Joseph E. Taylor's *Making Salmon*, William Cronon identifies salmon as keystone species, that is, "organisms so central to the functioning of an ecosystem, so tied to a multitude of other creatures, that their removal can have far-reaching, even devastating consequences" (ix). Not only do salmon provide sustenance to numerous mammals, birds, and fish species, they also help to fertilize and sustain the lush Pacific Northwest forests surrounding coastal ecosystems.⁷ Ricou locates his "Salmon File" near the centre of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* not because of the salmon's role as an ecological keystone, however, but rather as an imaginative one. Salmon inspire questions such as "How do they get back?" and "How do they find home?" (113), which are compelling in a scientific context and equally intriguing when considered in the contexts of narrative and experience. Where do we find home in an age of increasing national and international mobility? What leads us back to our homelands or compels us to explore far-flung places? And if circumstances cause us to dwell in new landscapes or communities, how do these places become "home?" By focusing on the primacy of the salmon story, Ricou offers a Pacific Northwest characterized by relentless rhythms of arrival and departure. As he writes with an ear tuned to tides, rain, and rivers, his readers cannot help but consider the impact of ecological rhythms on their lives and landscapes.

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula K. Heise finds the awareness of local places that characterizes bioregionalism insufficient to address the environmental concerns of an increasingly globalized planet. By asking us to listen to the places in which we live, however, Ricou's criticism and pedagogy encourage an affiliation with these local places that is crucial to engaging with global environmental issues. Salmon provide a powerful example of species bound into the complex web of international concerns. As the human population continues to increase, the importance of sustaining a plentiful source of protein is immediately evident. Salmon farming, however, which is often viewed as a means of sustaining salmon populations, negatively impacts the health of wild salmon and the ecosystems they help to support (Morton n. pag.). Given the role of salmon as a keystone species, their survival in the wild is crucial to the health of forests and species bordering salmon streams. As salmon have been extirpated from

vast stretches of their original habitat due to urban development, logging, pollution, and the construction of hydroelectric dams, the impact of their loss resonates throughout aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. In light of such ecological concerns, Ricou's focus on the importance of species to defining place provides a crucial point of entry to an engagement with local and, by extension, global environmental issues. Those who have watched salmon spawn in a nearby stream or understand their role in nourishing carbon-sequestering forests are more likely to advocate for these species at the national and international levels. Those who understand how the loss of the salmon story would impoverish the cultural mythology of a region are also likely to invest time and resources in advocating for their preservation. Ricou's scholarship inspires his readers to explore their local places and, through this exploration, to consider the significance of these places in broader ecological and cultural contexts.

Like his scholarship, Ricou's pedagogy encourages an exploration of the interconnections between species and place. His recent contribution to *The Bioregional Imagination*, entitled "Out of the Field Guide," details his approach to Habitat Studies. He presents the curriculum for this course as though explaining it to a new class on the first day of the semester, outlining the "rather speculative guidelines" for the term project and explaining the importance of field trips, interdisciplinary research, and collaboration to the successful completion of this project (349-51). In this first class, each student will randomly select "a particular species, most of which inhabit, in one way or another, the Pacific slope region of North America" (350). Students will then spend the semester pursuing this species in literature, art, museums, music, language, food, medicine, ecology, anthropology, and popular culture. Just as Ricou places no limits on the sources students may use, he also encourages creativity in determining the form of the final project. "[T]hink of yourself composing a *biography* of gull," he suggests, "a *story* of red huckleberry, an *archaeology* of the purple star, a *poetics* of snow goose" (350). This wide-ranging exploration is also central to his own scholarship, imbuing it with a sense of discovery and wonder.

Following his explanation of the term project, Laurie leads his class to a western red cedar on the UBC campus to "touch its bark, smell its leaves, and listen for what bird might be perching within it" (349). On this first of many field trips, he establishes his role as guide and fellow seeker, encouraging his students to develop an attentiveness to our natural surroundings. Perhaps the greatest gift a teacher can give is to show us how little we know of the

places we live and then offer a map to guide our exploration. Or perhaps the greatest gift he can give is to tell us what *he* doesn't know and then ask for our help exploring. Laurie's texts are a testament to collaboration—with scientists, poets, salal harvesters, and students—and he encourages the same spirit of collaboration in Habitat Studies.

