

# “KLEE WYCK”

## *Redefining Region through Marginal Realities*

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**E**MILY CARR'S FIRST BOOK, earned the Governor-General's award for best *non-fiction* in Canada in 1942. But it has, since then, rarely been considered as history or even “reliable” autobiography. *Klee Wyck* as text, however, is valuable history — not simply because it explains the journey behind some of Canada's most esteemed artworks — but because Carr's subjective expression of experience challenges our colonizing history by telling stories about marginal realities which we have never liked to hear. The adventures recounted in the book were memories of her trips to paint the forested Pacific Coast and the totem art of its indigenous people between 1898 and 1930. Carr was overwhelmed by the national recognition for her book because it was more than she had received in all her years of painting. Yet despite *Klee Wyck*'s instant popular success as personal anecdote and travelogue, the nature of critical study of the text to this point reveals mostly a superficial appreciation of the author's vision and skill and little appreciation of the power of this text to challenge dominant values. But even on the level of style, it was a book which sought and struggled for the power of re-definition. Carr used neologisms, creative arrangement of vignettes, and atypical figures of speech reflecting a naturalist philosophy. Why, then, has our response to this text been to further marginalize it by studying it in the limited context of naive autobiography?

One tendency has been for critics and biographers to contribute to the undervaluation of the text by assuming that Carr's deceptively simple and subjective style is naive and artless — “natural.” (Tippett 249-51, Sanger 234-35) As Heather Murray has recently observed, wilderness literature written by women is simultaneously canonized and marginalized in Canadian literature according to the bias favouring culture over wilderness, a colonial heritage in our criticism. (77) Murray holds that Canadian women writers may give highly perceptive accounts of nature, but the accounts themselves are seen as “natural” rather than controlling and therefore further removed from culture. While some literary critics have scrutinized Carr's unique perspective and prose style as further evidence of her painter's eye

and her legendary personal eccentricity, even the more sympathetic ones, who have claimed *Klee Wyck* as national artifact, have done so almost patronizingly, overlooking the political subversiveness of Carr's vision and staying on the level of the comic, the visual, or the romantic without penetrating the ideology of the text. For example, though early reviews of the book praised it for portraying the Indians as friends, there has been little or no analysis of how Carr represents her personal friendships in the context of cultural decimation. Similarly, the nature of *Klee Wyck* as female life-writing has been glossed over; few critics have discussed the controversial aspects of Carr's female subjectivity in terms of current theories of Canadian women's writing. Instead, critics seem preoccupied with arguing factually against Carr's version of her own life. As Dorothy Livesay protested:

So, in the long run, what does it matter to literature or art whether or not in real life the artist was unpredictable, irascible? at times overwhelmingly devoted to someone, at times spiteful? What does it matter if the artist was careless about getting dates in chronological order and contradictory about how events took place? It is a truism worth repeating, as Derek Reimer in *Sound Heritage* emphasizes, that "in examining the past . . . what people *thought* happened is just as important as what *actually* did happen." (147)

Livesay congratulated one biographer for dispelling unflattering myths about Carr's legend; but her main point was to protest the naïve supposition that we can know a "true" definitive story to correct the ones which Carr has written herself. Responding to the glut of biographies which began to appear in the late 1970s, Livesay took the opportunity to validate Carr's autobiographical works as subjective art. Somewhere during the argument over fiction or fact, the truth of what the author was saying, in any fundamental sense, had been dismissed.

*Klee Wyck* was the first book Carr wrote and the most feminist of her autobiographical works — probably because the book's focus on native culture and wilderness allowed her to recreate the empowering experience of marginal realities. With the exception of her painting journal, *Hundreds and Thousands*, the subsequent autobiographical works — *The Book of the Small*, *The House of All Sorts*, and *Pause* — emphasize constraint, rebellion, and survival more than empowerment. The name "Small," which she gave to herself as child and to her child-like side in adulthood, reflects as much about the restricted space a staunch Victorian upbringing allowed a vibrant and sensitive girl as it does about the author's age and place in the family. Small's fierce sense of individuality and her painful rebellion echo the spirit and events in the life-writing of Carr's contemporary, Nellie McClung, particularly her *Clearing in the West* (1935). However, while McClung grew into the political analyst who could then articulate her anger and her place in her region in terms of women's conditions, local and national politics, and the politicized community of prairie farm women, Carr lived out her anger in contrariness and isolation with only the occasional spurt of explicit feminist indignation. She did not begin

writing for an audience until her seventies when poor health kept her from going into the forest to paint. First, as an isolated woman painter, and then much later as a writer without an explicitly feminist agenda, Carr could find a sense of community and belonging only outside of her culture in a new symbolic order. She developed a love of region and sense of bonding by reaching into a space beyond the exclusionist reality of patriarchy — into nature and native civilization, and her own female subjectivity.

What is implicit in *Klee Wyck's* redefinition of region is the constant pull between the dominant culture and values of Carr's time, which she herself depicts as colonial, materialist, Victorian, and patriarchal, and the marginal perspective she learns to adopt in the forest as a freer, larger spirit than her own world would permit her to be. The book does not depict dominant culture explicitly because it begins with the adventure of leaving the city behind and freeing the spirit. Carr was, as all women are to varying degrees, excluded from patriarchal society. Exclusion of the other gender is precisely what patriarchy means:

*Patriarchy* — Has been described as a way of structuring reality in terms of good/evil, redemption/guilt, authority/obedience, reward/punishment, power/powerless, haves/have-nots, master/slave. The first in each opposite was assigned to the patriarchal father, or the patriarch's Father God, frequently indistinguishable from one another. The second, to women as 'the other' and in time to all 'others' who could be exploited. The father did the naming, the owning, the controlling, the ordering, the forgiving, the giving, considering himself capable of making [the] best decisions for all. (Nellie Morton in Kramarae, 323)

Having given voice to the usually objectified and excluded native race in her own narrative, Carr also defies her own objectification as the other sex. *Klee Wyck* succeeds at retrieving aspects of native art and culture from obscurity but not objectively as regional artifacts, subjectively as personal history. As she voiced scenes of female support, maternity, eroticism, female ritual, and the power of totem art and the forest itself, she drew a circle around patriarchal reality, not to exclude it, but to make a place big enough, beyond its limits, for herself and the others who had been excluded.

In addition to sketching the land and the natives visually, *Klee Wyck* tells at least two stories of the region simultaneously: the first has a public theme, the negative eclipse of native culture and land by colonial power, while the second has a private theme, a positive unveiling of female strength through the primal forest and matriarchal aspects of native culture. By refusing to separate public from private, however, and holding both of these stories simultaneously in focus, one sees the importance if not the pre-eminence of a kaleidoscope of other muted stories in the text. The heroine/narrator's receptiveness and deep involvement with eclipsed elements on the edge of a colonizing culture enable her to transform herself into "Klee Wyck," (Laughing One) but also enable her to translate the marginal voices into

narration. One may suspect there is a danger in describing the subversive quality of her laughter of diluting its joy, but not if one keeps the tone of the text and its multiple voices in mind.

Through her writing, Carr chose to replace the dominant white male discourse of her time with the muted stories which she had found in the forest, among the native women, and through the art of the totem. In choosing her subject and mode of expression, she made ideological choices which are reflected in the structure, tone, imagery, and style. By choosing to articulate the story of many, the marginal ones, over the usually told story of the dominant, Carr challenged white male dominance while she affirmed feminist, cross-cultural, and naturist values. In order to register this challenge, however, and to acknowledge the stylistic adaptations Carr used to voice it, readers must consent to read her prose as a product of her convictions rather than as mere landscape. For example, Carr's intense love for the natural features of the west coast region has given nature its own voice in her narrative. Yet this naturist voice, which I hear as the most important in the work, is generally rushed over, abstracted, or sentimentalized in critical discussions. There are no characters in *Klee Wyck* more memorable than the forest and the native art carved from it. The other characters, including numerous sketches of native people and the heroine/narrator herself, all seem ultimately to blend together in the blurring of limits which occurs in the intense pantheistic spirit of the stories. "Wilderness," in this narration of region, expands beyond the function of setting; it becomes frame, spiritual character, and voice.

Another empowering aspect of the text is the cross-fertilization which occurs as part of Carr's experience of native culture. Through totem art, Carr grasped the rootedness of art in nature. Contact in this sense takes on intensely personal overtones; although the physical landscape bears the marks of European contact in the abandoned Indian villages, the masses of Indian graves, and the fading and deteriorating totems, the emotional landscape tells a more powerful tale of banished spiritualism. As Carr relates her personal gains from native culture, she captures an enduring sense of loss in the shadow of materialism. For the native women Carr contacts, and for Carr herself, this sense of loss is palpable and uniquely female, striking very close at the roots of maternal love with its expansive sense of nurturing and continuity. Throughout *Klee Wyck* one hears the soft padding of small bare feet as Carr focuses on the birth and death of native babies. Female space is as much the reality of the west coast she depicts as the mountains and the sea. It is part of the mystery she finds in the silence of the "hugging" forest. It is also part of the reality of the region she experiences at a particular moment in history. European contact meant, along with augmenting materialism and missionary work, the imposition of patriarchal values on indigenous women. Carr sketches this aspect of colonization indirectly by focussing on the positive; she identifies womanliness and femaleness as positive attributes in native communities and the totem god D'Sono-

qua — the Wild Woman of the Woods. She fervently embraces the native culture's non-patriarchal symbolic order and comes to terms personally with a female god. She also allows her intense feelings of nature eroticism to speak through the sensuousness of the text as it spoke through the sensuousness of her paintings.

