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Snapshots of the California Desert, Sketches of the British Columbia Rainforest: An Ecofeminist Reading of Mary Austin's and Emily Carr's Short Prose

Abstract

Viewed from an ecofeminist perspective, three connecting points can be identified in Austin's and Carr's short prose. Firstly, both authors employ a first-person female narrator who directly addresses the reader, recording what she has experienced and inscribing the remote western regions with female presence. Secondly, this partially autobiographical narrator functions as a field guide, describing with scientific accuracy and in photographic detail the multilayered natural rhythms of the place. Thirdly, the narrator interacts with the local inhabitants, chronicling their multifaceted stories. These parallels point at the authors' shared resolve to promote conservation of non-industrialized lands, to participate in the preservation of North American native arts, and to advance the transformation of gender relations. Moreover, by stressing the geographical as well as cultural diversity of their regions, the authors redefine the boundaries of their respective national literatures and national identities.

Rsum

Du point de vue de la perspective cofministe, trois points de liaison peuvent tre identifis dans les proses courtes d'Austin et de Carr. Premirement, les deux auteurs utilisent une femme-narrateur crivant  la premire personne qui s'adresse directement au lecteur, enregistrant ce qu'elle a vcu et inscrivant au sein des rgions lointaines de l'Ouest une prsence fminine. Deuximement, ce narrateur partiellement autobiographique assume le rle d'un guide de champ qui, avec une exactitude scientifique et sur un dtail photographique, dcrit les rythmes de la nature locale. Troisimement, le narrateur communique avec les habitants locaux, en faisant la chronique de leurs histoires  multiples facettes. Ces parallles montrent la rsolution partage de prner la conservation des contres non industrialises, de participer  la prservation des arts indignes de l'Amrique du Nord et d'avancer la transformation des relations du genre. De plus, en mettant en relief la diversit gographique et culturelle de leurs rgions, les auteurs redfinissent les frontires de leurs littratures nationales respectives et de leurs identits nationales.

Although Mary Austin (1868-1934) and Emily Carr (1871-1945) were contemporaries, they never met and, most likely, they were not aware of each other's ground-breaking work. This absence of any direct influence makes the

parallels in their imaginative responses to the geography and cultural history of their respective regions quite striking. Austin's verbal snapshots from her wanderings among the waterholes and Paiute encampments in the California desert and Carr's prose sketches of her meanderings among the bays and Haida villages on the coast of the BC rainforest manifest shared literary methods as well as artistic purposes. Austin's desert stories were published in two complementary collections, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Lost Borders* (1909). Carr's rainforest accounts appeared in similarly paired volumes, *Klee Wyck* (1941) and *The Heart of a Peacock* (posthumously 1953). In these loosely arranged vignettes personal life stories are interwoven with the natural and cultural histories of the two border regions.

Viewed from an ecofeminist perspective,¹ three particular connecting points can be identified in Austin's and Carr's writing. Firstly, both Austin and Carr employ an embodied first-person female narrator who directly addresses the reader, recording what she has experienced and inscribing the remote western regions with female presence. Secondly, this partially autobiographical narrator functions as a field guide, describing with scientific accuracy and in photographic detail the multilayered natural rhythms of the place. She takes the reader into a living, spiritual and gendered landscape. Thirdly, the narrator interacts with the local inhabitants, chronicling their multifaceted stories, focusing especially on women's lives. Therefore, even though the particular geographical properties of the authors' adopted regions are in sharp contrast, the generative energies that these distinct regions inspired closely correspond. The formal aspects as well as the thematic concerns of Austin's and Carr's short stories indicate significant analogies in the author's philosophies of life and art. Specifically, they point at Austin's and Carr's resolve to promote the conservation of the remnants of non-industrialized lands, to participate in the preservation of North American native arts, and to advance the transformation of gender relations. Moreover, by stressing the geographical as well as cultural diversity of their regions, the authors redefine the boundaries of their respective national literatures and national identities.²

