

A Ramble in Stanley Park

*"There, by a most incestuous birth,
Strange woods spring from the teeming earth"*

John Wilmot

The search for origins, for “reconciliation with the stable rhythms of the earth,” for “familiar soil,” and the desire to go back to the “beginnings” (Taylor 194), to “Eden” (286), is of central concern in Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park*. The novel presents Stanley Park as a place where such reconciliation can occur, and in fact inevitably must occur for those in the novel who, both literally and figuratively, find themselves there. As Eden, the park is a place in which to find absolution, solace, spiritual reckoning, and revelation. In it can be found what is lost in the outside world. However, in producing this vision, the novel cancels certain regional actualities: it omits any significant presence of indigenous culture or First Nations issues and glosses over the geographical and historical realities concerning Stanley Park as Aboriginal territory. Hardly any attention is paid to indigenous culture. This omission is symptomatic of the narrative’s claim on Stanley Park as an appropriation of indigenous culture; simultaneously, it aids the novel and its park to emerge as a nationalist claim on a specific Canadian region. Here, I argue that the novel’s missing Aboriginal peoples¹ are in fact not missing at all. Instead, they are so deeply associated with the representations of nature in the park that they are unseeable² upon first glance. They are essentially located in the natural world of the park—that is, they constitute its essence. Their location as such is

¹ According to the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) website, “‘Aboriginal peoples’ is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants,” which in Canada constitutes three distinct groups: “Indians (commonly referred to as First Nations), Métis and Inuit.” The term “‘First Nations people’ refers to Status and Non-Status ‘Indian’ peoples in Canada.” This essay uses the terms “Aboriginal peoples,” or “Aborigines,” as Eva Mackey does, to refer collectively to the Aboriginal peoples in Canada for the purposes of exploring ideological resonances, reserving the term “First Nations” for its more accurate usage as a political term that orients First Nations peoples, persons, and interests specifically according to the Canadian system of government.

² I choose “unseeable” because it bespeaks agency in the act of seeing, or, in this case, unseeing, as opposed to simply looking. “Invisible” does not accurately express what I want because it is nuanced in favour of the thing in question, and not the person looking; I want to indicate accountability.

the actual, though ostensibly hidden, foundation upon which Taylor constructs his vision of Stanley Park as a place so natural that it becomes almost supernatural: an extraordinary Eden.

This essay employs Eva Mackey's "Becoming Indigenous: Land, Belonging, and the Appropriation of Aboriginality in Canadian Nationalist Narratives" and Lynn Coady's "Books that say Arse" in order to illustrate this view of *Stanley Park*. Using terms from Mackey and Coady, I will examine a central aspect of the novel: what I will call the grove scene. Mackey's "nationalist narratives" and "national identity" (Mackey 150) are crucial to the argument. These terms promote an inquiry that ultimately reaches beyond the constraints of this essay and, ideally, can mobilize an ongoing investigation of how works such as this, especially when identified as regional writing, serve Canada's purposes of nation building. For Mackey, nationalist narratives are stories about Canada derived from and sponsored by such nation-building productions and institutions as "national art and literature, national museums and art galleries, television and radio programmes, advertising, nationalist festivals and education programs [sic]" (150-51). These stories, she holds, though they "do not, of course, represent the actual lived and multiple sentiments of the entire heterogeneous and diverse population" (151), do together develop and disseminate ideas, and even experiences, of Canada's national identity. *Stanley Park*, though not an obvious nationalist narrative, yields to such an analysis and provides insight on how regional writing can serve nationalist goals.