### *Wilderness*

Carr creates a unique relation to space in her narrative by contrasting, from the outset, the constrictive Christian mores of the white world to the more expansive pantheistic native beliefs in the wilderness. She diminishes the white world, often through structural irony and caricature, in order to make a place for native experience on the emotional level. Her affirmation of native culture is achieved through the same highly visual, sensory, spiritual, and subjective method of reporting which she uses to depict nature. The result is that the book is firmly grounded in the particularity of the region, but in a space which existed beyond her own culture, encompassing and thereby diminishing the dominant hegemony.

We came to Toxis, which was the Indian name for the Mission House. It stood just above hightide water. The sea was in front of it and the forest behind. (3)

Toxis sat upon a long, slow lick of sand, but the beach of the Indian village was short and bit deep into the shoreline. Rocky points jutted out into the sea at either end of it.

Toxis and the village were a mile apart. The school house was half-way between the two and, like them, was pinched between sea and forest. (4)

Carr's narrative of discovery begins by situating the human on a grander canvas of sea and forest, a juxtaposition which has the effect not so much of peopling that natural landscape as of enlarging the natural by diminishing the human. The overriding aesthetic which guides the narrator's eye is one of space: in her depiction of houses, people, and culture, open space consistently admits freedom, energy, and naturalness whereas enclosure in various forms prefigures spiritual smallness, stagnation, and unnaturalness. In the passages quoted the houses seem dwarfed because they are "pinched" by the expansive, moving landscape: "a long, slow lick of land," "bit deep into," and "jutted out into." Also dwarfed is the church, called by its native name "Toxis" and therefore seen and renamed through distanced eyes.

The diminishment of the two missionaries is achieved through caricature; they are tightly-wrapped in "straight, dark dresses buttoned to the chin" (3) and renamed "Greater Missionary" and "Lesser Missionary," as though having only bird-like status. Comically immovable and trapped in their own gravity, the missionaries never penetrate beyond the outer edge of the forest. The one hates walking there because she can not see the forest floor beyond the "growing green" covering, but the other strides fearlessly over the trails blasting on a cowhorn, to which the Indian children pay no attention. The image of the Greater Missionary going to the

village where she “hand-picked her scholars from the huts” appears merely ineffectual rather than ominous, unlike the powerful image of the child-stealing Wild Woman of the Woods whom Carr will meet as she goes deeper into the forest (5).

An immediate contrast to the missionaries’ tightly-clothed bodies is the Chief: “His crumpled shoes hung loose as if they dangled from strings and had no feet in them” (4); and later, the native women: they “waddled leisurely towards church,” “full skirts billowing about their legs.” (9) Two scenes of nudity, a pantless native man at church and one in the forest, create, early in *Klee Wyck*, associations between native bodies and open space. The nudity is iconoclastic in terms of Carr’s turn-of-the-century protestant upbringing but ultimately it strikes a note in the narrative more expansive than negative or fragmenting. Perhaps because Carr remembers the liberating sensation of observing innocence in physical freedom as she narrates these vignettes, she creates the sensation of nudity as a breath of air:

Women sat on one side of the church. The very few men who came sat on the other. The Missionaries insisted that men come to church wearing trousers, and that their shirt tails must be tucked inside the trousers. So the Indian men stayed away.

“Our trespasses” had been dealt with and the hymn, which was generally pitched too high or too low, had at last hit square, when the door was swung violently back, slopping the drinking bucket. In the outside sunlight stood old Tanook, shirt tails flapping and legs bare. He entered, strode up the middle of the room and took the front seat. (9)

The text provides sufficiently positive values to lead us into the all-encompassing, welcoming space of native culture and the wilderness. The narrator savours the freedom which promises a strange natural mix of decay and sweetness:

In this place belonging neither to sea nor to land I came upon an old man dressed in nothing but a brief shirt. . . . The old man sawed as if aeons of time were before him, and as if all the years behind him had been leisurely and all the years in front of him would be equally so. There was strength still in his back and limbs but his teeth were all worn to the gums. The shock of hair that fell to his shoulders was grizzled. Life had sweetened the old man. He was luscious with time like the end berries of the strawberry season. (10-11)

In the opening chapter there are mainly humorous negative representations of confinement through European culture: whereas Carr was “shut up tight at Toxis” (6), the Indians “folded themselves into their houses and slept” (8); whereas the Mission House looked “as if it were stuffed with black” (3), Indian houses had been “soaked through and through with sunshine” (6); when the school house “shifted its job to church” on Sundays, the Indian women had to painfully “squeeze their bodies into the children’s desks” (9); the men were not admitted unless they followed a dress code, but the Indian houses freely admitted everyone without even the convention of a knock and “always” with a grunt of welcome” (6). The space which Carr found in the native homes was a welcoming space, much like the one she felt waiting for her in the forest, precisely because it

could release her from certain restricting conventions and beliefs. The contrast between a confining white world and a more open native world will gather weight and meaning as the narrative focuses on the distance between the two worlds in terms of loss, but at first the contrast is sketched lightly and comically.

In several scenes the narrator is conscious of the natives observing her. When they, as opposed to she, are the specularizing subject, a reversal takes place which shows the narrator's flexibility and openness to the separate reality of the narrated object. Of course, the natives actually did observe her and so she is reporting what possibility opening onto meaning. The opening prayer scene directs our attention ahead into the "wilderness" toward the promise of new knowledge rather than backward in a negative gaze. Carr's technique of contrasting conceptual worlds with comic effect and her affinity with innocents makes her distancing from austere Christian worship light and promising rather than alienating.

All her life, Carr remained fervently religious by integrating pantheistic principles into her Christian faith. The space explored in *Klee Wyck* may sometimes be of spiritual and cosmic dimension, but it is always clearly identifiable as the rainforests of the West Coast. Her individual quest is through a spiritual landscape that never detaches itself from its natural roots, as her artist's creed affirms:

"enter into the life of the trees. Know your relationship and understand their language, unspoken, unwritten talk. . . . Let the spoken words remain unspoken, but the secret internal yearnings, wonderings, seekings, findings — in them is the communion of the myriad voices of God. . . ." (*Hundreds and Thousands*, 30-1)

Eva-Marie Kröller has suggested that the author's feeling of union with nature both negates Victorian values and patriarchy while actually affirming "the mannerisms of patriarchal authority" by resurrecting her father's flights into romanticism. (94) But, the psycho-sexual implications of the wilderness passages in *Klee Wyck* seem more to point beyond romantic flight, which is fundamentally transcendent, to a more earthy and holistic attachment to the particularity of place. Carr loved her homeland, identified it with expansiveness and freedom, and felt strongly bonded to it. When going through an emotional breakdown during her studies in London, she would recall: ". . . Oh, I wanted my West! I wasn't a London lady." (*Growing Pains*, 124) When Carr pined for her homeland, however, it was for the wilderness and the coastal landscape rather than for the city of Victoria where she grew up. To her mind the attraction of the West was its wildness and the concept of region was chiefly the space beyond Victorian culture. Of her expeditions Carr would recall with fondness the lack of limits:

No part of living was normal. We lived on fish and fresh air. We sat on things not meant for sitting on, ate out of vessels not meant to hold food, slept on hardness that bruised us; but the lovely, wild vastness did something to it all. I loved every bit of it — no boundaries, no beginning, no end, one continual shove of growing — edge of land meeting edge of water, with just a ribbon of sand between. Sometimes the

ribbon was smooth, sometimes fussed with foam. Trouble was only on the edges; both sea and forests in their depths were calm and still. Virgin soil, clean sea, pure air, vastness by day, still deeper vastness in dark when beginnings and endings joined.  
(*Growing Pains*, 78)

Her positive aesthetic for the blurred limits of west coast landscape translated itself into some of the most evocative natural descriptions in *Klee Wyck*:

the sea, sky, and beach of Skidegate were rosily smoothed into one. There was neither horizon, cloud, nor sound; of that pink, spread silence even I had become part, belonging as much to sky as to earth, as much to sleeping as waking as I went stumbling over the Skidegate sands. (78)

The narrator's perception of limits and of limitlessness set the narrative tone of the book. The focalization shifts between the narrative perspective of the vulnerable individual, enfeebled and discomforted by the hostile elements, and the vision of an artist who sees the grandeur of the forest and sea and is moved to discover and communicate its power and mystery. This shifting perspective invites the reader to experience "wilderness" through both a sense of immediacy and a sense of awe. Quoted out of context of the whole work, these shifts in perspective seem great leaps in tone, but it is precisely the frequency and regularity of such abrupt transitions which make Carr's writing style unique. It is an uncontrived and transparent style because it subordinates itself to its subject and the author's emotion, and it is a memorable style in that it accommodates the concrete, the personal, and the sublime. For example, as vulnerable interloper she reports:

It seemed an awful thing to shatter that silence with a shout, but I was hungry and I dared not raise my veil till I got far out on the Naas. Mosquitoes would have filled my mouth. (53)

I felt like an open piano that any of the elements could strum on. (45)

But as artist who feels unity with the sublime, Carr sheds the comic persona of interloper:

The room was deathly still. Outside, the black forest was still, too, but with a vibrant stillness tense with life. From my bed I could look one storey higher into the balsam pine. Because of his closeness to me, the pine towered above his fellows, his top tapering to heaven. (8)

Grappling with the psycho-sexual implications of wilderness space in *Klee Wyck* is necessary because the narrative treats the forest in such physical, and at times erotic terms. For example, Carr expresses her awe and her longing for the welcoming space of the "hugging" forest and once again defines it in opposition to the colonizers' dominant culture:

It must have hurt the Indians dreadfully to have the things they had always believed trampled on and torn from their hugging. Down deep we all hug something. The



great forest hugs its silence. The sea and the air hug the spilled cries of sea-birds. The forest hugs only silence; its birds and even its beasts are mute. (8)

There is more to the hugging gesture than sheer expansiveness: as Catherine Sheldrick-Ross has observed, it is the nurturing gesture which will transfix Carr in her later meeting with the totem mothers of Kitwancool (91, 102), who affirm the same womanliness seen in D'Sonoqua, *The Wild Woman of the Forest*. The hug expresses a physicality and breadth of inclusiveness for female strength and desire that Carr's own culture did not permit.

While nature eroticism in Carr's paintings may be readily visible, there is a tendency to overlook the physicality and sensuousness of her wilderness prose. Annis Pratt has indicated that when female heroes feel a close affinity with nature and native animism it is often because, from their marginal position, they see society as the engulfing monster which threatens to enclose them in restrictive roles (unlike Frye's male hero who fears being engulfed by nature). In "Affairs with Bears: Some Notes towards Feminist Archetypal Hypotheses for Canadian Literature," Pratt reasons that an archetypal manifestation of the Canadian female hero's identification with nature is "an imagery of plunging *through* enclosures into the open spaces of nature . . . as if Canadian images of societal enclosures constitute modes of access, open at one end." (165) Pratt goes on to postulate that one such image of passage may be the sexual affair with an asocial lover. "Green-world lovers are necessary to women precisely because women are unnecessary as complete beings in society." (173) Through the "green-world lover, who appears as an alternative to societally acceptable suitors, husbands, and lovers," female heroes may reclaim the erotic potential which patrilineal society has made an object of shame, fear, and taboo. (173) In other words, whereas patriarchal society has sought to control and "diminish the potency" of the "ancient triple goddess — young virgin, nurturing mother, and wise old woman," wilderness and naturist religions such as native animism can restore the wholeness of the goddess by restoring her eroticism and her cyclical powers of reproduction. (164) According to Pratt's analysis, the archetypal encounter with a greenworld lover is not always specifically sexual in the coital sense, but may be a form of naturalistic epiphany, and the lover is not necessarily a man but any wholly marginal outsider; the greenworld lover may be an animal, or even a plant or a rock through which the female hero experiences natural epiphany outside of culture. Carr's wilderness narrative is replete with moments of epiphany before natural scenes, but what is also interesting, in relation to Pratt's hypothesis, is that Carr consciously decided to opt out of societally approved relationships in her life and to devote herself instead to nature art.

It is well known from her paintings and her personal legend that the physicalness of the forest held a strong fascination for Carr. The towering trees painted with a sense of movement and growth are usually superficially labelled phallic. When the

young man who was her most serious suitor traveled all the way across the ocean to propose to her while she was studying in London, she reflected that he “was like a bit of British Columbia, big, strong, handsome. I had to stiff myself not to seem too glad, not to throw my arms round him, deceiving him into thinking other than I meant.” (*Growing Pains*, 140) Though that chapter of her autobiography is ostensibly about the suitor, bearing his name as title, it is chiefly devoted to a description of Britain’s tame and manicured forests contrasting them unfavorably to west coast forests. This upset of feminine priorities suggests that Carr’s decision to remain celibate was founded not only in her choice to devote herself to her art, but also in her preference for the frank sensuality which she could experience through nature eroticism. Elsewhere in her autobiography, in the chapter titled “Love and Poetry,” she remembers: “From the underscored passages in my poets, poetry did not touch love as deeply as it touched nature and beauty for me. Marked passages are all earth and nature” (80) — this self-reflection followed by a passionate description of a train ride through the Rockies.

Carr explains the degree of prudery she struggled with in “Difference Between Nude and Naked” in *Growing Pains* (29-31); she realizes “The modesty of our families was so great it almost amounted to wearing a bathing suit when you took a bath in a dark room. . . . So because of our upbringing Adda and I supposed our art should be *draped*.” (emphasis added, 29) In Carr’s time female art students, if allowed at all into life study classes, were painting only female nudes; but even without having to confront male nudes they were struggling with carefully implanted feminine prudery toward the nude bodies of their own gender. If she invested her forest scenes with so much eroticism, it may have been because she, like other female artists within a masculinist tradition, had never been allowed or trained to express desire for the male body. Frequently described as prudish, even “frigid” (e.g. Tippett 45), Carr was, nonetheless, aware of this aspect of her own character as both a product of socialization and a limitation to artistic expression. (She never did write in any of her books about the deeper reasons which may have contributed to her turn from heterosexual love to the marginal form of eroticism. But in a letter to her closest friend just a few years before her death, she hinted at her father’s incestuous advances calling it “the brutal telling” and explaining how he had ruined something beautiful and natural by making it ugly for her. [Tippett, 13, 60; Shadbolt 21; Letter to Ira Dilworth, *Journals of Emily Carr*, Public Archives, Easter Monday 1935].)

Carr’s narration of wilderness experience in *Klee Wyck* consistently builds on an amplified awareness of the smells, sounds, touch, and taste of natural life as well as on its explicitly stated visual beauty. This physical description transforms wilderness from mere setting into a substantial character in the work, various aspects of which are seen and felt by the narrator and experienced over and over as an active spirit and presence:

There was no soil to be seen. Above the beach it was all luxuriant growth; the earth was so full of vitality that every seed which blew across her surface germinated and burst. The growing things jumbled themselves together into a dense thicket; so tensely earnest were things about growing in Skedans that everything linked with everything else, hurrying to grow to the limit of its own capacity; weeds and weaklings alike threw in the rich moistness. (17-18)

The physical description is only sometimes sensuous since the perspective of the interloper often interprets wilderness as encroaching on vulnerable senses, hence the sting of nettles, the stink of skunk cabbages, and the sogginess of unremitting rain. But even when conscious of herself as interloper, the narrator expresses a profound empathy with the forest, describing her landing on a beach as a wounding which shatters silence: "The grating of our canoe on the pebbles warned the silence that we were come to break it," (12) and "Then we went away from Tanoo and left the silence to heal itself." (16) Since nature itself is described as wounding (the sea against the shore and time against the mountains), the image of wounding silence becomes part of a larger whole rather than merely shattering.

The space Carr gives to wilderness in the narrative contains, apart from the naturalistic details of trees, undergrowth, and shoreline, a sense of welcoming space that encompasses all of physical life and spiritual life together: "The near shores were packed with trees, trees soaked in sunshine. For all their crowding, there was room between every tree, every leaf, for limitless mystery." (88) As though in sublimation of the wilderness, the style of the narrative reflects this growing space; it includes the constantly shifting focus from naturalistic detail to spiritual awakening and both are rooted in each other. As Pratt observed in her analysis of women's nature narratives, the encounter of female heroes with nature is not romantic and transcendent, but immanent — "a kind of animistic reciprocity between being of woman and being of rock, tree, and beast . . . an interchange of equally autonomous entities." (162)

Cyclical life patterns and a blurring of limits open one's consciousness to the intimate connection between spirit and body and invites the sort of nature/fertility worship long ago condemned in Christian patriarchy as pagan. Accordingly, when Carr inscribes the forest lovingly and physically, she is stepping beyond the dominant, white, colonial discourse of her period and reclaiming, from the far past before patriarchy, her own truncated sensuality. Her inscription of wilderness in this radical sense is reminiscent of other re-definitions:

Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it "wild" for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the "Wild West" began.  
(Chief Luther Standing Bear, in T. C. McLuhan, 45)

History teaching strengthens white racism, because it is the history of Europeans on the North American continent. White historical anthropologists have developed basically racist materials about American Indian history. There are many examples . . . Although whites called the land "wilderness," no such thing existed. Indians knew, occupied and utilized every piece of earth, every stream, river and lake.

(Dr. Lionel de Montigny, 116-7)

Wild is the name of the Self in women, of the enspiriting Sister Self. The wildness of our Selves is visible to wild-eyes, to the inner eyes which ask the deepest 'whys,' the interconnected 'why's' that have not been fragmented by the fathers' 'mother tongues,' not by their seductive images or -ologies. These are the 'whys' undreamt of in their philosophies, but which lie sleeping, sometimes half-awake, in the wild minds of women. These are the whys of untamed wisdom.