The roaming narrator as a naturalist, anthropologist, and feminist

The narrative voice in Austin's stories of the desert and Carr's stories of the rainforest fluctuates between that of an emotionally reserved observer and an intimately involved participant, between that of a self-conscious, humorously awkward outsider and a mystic who feels at one with her environment. Close-up studies of a solitary tree or bird are balanced with panoramic views of the desert or coastal ranges, minute descriptions of flowers are expanded into subliminal scenes when all boundaries have become blurred, "time and texture faded . . . ceased to exist" (Carr, 1941, 110). Therefore, Austin's as well as Carr's short prose contains all of the three main elements of nature writing as articulated by Thomas J. Lyon, namely "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (Lyon, 1996, 276). While the relative emphasis on these elements differs from story to story, the connection between the devastation of the natural environment, the dispossession of native populations, and the discrimination against women underlies all of these stories

of place. Both Austin and Carr were strongly influenced by Native American world-views, particularly those of the Paiute and the Haida (Karell, 2000, 157, Rimstead, 1991, 50). The fact that today their writing can be called ecofeminist supports Irene Diamond's and Gloria Orenstein's observation that ecofeminism is just "a new term for an ancient wisdom" (Diamond and Orenstein, (eds.), xv).³

The affiliation between the naturalistic and anthropological tendencies in Austin's and Carr's texts is succinctly expressed in Austin's assertion that "To understand the fashion of any life, one must know the land it is lived in and the procession of the year" (Austin, 1903, 84) – or as Carr puts it, in the Haida villages "the houses and people were alike. Wind, rain, forest and sea had done the same thing to both" (Carr, 1941, 6). Accordingly, Austin and Carr capture the cyclical patterns of weather-plant-animal-human activity that takes place in the desert or the rainforest ecosystems. The feminist undertones of Austin's and Carr's writing surface most emphatically in their depictions of the native women's knowledge of such patterns in their home environment, an ecological type of knowledge which feeds their resilience and adaptive ingenuity.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, while Austin and Carr found themselves captivated and stimulated by either the magnetic desertness of the Owens Valley or the misty jungle of Haida Gwaii, the spread of industrialization and tourism had already reached the edges of these regions. In both areas the lumber and mining camps had sprung up. As Austin observes, the antelope of the high desert plateau "had ceased before the keen edge of slaughter that defines the frontier of men" (Austin, 1909, 190). With the arrival of steamboats and trains at some of the coastal villages, Carr reports that the sacred totem poles were turned away from the water toward the railroad and "everything was changed" and "cheapened" in order to satisfy the tourists (Carr, 1953, 512). Nevertheless, the seasonal changes of those majestic landscapes still largely govern the rhythms of all life in them. In Austin's country, "the land sets its seasons by the rain" (Austin, 1903, 3). The "hot, still" summer of "violent" storms gradually turns into the "chill, quiescent" winter which gratefully drinks "its scant rain and scantly snows" and which reluctantly gives way to the "blossoming, radiant" spring (Austin, 1903, 3). Like the life cycles of the desert plants and animals, the regional migrations of the local tribes as well as the shepherders, cattle ranchers and other human desert dwellers follow these seasons. In Carr's country, where it hazes, drizzles or rains most of the time, it is largely the return of the salmon that determines the main seasons. During the salmon runs, "the men would go on the fishing boats" and the women would "pack salmon in tins" in the canneries (Carr, 1953, 529). When the salmon leave, the native people return to their home villages and devote themselves to other types of fishing, and carving and basket weaving for the tourist trade.

Austin's and Carr's representations of the peopled landscapes of the California desert and the BC rainforest include, even foreground, the voices and activities of native women. However, Austin's and Carr's tributes to such enduring and creative women like Seyavi in *The Land of Little Rain* or Mrs. Green in *Klee Wyck* do not obscure the loss and pain they carry. Seyavi and her infant son were the only ones in their family to survive "the last stand" of the Paiutes, and while living on "tule roots and fresh-water clam," they "must have come very near to the bare core of things" (Austin, 1903, 83). This was how Seyavi, the basket

maker, learned “how much more easily one can do without a man than might at first be supposed” (Austin, 1903, 84). Like Seyavi, Mrs. Green was able to use her familiarity with what her environment had to offer to survive the traumatic economic and cultural changes that transpired during her lifetime. For example, she knew where the fish lay their eggs in the kelp leaves and took advantage of the Japanese demand for fish roe. She also cultivated potatoes “wherever she could find a pocket of land on the little islands round about” (Carr, 1941, 77). These determined, self-reliant women continued to strive to assert control over theirs and their children’s lives. They drew much of their strength and sustenance from their continued sense of kinship with the primal forces of the desert and the rainforest.