On the first day of Laurie's class, years ago, I picked the rufous-sided towhee from a hat and began the task of reading the Pacific Northwest through its piercing red eye. In David James Duncan's *The River Why*, I heard "the spiral watersongs of towhees" that accompany the protagonist, Gus, on his trek to the source of the Tamawanis River (237). While towhees were not the Chinook salmon navigating the journey to their spawning grounds, they were an integral part of the understory, as "they sifted through the hazel clumps, watching [Gus] with crazed red eyes" (237). My trek led me to field guides and fridge magnets, to my uncle's garden on Saltspring Island, and to the wild rose in my parents' backyard where towhees forage amongst late-season rosehips. In the years since I completed this project, I have recognized its influence on my dissertation topic, my creative and critical writing, and the quality of my listening. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is that it is still ongoing. More than a decade after completing Laurie's class, I still greet towhees with a blend of wonder and recognition, whether I encounter them in texts or in the underbrush. I still receive notes from Laurie and other Habitat Studies participants when they find towhees, a reminder that these projects, like Laurie's files, remain open. Laurie reveals that literary study is not bounded by text, or discipline, or region, but only by limits of our curiosity. He also demonstrates how engagement with place can radiate from a single class to all the future places in which we find ourselves.

After Region

Question
and answer together
inhabit the ground.
—Robert Bringham, "Gloria, Credo, Sanctus et Oreamnos Deorum"

In "Anasayú File," the concluding chapter prior to his afterfiles, Ricou "cautions that the affiliations [he has] cultivated" between the authors and texts in his book lead to "a sub-species of regionalism that may thrive in some conditions, but will be profoundly vulnerable in others" (*Arbutus* 149). Far from an example of hedging—as if the book might well be dismissed as

so much local colour—this caution recognizes “the often pejorative label” that has accompanied discussions of regionalist criticism in Canadian literary studies (Fiamengo 241). If each section of this essay represents a sub-species—literary critical, ecocritical, bioregional—eking out an existence in different regions of study, taken together they demonstrate that one scholar’s idiosyncratic focus on the particulars of place can encourage a rich biodiversity of responses, thereby influencing the study of Canadian literature more broadly. Or, as Ricou puts it in “Afterfile: Anasayú,” “local knowledge, even nostalgia, need not be inconsistent with nation-building” (205)—with the impulse, that is, to think through how regional concerns inform national responses to, say, botanical metaphors, extreme climate conditions, and salmon behaviour ecology. Like the seeds of a particularly robust plant species catching on shoes or backpacks during a hike, Ricou’s books have moved with each of us, as have the questions he asked and the observations he made in the classroom. Will they remain vulnerable or will they thrive? “Question / and answer together / inhabit the ground” (155). Yes.

NOTES

- 1 See Ricou’s “Out of the Field Guide: Teaching Habitat Studies” for a detailed explanation of the course.
- 2 Bradley is another of Ricou’s former students.
- 3 In a review of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, Robert Bringhurst remarks: “[t]hese *Files* are the writing of a man who listens carefully to words and loves to read, but also of a man who loves to teach, has done so all his adult life, and has, I think, been humbled by his students’ brusque repudiation of all their elders’ claims to greater knowledge or authority” (104).
- 4 In using this phrase, I am thinking of Ricou’s assessment of David Douglas, one of the first European botanists to encounter salal. Ricou notes: “Douglas’s biographer, Athelstan George Harvey, describes him as . . . excessively modest and shy (39). Maybe the modest Douglas empathizes with the unpretentious salal. The ‘shady stillness’ of the rainforest, discouraging to many, is congenial to Douglas—according to his biographer, the shade-loving Douglas makes the shade-loving [salal] his favourite” (*Salal* 148).
- 5 Ricou adds later: “In some sense, the presentation is distorting—it leaves out a measure of dialogue. But the measure is slight: in most of the interviews . . . I had to ask very few questions. My interventions tended to consist of encouraging ‘Uh-huhs’ and a surprised ‘Oh really’” (16-17).
- 6 Ricou shares a similar statistic: “Mean annual rainfall at the Vancouver International Airport is 1055.4 mm” (*Arbutus* 60).
- 7 As Alexandra Morton explains in *Saving Salmon*, such contributions are evident even to the naked eye, as years with higher than average salmon returns can be identified by larger than average growth rings in trees.

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