(Mary Daly, *Kramarae*, 486)

I sat down to sketch. What was the noise of purring and rubbing going on about my feet? Cats. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was seeing right, and counted a dozen of them. They jumped into my lap and sprang to my shoulders. They were real — and very feminine.

There we were — D'Sonoqua, the cats and I — the woman who only a few moments ago had forced herself to come behind the houses in trembling fear of the "wild woman of the woods" — wild in the sense that forest-creatures are wild — shy, untouchable. (*Klee Wyck*, 40)

### *The Totems and D'Sonoqua*

*Klee Wyck* offers a style and form which materializes its wilderness subject while capturing spirit. Similarly, totems blend with the landscape while abstracting essence. There are a number of other parallels between Carr's book and the totem art. The loosely arranged sketches of *Klee Wyck* share with totem art a loose but coherent, associational arrangement of meaning (as opposed to linear story). The figurative language of the book reflects the animistic ethos, also operative in totem art, which refuses to privilege humans over other life forms. The narrator's most intense moments of naturist epiphany come through her contact with totem art and the visual description of the poles during these epiphanies is vivid enough to give the poles their own voice in the narrative.

Insofar as *Klee Wyck* takes up the story of the totems, it serves as one possible bridge between the oral/visual tradition of native history and the white culture's written history. The need for such a bridge under the strain of colonization is poignantly stressed as the narrator registers Louisa's difficulty in telling the legend on her grandmother's pole in "Tanoo": she "told it to us in a loose sort of way as if she had half forgotten it." (13) Carr goes on to empathize from a distance with their sense of loss:

The feelings Jimmie and Louisa had in this old village of their own people must have been quite different from ours. They must have made my curiosity seem small.

Often Jimmie and Louisa went off hand in hand by themselves for a little, talking in Indian as they went. (13)

The story trails off, let go by the narrator who consents to know it only partially. The narrator keeps this respectful distance from the totem poles on the mystical as well as the cultural level. At one point the narrator describes them, along with the shoreline, “stole[n]” by the mist, “as if it were suddenly aware that you had been allowed to see too much.” (61)

For the most part, Carr maintains a careful distance from natives and their art. One means of achieving this distance is to insert herself as a subjective reporter in the text rather than posing as invisible, omniscient, or objective. When she is not depicting herself as interloper, she is communicating her intensely personal involvement with native art. In the process of cross-fertilization between the artists of both cultures, her descriptions of the totems become even more subjective and personal. Part of their story becomes her story through a process of internalization. Without such openness to the messages of the totems, Carr’s expressed intention to glorify the Indians and to let their poles speak would seem like usurpation and arrogance.

One frame for the book is the interloper/artist’s statements of intention to the native people. Two conversations with older native women reveal the respect behind Carr’s painting and behind *Klee Wyck* itself: in the first chapter she assures Mrs. Wynook that she will not make any more pictures of the old people when she learns that they believe their souls are somehow trapped in their likenesses (8); then, very close to the end of the book, she explains to Mrs. Douse, “chieftainess” at Kitwancool, that she wishes to paint the totems to pass on to future generations and remind them of what the art form was before its decline. (101) The text serves the same purpose as her paintings; Carr is hoping to rescue the totems from the death they are destined to if they survive only as artifacts:

They took no totem poles with them to hamper their progress in new ways; the poles were left standing in the old places. But now there was no one to listen to their talk any more. By and by they would rot and topple to the earth, unless white men came and carried them away to museums. There they would be labelled as exhibits, dumb before the crowds who gaped and laughed and said, “This is the distorted foolishness of an uncivilized people.” And the poor poles could not talk back because the white man did not understand their language. (52-3)

Just what sort of death native artifacts die was discussed by Douglas J. Preston. While conceding that “[b]etween 1880 and 1930 . . . the anthropologists and the museums were the only forces in our society working to protect — or at least to save what remained of — [native] heritage” (69), Preston notes that the Smithsonian Institute holds 18,500 skeletons and will not relinquish control unless legally compelled despite attempts by Indian activists to have them returned for proper burial. Preston tells how the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, first articulated the idea of “cultural relativism, . . . that human races were *intrinsically* equal” (70) on his

arrival in the United States in 1886 (Carr's expeditions to Indian villages started in 1898). Yet, in the name of science, Boas "himself, in the dead of night, raided the graveyards of his beloved Kwakiutl tribe of British Columbia" with little thought for the natives' beliefs. (70) Boas would also, along with a colleague, welcome six "Eskimo" brought to New York by Robert Peary; lodge them on the fifth floor of the museum; make casts of their legs, arms, and faces and note "slight colds" in passing (70); then, when the colds had developed into tuberculosis and the six had died, he would have their bodies "macerated, boiled, and reduced to skeletons" for installation in the museum's collection. (71) These details are drawn, of course, only from the darkest side of scientific objectivity, but a glimpse at the contemporary scientific backdrop illuminates the difference and value of Carr's form of cultural relativism and the need for subjective records of decimated cultures. Carr's notion of cultural relativity was to open herself to what she saw and allow herself and her art to be partially reconstructed in the process.

The totems were not merely symbols; they were ultimately the voice of nature itself. Of the totem artist's intention and inspiration, Carr writes:

He wanted some way of showing people things that were in his mind, things about the creatures and about himself and their relation to each other. He cut forms to fit the thoughts that the birds and animals and fish suggested to him, and to these he added something of himself. When they were all linked together they made very strong talk for the people. . . . Then the cedar and the creatures and the man all talked together through the totem poles to the people. (51)

At close range, to appreciate their colours and contours along with their primal message, Carr appreciated native art deeply and personally. But from a distance, in a larger frame, she saw the native art in relation to its region, time, and the cosmos. One of the most arresting images of the totems occurs at the end of the thirteenth chapter, "Cha-atl," where the poles are shown in complete harmony with light on the beach, and sea and sky:

Where the sea had been was mud now, a wide grey stretch of it with black rocks and their blacker shadows dotted over it here and there. The moon was rising behind the forest — a bright moon. It threw the shadows of the totems across the sand; an owl cried, and then a sea-bird. To be able to hear these close sounds showed that my ears must be getting used to the breakers. By and by the roar got fainter and fainter and the silence stronger. The shadows of the totem poles across the beach seemed as real as the poles themselves.

Dawn and the sea came in together. The moon and the shadows were gone. The air was crisp and salty. I caught water where it trickled down a rock and washed myself.

The totem poles stood tranquil in the dawn. (66)

In this passage, Carr shows the totems in a mediating role; aesthetically, they mediate between beach and forest, dream and reality, dusk and dawn, as in native culture they had mediated ritualistically between life and death by telling the story

of the deceased individuals or of family ancestors. Sketches of totem poles in various stages of decline, both natural and cultural, give the narrative a striking emblem for time. Carr describes the potential beauty of natural death within its cyclical relation to new life when she notes: "It was a fine pole, bleached of all colour and then bloomed over again with greeny-yellow mould." (13) The natural fading process cannot diminish their beauty, however, for their strength of expression appears to lie in a wider, more powerful sphere: "They were bleached to a pinkish silver colour and cracked by the sun, but nothing could make them mean or poor, because the Indians had put strong thought into them and had believed sincerely in what they were trying to express." (19)

Still, in terms of colonial history, the poles were already "old" and Carr on several occasions refers to them as the "poor old poles." They belonged to the old rather than the new villages, the old native ways of trading and "potlatch," rather than to the new ways of consumerism and industry for wages as described in Greenville. (51-3) Though initially after contact, more poles had been erected because of growing wealth through the salmon and sea-otter trade, and because of the introduction of steel tools which replaced those of shell, bone, or chipped rock, the totems were gradually disappearing when Carr visited the coastal villages. She noted with their tilting and their fading that the poles had an added symbolic weight just as their speaking strength was diminishing, for now they were the emblems of a dying race in search of its audience.

A common misreading of Carr's style describes her figures of speech as anthropomorphic, a style which gives prominence to the human world by projecting it on to the animal/plant/or inanimate world (Sanger/Tippet). When Annis Pratt discusses "animistic reciprocity" between women and nature which she has identified as archetypal in Canadian women's narratives, she stipulates that the interchange precludes anthropomorphism because it is based on intrinsic qualities rather than projected human qualities. (162) Carr not only avoids anthropomorphic images, she actually reverses the process by superimposing the world of nature and animals onto the human world with the effect of leaving a lasting impression of nature in the reader's mind. The predominant type of simile is animal/plant juxtaposed onto human rather than the contrary:

... "Indian mothers are too frightened to move. They stand like trees, and the children go with D'Sonoqua." (35)

... but if I had possessed the arms and legs of a centipede they would not have been enough. (20)

When I looked up, she darted away like a fawn. (105)

There were so many holes in the road and the men fell off so often that they were always changing places, like birds on a roost in cold weather. . . . We threw ourselves on-to our stomachs, put our lips to the water and drank like horses. (98)

The place was full of themselves — they had breathed themselves into it as a bird, with its head under its wing, breathes itself into its own cosiness. (104)

. . . I flopped on top of the fish hatch and lay there sprawling like a star fish. . . . I lay among the turmoil with everything rattling and smashing around and in my head no more sense than a jelly fish. (83-4)

I floated in and out of consciousness, and dream fish swam into my one ear and out of the other. (92)

These naturist images far outnumber the isolated anthropomorphic images in the text and vary widely in tone and effect from comical to lyrical. There are few exceptions to these naturist metaphors but two are curiously alike in that the imposed image is one of prettified femininity: pines in crinolines (63) and mountains in bonnets (80). Elsewhere, pines march and the sea tosses a boat, like a spoiled child does a toy. These exceptions are rare and isolated. Whereas the naturist figures are frequent and integral, the isolated anthropomorphic images are set apart from intense feeling and general mood.