The feminized land as a speaking, desiring, and empowering agent

Austin’s and Carr’s stories of place enact the fundamental ecocritical principle of interconnectedness and interdependence of the human and the nonhuman within the ecosphere (Glotfelty, (ed.), 1996, xix). Just as the desert and the rainforest have imprinted their indelible mark on their inhabitants, the people have responded by inscribing the various features of the land with their actions as well as their views, memories, and dreams. Perhaps most clearly such inscriptions take the form of name-giving. In Austin’s desert region the mountain called the Weeping Woman, or Oppapago, by the Paiute, “sits eastward and solitary,” apart from the other peaks of the Sierras (Austin, 1903, 104). She has “a bowed, grave aspect as of some woman you might have known, looking out across the grassy barrows of her dead. From the twin lakes under its noble brow stream down incessant white and tumbling waters” (Austin, 1903, 104). It is through the capturing of this continuous and inescapable process of mutual engraving that Austin’s and Carr’s re-reading of landscape recovers the cultural history of their regions.⁴

In addition, Austin’s and Carr’s writing can be seen as biocentric in that it diminishes human powers and presents people as “simply equal to everything else in the natural world” (Campbell, 1996, 128). The adventurous spirit of the desert traveler is humbled as she is constantly reminded by physical evidence as well as rumor of the omnipresent danger of death by thirst. On the west coast, it is death by drowning that perpetually threatens the locals as well as the visitors, inspiring their respect while nurturing their imagination. Carr remembers that as she was trying to make her way through the rainforest greenery towards the totem poles in an abandoned Haida village, she found herself “drowned under an avalanche of growth” and could go no further (Carr, 1941, 53). As she puts it, “the dog and I were alone in it—just nothings in the overwhelming immensity” (Carr, 1941, 53). As had happened on many other occasions, the rainforest protected her secrets behind “an impregnable barrier” (Carr, 1941, 39). Thus the inherent mystery of the land remains beyond human reach. Moreover, the land not only lays claims on the bodies of humans; it also extracts her dues by luring and then trapping human souls. When the desert turns “her hot breath” and “her fulgent, splendid smiling” on a man or a woman (Austin, 1909, 177), she “sucks [them] dry” and then “keeps [them] dangling like gourds on a string” (Austin, 1909, 205). With a similar fierceness, the rainforest attacks with its “rush of growth” the abandoned

villages, “swoop[ing] and gobbl[ing] up” every trace of human habitation, taking back her space (Carr, 1941, 79). Austin’s desert as well as Carr’s rainforest are living entities that possess a will and a power of their own.⁵

These life-giving and life-taking properties of the land, her voices and desires, are embodied in Austin’s “The Walking Woman of the Desert” and Carr’s “The Wild Woman of the Forest.” Both of these representations of the land merge the sexual and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred. Even though they belong to different climates and topographies, their characterizations echo each other on many levels, revealing Austin’s and Carr’s attempts at self-definition. Austin’s Desert Woman is “deep-breasted, broad in the hips,” with long tawny hair and tawny skin, full lips, “sane and steady” eyes, a large mind, “passionate, but not necessitous, patient – and you could not move her . . . so much as one tawny hair’s breath beyond her own desires” (Austin, 1909, 160). In comparison, the composite image of Carr’s Forest Woman is “graciously feminine,” with “two eagle-heads” for her breasts, a “weather-worn” skin, a “shouting mouth” with “projecting lips,” and deep, staring eyes. Like the desert woman, she is always on the move, “a singing spirit . . . passing through the jungle” (Carr, 1941, 32-40). Both of these figures express “power, weight, domination” (Carr, 1941, 35), and, even more importantly, they import a vision of wholeness.

A comparative analysis of Austin’s snapshots of the California desert and Carr’s sketches of the BC rainforest thus suggests that their form as well as their main themes are underlaid by a shared ecophilosophy and ecofeminism. Even though each author’s writing is rooted in the particularities of different ecosystems, their stories contain a common emphasis on locating female subjectivity and multicultural presence in the two landscapes. This emphasis allows Austin and Carr to portray their regions as polyphonic, foregrounding the connection between environmental, cultural, and social issues while excavating and re-imagining the regions’ “landscape memory” (Schama, 1995, 13). Moreover, Austin and Carr do not paint over cultural conflict and their work participates in the “legacy of subversion” that characterizes much of women’s regional literature (Inness and Royer, 1997, 3). As Jim Wayne Miller observes, “contrary to the conventional belief that regions belong to the past and are forever passing away, our various regions in America are still forming. Their parameters may shift, but they endure—and they may become even more distinct, rather than less so, as time passes” (Miller, 1987, 12). In the US as well as in Canada, much of regional writing has attempted to enrich and re-evaluate the national literary tradition. Through their inclusion of the voices of the land, the voices of native cultures and, in particular, the voices of women, Austin and Carr, both ecofeminist regionalists, extend the definition of US and Canadian literatures and identities.