Like people, canoes and boats in *Klee Wyck* are compared to animals: “like retrieving pups,” “like a dog straining on leash,” “contented as an old cat” (90, 81, 84); or to horses, beavers, and wolves. And the totems themselves followed the Indians across the sea with a “stare in the empty hollows of the totem eyes . . . as the mournful eyes of chained dogs follow their retreating masters.” (60) Shades of anthropomorphism may be assumed in moments where the narrator perceives spirit animating nature, but that is more properly pantheistic (the spirits belonging to the essence of the thing itself rather than its human projection). Similarly when the narrator empathizes with inanimate objects, as she also does with natives and animals, to try to imagine their feelings or their story, the process is more like reception than the projection of characteristics. For example, she intuits the resentment of Indian Tom to her questioning (35), as she intuits the resentment of leaning poles to the stronger elements. (38)

Most of the animal imagery involves domesticated animals: cats, dogs, horses, or birds, the animals whom Carr befriended more than humans. The fiercer, “wilder” animals, cougars, bear, beavers, eagles, and wolves, she presents largely through descriptions of Indian carvings, legends, or dialogue with natives (although she does see eagles and dolphins first-hand). Yet such a source was a reliable one, as Carr explains in a short discussion of totem carvings in *The Heart of a Peacock*; the carver was bound to concreteness and preserving the essence and “[completeness of] being” of the animal no matter how stylized or abstract the carving became. “The carver must make it express weight, power, being. Let wings, tail, talons be unconnected: they must be told.” (83)

Her close observation of animals in *Klee Wyck* and in *The Heart of a Peacock* indicates Carr’s affection for their actual physical presence as well as their symbolic figurations (“The scraggy ponies dragged their feet heavily; sweat cut rivers



through the dust that was caked on their sides.” [98] and “The horses held their bones stiff and quivered their skins. It made the rain fly out of their coats and splash me.” [103]). Like a true naturalist, she describes even those animals which she found repugnant (e.g. slugs [65] and devilfish [15]) with careful detail and some empathy, rather than detached objectivity. In so detailing animal life (and plant life as well, for skunk cabbages and kelp are described with as much care as dogwood and cedar), Carr is stepping outside of the hierarchical chain of life generated by European humanism into the non-hierarchical, reciprocal conception of life lived by natives, a conception of life where every living thing has a place, a purpose, and a spirit. The shift of perspective entailed in this marginal but holistic view of wilderness, is brought home in the lightly comic scene at the end of “Tanoo.” Shocked to find herself lying on something slithery in the boat, the narrator learns that they are devilfish. When she cries out, Jimmie, the native guide, reassures her that the devilfish are dead so she need not worry because, by rolling over, *she* will not hurt *them*. (16)

In her home, the House of All Sorts, on a slanting wall over her bed, Carr painted two Indian eagles: “they made ‘strong talk’ to me.” (*House of All Sorts*, 10-11). Only when she had abandoned the realistic and traditional landscape schools of European painting and began to incorporate the principles of abstraction and style from native art into her own work could she at last capture the vastness of the wilderness and the spirit she felt there. Doris Shadbolt has explained the influence of schools of painting on Carr’s style; unlike the postimpressionist and then the postcubist influence, the Group of Seven’s influence, coming especially from Lawren Harris, led Carr to re-examine her fundamental religious values along with her painting style. The nature-centered canvases of the Group of Seven and the nature-centered philosophy of theosophism preoccupied her for a number of years, but ultimately she returned to her own brand of pantheism and her own style of rendering Indian subjects which could give her “a valuable moral and social purpose for her art.” (Shadbolt, 30) Totem art also allowed her to redefine god in terms more appropriate to the region.

God got so stuffy squeezed into a church. Only out in the open was there room for Him. He was like a great breathing among the trees. In church he was static, a bearded image in petticoats. In the open He had no form; He just *was*, and filled all the universe. (*Hundreds and Thousands*, 329)

This caricature of the male god shows both the constricted spiritualism of institutionalized religion and the debasing aspect of frivolous female dress. The juxtaposition of the two produces a bizarre image of an emasculated and impotent male god. In contrast, in *Klee Wyck* the conception of god and also of female gender expands through the narrator’s personal receptivity to totem beauty and “strong talk.” When face to face with the female totem spirit D’Sonoqua, the relationship of painter/story-teller to the art object becomes reciprocal, a giving and taking,

listening and telling, seeing and showing which is profoundly intimate and permits the totem to move through the text's translation, from objecthood to speaking subject:

The eyes were two rounds of black, set in wider rounds of white, and placed in deep sockets under wide, black eyebrows. Their fixed stare bored into me as if the very life of the old cedar looked out, and it seemed that the voice of the tree itself might have burst from that great round cavity, with projecting lips, that was her mouth. Her ears were round, and stuck out to catch all sounds. The salt air had not dimmed the heavy red of her trunk and arms and thighs. Her hands were black, with blunt finger-tips painted a dazzling white. I stood looking at her for a long, long time.

. . . I never went to that village again, but the fierce wooden image often came to me, both in my waking and in my sleeping. (3-4)

The three meetings with different D'Sonoquas in *Klee Wyck* are described as constituting a central development in Carr's life. The intensity of these experiences is evident in the building emotional effect from her initial fear of the goddess's fixed stare: "her stare so over-powered mine, that I could scarcely wrench my eyes away from the clutch of those empty sockets" (36), to her ultimate feeling of harmony and peace when she meets what she calls the third wild woman:

She appeared to be neither wooden nor stationary, but a singing spirit, young and fresh, passing through the jungle. No violence coarsened her; no power domineered to wither her. She was graciously feminine. Across her forehead her creator had fashioned the Sisticheutl [*sic*], or mythical two-headed sea-serpent. One of its heads fell to either shoulder, hiding the stuck-out ears, and framing her face from a central parting on her forehead which seemed to increase its womanliness.

She caught your breath, this D'Sonoqua, alive in the dead bole of the cedar. She summed up the depth and charm of the whole forest, driving away its menace.

(39-40)

By reading *Klee Wyck* as archetypal autobiography, Catherine Sheldrick Ross is able to interpret the shamanistic function of D'Sonoqua as part of the heroine/narrator's developing identity. She concludes that the narrator listens to the language of the totems throughout the book in order to retrieve the primitive aspects of female identity "buried by white technological society — sexuality, fertility, violence, irrationality and death." (88) Ross compares Carr's experience of consciousness and released energy after "initiatory ordeals" to similar rites of passage experienced by the white heroines who venture into the wilderness through personal contact with native culture in Atwood's *Surfacing* and Laurence's *The Diviners*. Anticipating the spirit of Annis Pratt's article on the "greenworld lover," Ross argues that the female hero feels affinity with nature and the animistic religions of native culture because these worlds will, unlike patriarchal society, accommodate the *complete* woman, the *complete* goddess. Ross interprets Carr's relationship to D'Sonoqua as one of unity in a world with space enough to hold *all* of life:

D'Sonoqua's mouth that lures away children is also a nest for birds and thus a source of life. Both creator and destroyer, D'Sonoqua eludes our need for clear moral categories. The white person says good or bad, alive or dead, but D'Sonoqua answers with unity. Life and death are held together in the circle of unity of her open mouth and fixed stare. (89)

This holistic spirit is reflected in the loose but connected structure of the narrative and the sentences themselves. Daniele Pitavy-Soukes has carefully studied the looseness of form and elliptical syntax as prosaic reflections of the painter's eye. The loose, non-chronological arrangement of sketches frames the simple and sparse syntax. Both could be seen as a stylistic sublimation of the liberating space which Carr perceived in the wilderness and native culture. Another explanation for the non-linear arrangement of sketches comes from considering Carr's book as women's life-writing. Jay McPherson's assessment of Carr's writing stance in her discussion of autobiography in the *Literary History of Canada* was: "[A] natural arrogance that must snatch the last word, even when unspoken" (II, 132); but she also observed that, among Canadian autobiographers, women as a group are "less self-absorbed and more actively interested in the people around them, and so able to give a fuller sense of life." (133) Among the characteristics of style and form that Helen M. Buss lists in "Canadian Women's Autobiography: Some Critical Directions" (1986), are a strong sense of relatedness with concrete reality, and loose, non-chronological structure which attempts to unify fragments of the self without imposing order. Accordingly, Buss recommends that we read women's autobiographies with "the kind of metaphoric association that poetry demands" (157). When Buss observes possible causes for women's departure from strictly chronological arrangement of autobiography, the form of *Klee Wyck* jumps to mind for it is loosely based upon places and events: "Ucluelet," "Tanoo," "Cumshewa," "D'Sonoqua," "Salt Water," "Canoe":

those literary women who experiment with style and those native writers who find their assumed style escaping them and a new style being imposed by the material are directed by similar imperatives: a need to find unity of self without leaving out any of the diversity of their lives, a need to redefine womanhood in the face of a changing world, a need to rescue some primitive aspect of that womanhood which is missing in their lives, and a need to abandon egocentric and developmental definitions of self in favor of a sense of self based on relatedness and an accumulation and integration of identities. (157)

The chapter on D'Sonoqua is the only one in *Klee Wyck* which spans several years in Carr's life and is, consequently, the chapter in which the reader is most conscious of the narrator's developing psyche; the other chapters describe seemingly isolated moments in her personal history without a sense of chronology except for very loose threads based on travel. The sketches dip into seemingly randomly arranged memories of her visits to coastal villages and a few recollections of native

people from her childhood (“Wash Mary” and “Sleep”). It is only with D’Sonoqua that Carr shows introspection (although achieved outwardly through reflection on the totem) and submits story line to a personal sense of time.

Those readings which resist the underlying unifying principles in the work upbraid the author for her subjectivity and lack of objective accuracy, and attempt to define the loosely unified fragments of self as evidence of a flawed or incomplete psyche. These readings would impose order on the text’s subjectivity. For example, contrary to Ross’s reading of the D’Sonoqua as a shamanistic rite of passage into unity and self-growth are two readings (Stich’s and Sanger’s) which interpret the totem goddess as a mirror for the author and the fragmented psyche of the author. In these interpretations, D’Sonoqua is completely uprooted, pulled out of the forest, out of her cultural and natural setting and sources of power and made to voice psychoanalytical theories of mother/child relations rather than anything even remotely related to the nettles and moss around her. The psychological interpretations disempower D’Sonoqua as goddess and also isolate the author by screening her feelings of feminist, cross-cultural, and naturist power through a dominant sense of normalcy. K. P. Stich has read D’Sonoqua as Carr’s “writing” as opposed to “painting” self, an expansive but *demonic* and *repressed* urge to create through words. But it is Peter Sanger’s use of D’Sonoqua, in “Finding D’Sonoqua’s Child,” which perfectly illustrates critical resistance to Carr’s subversiveness.

Sanger seeks to locate the “real” author behind the text and, not surprisingly considering his angle of approach, locates fragmentation rather than unity — fragmentation not in patriarchal society’s definition of woman, life, and nature, but fragmentation in the female author herself. Sanger interprets D’Sonoqua as a mirror of Carr’s very deep psychic schism, a shadow self which he believes Carr sought to conceal both consciously and unconsciously by altering objective facts. (220-21) Claiming that the “shadow side” of Carr’s personality disrupts her realistic prose, this critic argues that Carr could not find the appropriate form for her life-writing in any of her realistic biographies but only in the free associations of her journal, *Hundreds and Thousands*. (234) In going so far as to suggest that she might have used a fantasy form like “the *Alice* books” and *Wind in the Willows* rather than realism for her autobiographical prose (234), Sanger minimalizes any concrete tie to the West Coast wilderness in the work and robs nature of its voice in the narrative. His lengthy study focuses on details of the text without accepting its subjective pattern or discussing that subjectivity as valid artistic expression. Surely this is to overlook the forest for the tree, the central totem figure D’Sonoqua. Carr’s meeting with the totem spirit is too often picked out of its context, the heart of the forest, and used as a focus for psychoanalysis of the author or for archetypal analysis. Yet if one adheres to the truly marginal voices of the work as a whole, the severance of the whole into parts is exactly what ought not to be done in respect to

the work's own holistic aesthetic. Instead, the multiplicity of voices within the context of the forest is what carries the spirit of the work.

Sanger speculates that Carr's "lie" about her age in the beginning of *Klee Wyck* (according to his research, she was not 15 but 26) and her failure to identify the lady missionary as her sister were attempts to posture as a more courageous traveler than she was. Hembroff-Schleicher documents many of the same discrepancies but ends her chapter, "Sources of Error" with a quotation by Carr herself on her extreme forgetfulness and lack of concern for dates (176). *Klee Wyck* itself yields some secrets about the space outside of objective concepts of time. The chapter entitled "Century Time" clearly exposes the phenomenon of the native culture resisting the new symbolic order of the colonizers. The white man's gravestones, which were replacing totems, could not accommodate the language of the forest nor the breadth of a native vision rooted in connectedness; instead they would carry only a fragmented inscription of the past and of the dead ones, a rational and numbered version. At first when Carr reads "IPOO" on all of the Indian graves, she cannot comprehend but must quiz a native woman who responds that it means "'die time'." Carr concludes: "Time was marked by centuries in this cemetery. Years — little years — what are they? As insignificant as the fact that reversing the figure nine turns it into the letter P." (96)

Perhaps Carr altered facts for dramatic effect, but the author who so often diminishes herself through comic falls, outlandish clothing, mosquito attacks, and fear of the dark, is not likely an author posing for the heroic. Carr respected fear and did not deny feeling it, describing it, or laughing at it. In *Klee Wyck*, the old native's warning about cougars at the end of the first chapter shows the wisdom of certain kinds of fear in the rain forest. And the meetings with D'Sonoqua essentially concerned the narrator's coming to terms with her fear of marginal realities, both the wilderness and the wild woman. If the objective errors Sanger cites were not used for posturing, as he maintains, and not for dramatic effect, as I have proposed, what were they meant to achieve? I think, in the matter of subjective and personal history, the ultimate answer is Dorothy Livesay's — What does it matter?

Another negative result of all this objective measuring of Carr's autobiographical text is that, ultimately, nature and female subjectivity are somehow seen as obtrusive. For example, Sanger's biographical approach to the text is seriously marred not only by excessive concern for minor errors but by a masculinist attitude to female texts. This critic fails to identify key instances of subjectivity in Carr's books and letters as gender specific and he fails to extend sympathy in such central events in Carr's life as incest, sexual harassment, female bonding, and alienation from the body. He interprets them, instead, as exaggeration, distortion, or fabrication. If this were one isolated masculinist viewpoint, the negative direction of the study would not be worth mentioning. But the truth of the matter is that Carr's biographers,

despite the fact that they have been mostly women, have not extended sympathy in or credibility to the matters of sexual and child abuse, simply on the grounds that she came from a good family and respectable people do not do that sort of thing.

The positive aspect of an “objective” treatment of the D’Sonoqua meetings, on the other hand, does reveal one interesting fact. According to Sanger and confirmed to me in a letter from Peter L. Macnair, Head of Ethnology at The Royal British Columbia Museum, Carr misidentified the third totem in chapter six as D’Sonoqua. It was actually the representation of a male chief or ancestor. Sanger maintains that Carr’s misidentification of this totem as a non-aggressive singing spirit proves her inability to accept and express the shadow/warrior side of her own personality. (237) This is only one possibility. A more certain conclusion to be gleaned from such data is simply that Carr projected female gender onto the male totem at a moment when she was feeling free from fear in the forest. Falsely inscribing gender is itself an interesting transposition by means of which the numerous positive associations between womanliness and nature and native culture can be acknowledged. In the description of the Skidegate eagle in *The Heart of a Peacock*, as in the description of “D’Sonoqua,” Carr also seems to inscribe gender because she perceives womanliness as a positive and powerful attribute: “This eagle had folded wings. Her head was slightly raised, slightly twisted. . . . Maternal, brooding, serene, she seemed to dominate Skidegate.” (84) In Carr’s painted version of this bird carving “Skidegate Eagle” (which appears on the cover of the paperback edition of *The Heart of a Peacock*) the femaleness and maternal quality of the carving is not immediately obvious, though the impression of strength and dominance is. If one considers Carr’s verbal connection between womanhood and strength while studying the painting, the experience becomes provocative and, for women, an empowering re-visioning of gender.

### *Sophie*

“Sophie” is a glimpse at the story of eclipsed female strength in the history of colonization of native women. Her prominent place as the person to whom the autobiography is dedicated reveals as much about Carr’s respect for female strength and bonding as the mystical meetings with D’Sonoqua. Yet, as I stated in my introduction, female bonding in *Klee Wyck* has largely been overlooked by literary critics, with the exception of Catherine Sheldrick Ross’s prelude to the theme in her describing a spiritual link between the narrator, D’Sonoqua, the mother totems in Kitwanoocool, and Sophie. It appears that other artists have been quicker than literary critics to pick up on these deep emotional strains in Carr’s work. Dramatic portrayals of Carr’s life and poetic dedications have, according to Eva-Marie Kröller, increasingly emphasized rebellion against patriarchy, affinity with natives, and female bonding. Considering that the 1942 Farrar & Rinehart edition of *Klee Wyck*

bears four coloured plates of Carr's paintings which all portray women — Sophie, D'Sonoqua, Indian Village Alert Bay, and Totem mother and child at Kitwancool — the book's theme of women's connectedness was hardly obscure even in the early days, though it was and still is overlooked as a subversive element in Carr's story.