Endnotes

1. The term ecofeminism (ecoféminisme) was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in the early 1970s. In *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974) and *Ecologie féminisme: Révolution ou mutation* (1978) d’Eaubonne asserts an inextricable link between the destruction of natural resources and overpopulation, pointing out the shared patriarchal underpinning of the exploitative treatment of nature and women. Barbara T. Gates, d’Eaubonne’s translator into English, summarizes the crux of

d'Eaubonne's argument in the following words: "Urbanized, technological society, which is male-driven, has reduced the earth's fertility, while overbreeding, also male-driven, has increased the population" (Gates, 1998, 17). As the titles of d'Eaubonne's works indicate, survival of the human species and possibly the planet is threatened, and a revolution in thought and action is necessary. Ecofeminism, a growing critical discipline, builds on d'Eaubonne's writing. In addition to tracing the connection between the domination of land and oppression of women in literary texts, ecofeminists emphasize the inherent interconnectedness of all elements and the crucial importance of diversity within the web of life on Earth. Further, ecofeminists critique hierarchical binaries such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, science/art, human/animal, and other androcentric and anthropocentric biases of modern Western civilization, focusing on recognizing and promoting literary strategies that recognize "the other" as a non-alien, related, speaking subject (King, 1990, Merchant, 1990, Murphy, 1995, Spretnak, 1990, Warren, 1990).

2. Historically, regional literature in general, and women's regional writing in particular, has been considered marginal within the context of both US and Canadian national production. Nevertheless, recent regionalist criticism, drawing on poststructuralist and postcolonial theories as well as on cultural geography and sociology, shows that a fluid and multilayered concept of region has always been a central element in fiction. Even more importantly, in its ongoing permutations this concept continues to stimulate much of contemporary writing in both countries, having inspired a wave of "new regionalism" since the 1980s (Brown, 1983, Comer, 1997, Inness and Royer, 1997, Jordan, 1994, Miller, 1987, New, 1997, Robbins, 2001, Winks, 1983). Among the most significant reformulations of regionalism as it relates to Austin's and Carr's works is Ursula Kelly's observation that while regionalism "is an ideological discourse which positions and produces subjects in specific and very political ways," it also has the potential "to mark difference, resist cultural homogenization, claim history and demand autonomy" (Kelly, 1993, 15). As Austin's and Carr's narrators journey through the California desert and the BC rainforest, they interact with a region that embodies an agency growing out of its specific geography, history, and culture.

3. As Patrick D. Murphy points out, ecofeminist writers and critics have in fact established a distinctive form of environmental literature. The established canon of nature writing in English has been dominated by the nonfictional naturalist essay written mostly by men indebted to the Enlightenment belief that privileges scientific, non-participatory description. For example, Thomas J. Lyon's *This Incomparable Land: A Book of American Nature Writing* (1989) completely excludes native authors and *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990), edited by Robert Finch and Robert Elder, is similarly biased in its near blindness to ethnic and female voices (Murphy, 1995, 31-46). Austin and Carr thus extend the existing generic boundaries of nature writing in at least two ways: they blur the distinction between fiction and nonfiction and they integrate indigenous and female presence into the genre.

4. In the sense that Austin's desert and Carr's rainforest "reflect a distinctive way of transforming nature into culture," they become "ethnographic landscapes" (Hardesty, 2000, 169). Portrayed through culturally tinted lenses, these

ethnographic landscapes “mirror the systems of meanings, ideologies, beliefs, values, and world-views” of their various groups of inhabitants (Hardesty, 2000, 169). Such conception of landscapes allows for their continual redefinition through historically changing cultural perspectives.

5. Similarly to region, “landscape is a concept as well as a place,” consisting of cultural as well as ecological dimensions (Melnick, 2000, 23). In her discussion of “a poetics of geography” Patricia Yaeger suggests that “place-centered narration not only refocuses our attention on the ways in which place is political; it necessitates the geographic equivalent of the ghost story—an awareness of the irreducible strangeness of place” (Yaeger, 1996, 6). Austin’s and Carr’s stories can be seen as place-centered narratives in that they incorporate the encrypted element of an unknowable mystery, of “the interstitial” nature of place (Yaeger, 1996, 15).

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