Contributing to the gender specificity of *Klee Wyck* as a woman's account of her personal contact with native culture is the social setting, the moment in history when Carr visited the villages. Initial contact was solidifying into cultural assimilation, genocide, exploitation, and race suicide and native women were experiencing re-definition and drastically shifting female roles. Carr may not be reliable as an objective source on natives (I hear the disapproving ring in my letter from the museum ethnographer which begins: "Regarding the ongoing problem of Emily Carr and the Indians. . ." [Letter, 10 March, 1989]), but what other white woman at this time was writing so emotionally and personally of native friends and native women's lives? Thus, through mood rather than direct objective reporting or political analysis, Carr manages to recreate the sense of decline and eclipsed power in the native community. What she may not have noticed consciously, but what emerges in the tone of her female history, is that the native women of the period were adjusting not only to the losses of their people as a whole but to their own loss of status during the reorganization of their matrilineal, pantheistic culture under a patriarchal, Christian order. Carr would discover and depict this lost female power overtly in telling about her meetings with the banished goddess, D'Sonoqua, but she would also portray a deep awareness of tragic female strength in her depiction of strong native mothers unable to disentangle themselves from death.

It would be wrong to assume that the pre-contact tribes of the West Coast offered a utopian existence or golden age of matriarchal power to native women. Although more fundamentally egalitarian than patriarchal society, they were distinct from Eastern tribes in that they were rank-differentiated and had more gender-designated roles. However, recent essays on the Pacific Coast Indians compiled by Bruce Alden Cox caution that although the pre-contact tribal organization was "hierarchical, slavish even" (158), it was not patriarchal. Despite differentiation of tasks by sex (e.g. only men carved totems and went on whaling expeditions while women wove and played a major role in salmon fishing), women inherited hunting and fishing territories, potlatches were a celebration of female fertility as well as of acquired wealth, female as well as male spirits were worshipped, and menstruation was usually celebrated through ritual seclusion. (158-97) True, in the Haida menstrual blood appears to have been taboo; but the menstrual blood of white European women had been banned from any public attention whatsoever — it had been made invisible. On initial contact, white traders complained of the strong bargaining powers of the native women saying they drove the prices of sea otter up and therefore delayed or interfered with trading (Cox, 174-6). But by the time Carr

arrived on the scene, the white lawmakers had already spoken out very loudly in the name of patriarchy:

The 1869 Indian Act imposed on Indians the patriarchal systems of the British and French and defined a registered Indian as “a male person who is a direct descendant in the male line of a male person.” A female could be a registered Indian only if she was the daughter or wife of a male registered Indian. People not entitled to be registered Indians were women who married outside the tribe or children whose fathers were not Indians. However, an Indian man marrying a non-Indian woman not only retained his status but the non-Indian woman also gained Indian status. (Dranoff, 98)

Despite publicised legal suits and demonstrations by native women throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Canada did not move to redress the sexist injustices of the Indian Act until 1981 when the UN Committee found the Canadian government in breach of the International Covenant on Civil Rights (Prentice, 398). The disempowerment of native women is a particularly noisy skeleton in the closet of Canadian history because it leads directly to the discovery of other skeletons which reveal white women’s disempowerment centuries before in European history.

Contact had meant special losses for native women, losses which are being written into Canadian history only now. The authors of *Canadian Women: A History* point out that while the shift from private to public work in the 1700s and 1800s meant an increasing exclusion of all Canadian women from power, the effect would have been exacerbated in the case of native women as many tribes shifted from relatively egalitarian concepts of collective tribal organization to a more patriarchal and capitalist ordering of production and inheritance. In many tribes this shift in economic system was a result not only of trade but of a concerted effort by missionaries to impose a patriarchal culture and morality on the native population. Religious intervention resulted in a significant loss of status for Indian women: the loss of matrilineal patterns of inheritance; the change from relative sexual freedom and the communal spirit of child rearing in native tradition to white ways: monogamous marriage (with divorce made impossible or more difficult than it had been under tribal laws), the proliferation of prostitution, and the concept of children as private property; the change from maternity to paternity rights in cases of separation; the pressure to exact from wives obedience to the patriarchal authority of their husbands; and the meting out of land by church and government to male heads of the nuclear family. Of course none of these shifts in power was experienced uniformly throughout different tribes, but the authors of this history surmise that the native women in agricultural tribes in Eastern Canada were much more able to resist European influence than hunting, gathering, and fishing tribes such as were found on the West Coast. The native women of this region also suffered special difficulties because of the stronger tendency here to the taking of “ ‘country’



wives” from among native women, wives who were generally abandoned when white women arrived. (Prentice *et al.*, 24-40, 70-2)

Carr’s focus on native women derives, of course, partly from her being able to move more freely among the women than the men, and also from her valorization of female role activities such as mediating, domestic work, child-bearing and rearing, weaving crafts, emotional support, and care of the sick as opposed to the male activities of warring, hunting, and fishing. (Carving, the one male designated activity which Carr valorized, was also upset by the economic transformation under capitalism.) Significantly, the first two representations of native women show them mediating between angry husbands and the white world (7-8): Mrs. Wynook drags herself to Toxis where she strokes Carr’s skirt to explain her husband’s outburst and the native woman in church covers her husband’s nudity with her shawl:

The service was over, the people had gone, but a pink print figure sat on in the back seat. Her face was sunk down in her chest. She was waiting till all were away before she slunk home. It is considered more indecent for an Indian woman to go shawl-less than for an Indian man to go bare-legged. The woman’s heroic gesture had saved her husband’s dignity before the Missionaries but had shamed her before her own people.

The Greater Missionary patted the pink shoulder as she passed.  
 “Brave woman!” said the Greater Missionary, smiling. (10)

The ineffectual and patronizing reward of a pat on the back sets a downward tone for what might otherwise be sentimental renditions of female sacrifice and it fore-shadows the rest of the sketches, which show how native women ultimately lose more than they gain in their mediating role between unbalanced powers.

Of the following twelve figures of female strength in *Klee Wyck*, the first ten are portrayed in the shadow of death, illness, or cultural decimation: the groups of female mourners in “The Blouse” and “Sophie”; Old Jenny, who harnessed her blind husband to a wheelbarrow to collect refuse on the beaches (54-5); Sophie, who buried every one of her twenty babies; Sophie’s aunt, who suffered so terribly from rheumatism that her “eyes, nose, mouth and wrinkles were all twisted to the perpetual expressing of pain” (28-9); Orphan Lizzie, who fed the entire family on candy and brought wild berries to the crippled child (104-5); Wash Mary whose “brown was all bleached out of her skin” and whose “fingers were like pale yellow claws now, not a bit like the brown hands that had hung the clothes on our line.” (68-9); old Mrs. Green, who had long ago mothered the only “tripples” ever born on Queen Charlotte Islands (“‘One died and the other two never lived’” [77]); Granny in the abandoned village of Greenville, who laughed “till the tears poured out of her eyes . . . while the black eyes of her solemn grandchild stared.” (50); powerful Mrs. Douse, who was leader of Kitwancool where men carried guns, went to prison, and came back as heroes, but where women made the decisions; the young mother who skillfully paddled the canoe with a babe in arms but who had

a story of how her own blood children had all died; the women on the beach who, all one long day, washed clothes over a fire, baked bread, and boiled jam, and cared for the children and the old (109): and upwardly-mobile Louisa, who transformed her old mother's secret knowledge of the sea and where to find roe eggs into orders from the catalogue (75-6). The gloom cast by a colonial shadow was not unrelenting though it was pervasive.

Native women mothering death — “mothers of all those little cemetery mounds” (31) — leads to scenes of mourning and worrying over the cost of upkeep for all the meagre graves. Without authorial comment or descriptive material on mood, tone, or intent, Carr attempts to reproduce Sophie's own story about the coffin-man. (At this point the question of authenticity of the dialect should, perhaps, be suspended considering the time and the author's obviously sincere attempts to reproduce what she had heard some fifty years earlier.) “Grave man make cheap for me. He say, ‘You got lots, lots stone from me, Sophie. Maybe bymby you get some more died baby, then you want more stone. So I make cheap for you.’” (25) Later when Sophie realizes how poor the deal has been, she reinterprets the facts: “She laid her hand on the corner of the little coffin. ‘See! Coffin-man think box fo’ Injun baby no matter.’ The seams of the cheap little coffin had burst.” (27-8) The priest is also a powerful and absent male figure in Sophie's story. The fence of the graveyard closes against those babies who died before being baptised and the circle of mourners for one child will be denied closure and must go on “howling . . . like tortured dogs” for three days until the priest returns from the city to preside over the funeral. The women's own ceremony has, however, a quasi-religious aspect as the mourners, “their shawls drawn low across their foreheads, their faces grim,” take part in a washing ritual:

Suddenly they stopped. Sophie went to the bucket and got water in a tin basin. She took a towel in her hand and went to each of the guests in turn holding the basin while they washed their faces and dried them on the towel. Then the women all went out. . . . (27)

The close tactile aspect of their movements contrasts the women's world to the outside world of absent men. Carr repeatedly portrays this physical proximity and gentle touching as a characteristic of native women's community. Sophie makes her entrance selling baskets with a baby slung on her back, a girl clinging to her skirt, and a boy close behind her and she exits from the book longing to touch a white woman's healthy twin babies since her own had died. An inauthentic, foreign utterance stops her hand as she “burns” to touch them: “‘Nice ladies don’ touch, Em’ly.’” (31)

In the death scene which immediately follows Sophie's story, Carr transforms a potentially morbid even ghoulish experience into something more spiritual by emphasizing the strength of female community and the spirit of sharing which is communicated through touch:

I thought that she was dead, holding my sleeve in a death grip. One of the women came in and tried to free me. Mary's eyes opened and she spoke in Indian.

"Mary wants your blouse," said the stooping woman to me. (41)

. . . I scrambled out of the blouse and into my jacket. I laid the blouse across Mary. She died with her hands upon it. (42)

Daniele Pitavy has pointed out the intense visual richness of this sketch, citing it as an example of how Carr often develops space in her prose as though laying out a canvas. In particular, Pitavy refers to the cosmic framing of this death scene which seems to join interior concentric circles in ripples:

Des la première phrase, en faisant référence à la mer, au soleil et à la terre, puis à la mort, Emily Carr inscrit son texte — ou sa toile — dans un cadre cosmique. Elle le replace dans l'ordre naturel, comme est naturelle au début du second paragraphe la vision du corps décharné. Mais en même temps, elle prend soin de rappeler la rangée de pleureuses à l'extérieur et trace ainsi un second cercle, rituel cette fois. Ensuite, l'intérieur de la cabane est pris comme point de vue, ou espace de figuration, l'humain est donc enserré dans ce cadre cosmique et rituel. Toute la tension du texte (ou de la toile) naît du passage de l'un à l'autre. Pour l'exprimer, Carr a recours au procédé pictural de l'encart ou de l'insertion du tableau: elle développe la représentation de l'intérieur de la cabane avec la mourante mais traite aussi de ce qui précède celle-ci, l'autre "cabane" qui, après sa mort, la représentera socialement: . . . (87)

The circles or frames described by Pitavy are, therefore, the cosmic frame of sea, sky and earth; the circle of mourners who enact a ritual; and the encasement of the gravebox where the blouse and the woman's other belongings will be displayed to give a personal history. Without making the connections between female community, touching, ritual, and spirituality, Pitavy recognizes the circle as a means of accommodating spirituality in the work. Yet earlier in the forest the magic circle of femaleness was formed by the narrator, the "feminine" cats, and D'Sonoqua, while the center of that circle was not death but the artist's easel and the story.

The bonding of women in *Klee Wyck* takes place within the larger spirit of innocent reciprocity in which "Indian people and the elements give and take like brothers, accommodating themselves to each others' ways without complaint." (20-1) Moreover, through this ethos of sharing Carr comes closest to connectedness with native culture, for her artistic role of reproducing, translating, and interpreting the wilderness is also the role of returning, in her own way, what she has learned from the totems. Before accepting, however, that the story is in some way central to the sense of cross-cultural female bonding in *Klee Wyck*, one must certainly acknowledge current steps being taken by native writers and cultural leaders to reclaim their stories and their right to tell them. Especially since story-telling has been such an integral part of native culture and because the native languages were suppressed, the usurpation of the story-telling role by white writers and

film-makers has received serious political criticism. In one such recent protest, the taking of stories is depicted as a continuation of oppression:

the Canadian cultural industry is stealing — unconsciously, perhaps, but with the same devastating results — native stories as surely as the missionaries stole our religion and the politicians stole our land and the residential schools stole our language. As Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*, stories “are all we have, you see — all we have to fight off illness and death.” (Keeshig-Tobias)

I believe it is important that we read Carr’s *Klee Wyck* today with a consciousness of the native community’s struggle to reclaim their own stories, but also with a consciousness that *Klee Wyck* is Carr’s own subjective story of how she experienced and was transformed by contact with native culture. The spirit of exchange which Carr encountered in her personal contact with natives reflected a willingness to give and take, but respectfully, and involved her in a strangely circular process of language, of naming and re-naming bringing her closer to the margins of her own culture.

The first gift to Carr from the natives is her new name, “Klee Wyck” and she will return it to them, in a manner of speaking, by titling the book, her story about them, with the same name. The dedication page shows Sophie’s name, which is also a returned gift. When Sophie named the biggest and strongest of her newborn twins after “Em’ly” and they both died, Carr bought one gravestone while the mother bought the other (25-6). It may also be part of the chain or circle, that Carr, who was childless herself, has dedicated Klee Wyck to Sophie. A similar circle of support is formed by mourners in “The Blouse” around the dying woman: “Although the woman was childless and had no husband, she knew that the women of her tribe would make sorrow-noise for her when death came.” (41) These stories of name-giving open onto the question of why so many natives bear white names and those appearing mostly on gravestones: Jenny, George, Rosie, Mary, Casamin, Tommy, and Orphan Lizzie, Mrs. Green and so on. The proliferation of white names speaks of assimilation, conquest, smallpox epidemics, something taken and then taken again rather than ever being given back. The signification of “Klee Wyck,” on the other hand, is “Laughing One” which connotes sharing, understanding, and knowledge, the promise of a closer kind of contact achieved outside of verbalization in a universal space of feeling rather than designation, a space depicted in many scenes throughout *Klee Wyck* where the narrator and natives come together through laughter, gesture, “dumbtalk,” “straight-talk,” “strong-talk,” and the reading of faces. Of all the redefinitions and reinterpretations is one especially intense moment, which I quoted earlier, where Carr comes to terms with the wildness of the totem goddess. We now know that one way in which she came to terms with that wildness is by inscribing a positive female identity onto a masculine ancestor, a transposition or marginal gender onto images of strength similar to the reclaiming of wilderness through redefinition. By renaming some of her new-

found positive knowledge of life, death, and the vast world of the forest “feminine,” “female,” and “maternal,” Carr retrieved and reclaimed the power of subversive womanhood in herself.

But even as she captures some of the native past and of native stories throughout *Klee Wyck*, Carr stands respectfully back knowing there must be more living memory that remains out of her reach, too strong and bright, perhaps, for the linear narrative and the rational foreign language to hold: “Memories came out of this place to meet the Indians; you saw remembering in their brightening eyes and heard it in the quick hushed words they said to each other in Haida.” (18) To Carr, the female figure is obviously a more spacious vessel for these memories. Mrs. Green, for example, is Sophie grown old beyond pain. A Mother Courage figure, she steps across time and cultural decline mythically, a simple planter of potatoes nonetheless:

Whenever I saw that remarkable old woman, with her hoe and spade, starting off in her canoe to cultivate the potatoes she grew wherever she could find a pocket of earth on the little islands round about, I thought of the “tripples.” If they had lived and had inherited her strength and determination, they could have rocked the Queen Charlotte Islands. (77)

When Carr returns to “civilization,” however, the stories she has to tell of female strength do not seem comprehensible. They too, like native memories, are too large for the scope of language and concepts in the dominant discourse and would indeed have rocked the islands if they had been heard. Strangely though, the larger frames of reference of marginal realities have a way of shrinking or dissolving when the audience will not listen. The Mounted Police, for example, cannot seem to understand how Carr had been admitted to Kitwancool:

“You have been in to Kitwancool?”

“Yes.”

“How did the Indians treat you?”

“Splendidly.”

“Learned their lesson, eh?” said the man. “We have had no end of trouble with those people — chased missionaries out and drove surveyors off with axes — simply won’t have whites in their village. I would never have advised anyone going in — particularly a woman. No, I would certainly have said ‘Keep out’ ” (107).

Carr had discovered other stories in the village however. Under the public story of the “hero-man,” who was the chief’s son and celebrated in the native community after being imprisoned as a “ferce, troublesome customer” in the white world, lay another story of power; it was not the chief but his wife, Mrs. Douse, who was the more important figure in the village, who made all the decisions, asked all the questions, and decided if the woman painter would be allowed to stay or not. Everyone, including the “hero-man” son deferred to her judgement. And then there was the story of the totem mothers holding their babies: “Womanhood was strong in Kitwancool.” (102) Instead of revealing this muted story of female power

directly, Carr responds to the police officer's queries and advice simply, mysteriously, but somewhat rebelliously, reclaiming for "woman" the positive connotations she has learned in the forest, rather than the negative connotation of weakness that the white world falsely applies: " 'Then I am glad that I did not ask for your advice,' I said. 'Perhaps it is because I am a woman that they were so good to me.' " (107)

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## DOWN TO AGAWA

Wayne Keon

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old dimension  
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time

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circle

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