In "Becoming Indigenous," Mackey discusses the problematic relationship between "identity, space and place." She establishes Canada as an "Ex-Colonial British settler [nation]," a yet-unstable but shrewd political entity "created as a result of earlier transnational flows of capital and populations," and observes that such creations "usually involved destruction of Native peoples and the appropriation of their native lands." She "examines the cultural politics of the processes" involved as Canada "attempts to make the geographical space of the nation a 'Native Land'" (150). As a settler nation, Canada depends upon the appropriation of indigenous culture in order to flesh out its national identity. To conduct this appropriation successfully, however, it must erase or repress narratives of conquest, and instead affirm its claim to the land as a naturally occurring heritage. Mackey observes that a dominant feature in Canada's nationalist narratives is the emphasis on

living in harmony with the land and its indigenous peoples.³ Their focus on nature and, especially, on the constant reiteration of a return to nature as the source of life-giving energy, appropriate indigenous culture and effectively convince Canada as a settler nation that it is “becoming indigenous.”

Coady’s “fetishization” (2) supports and focuses this analysis by emphasizing appropriation on a regional level, and by revealing the personal urgency and desire behind this appropriation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fetishes as “objects,” “amulets” used for “means of enchantment, or regarded . . . with superstitious dread.” Anthropologically, a fetish is “an inanimate object worshipped by primitive peoples on account of its supposed inherent magical powers, or as being animated by a spirit.” Figuratively, it is “something irrationally reverenced”; psychologically, it is something that “abnormally serves as the stimulus to, or the end in itself of, sexual desire.” Further, “fetishism” is a “perversion of the sexual instinct, often resulting from earlier repression” (*OED*). Coady’s fetishization exposes the act of perceiving special characteristics—“magical powers” with the potential to stimulate or satisfy something akin to sexual desire—in any particular culture, as at least irrational and abnormal, likely the result of earlier repression, and maybe even perverted.

In “Books that say Arse,” Coady writes:

The problem is, whenever a distinctive culture, like that of Atlantic Canada, is taken note of by a larger culture, like Canada, two things happen simultaneously. On the one hand, the distinctive culture gets marginalized The second is an offshoot of the first, but is much wider-ranging, seemingly benign, and therefore insidious: the culture gets fetishized. (1)

Coady’s observation, consolidated with Mackey’s examination of appropriated Aboriginality in nationalist narratives, enables a view of *Stanley Park* as a distinctly regional, nature-based culture, whose glorified features (that which makes the park a holy place promising

³ Notably, most of the imagery in the INAC website’s “Aboriginal Peoples & Communities” pages shows either natural scenery or Aboriginal persons superimposed on decorative backdrops of natural scenery, including snowy mountains, green forests, fields of flowers or grain, and even an image of an Inuit child carrying what appears to be a polar bear cub. In contrast, the section “Acts, Agreements & Land Claims” shows Ottawa’s parliamentary clock tower superimposed over a close-up crop of a pinstriped suit’s hands writing on a document: a rather blatant rewrite of the concept of time immemorial, indeed.

harmony with nature) rely upon the repression of something else (conquest) in order to exist. The novel presents Stanley Park as a kind of promised land where encountering nature and connecting with the land becomes the way to reconnect with personal beginnings and the source of life. Not just survival, but abundant living off the land and participating in a diverse community are available there. From the novel's first page, it is associated with beginnings. The narrative opens in "early spring" (Taylor 3). Jeremy, preparing to meet his father, recalls his childhood and his mother, a photographed moment in the same place at the same time of year—his beginnings—while seated underneath a blossoming cherry-tree "doorway" (3) into the park, signifying entrance, newness, a possible world beyond. Everything the park offers—physically, its food and shelter, and spiritually, its consolation—relies on its natural resources. Despite Jeremy's inviting cherry-blossom door, Taylor minimizes the park's recreational, park-like accessibility, and instead writes it as a place that is nearly impenetrable to those who do not know it yet. Once in, however, that impenetrability becomes their protection; the waters and woods become their happy hunting grounds. Moreover, penetrating the woods involves disorientation, surrender to the forest, and even blood sacrifice. Jeremy's late night ramble into the park in search of his father and the consequential grove scene exemplify this process (104-9).⁴ Entering these woods means turning away from established notions of the self and the outside world, assuming an attitude of humility, faith, and devotion. It becomes an act of passionate communion.

Stanley Park is a regional novel whose presentation of nature in the regional space that is Stanley Park, fictitious or not, is a representation of a fetishized culture. The natural elements of the park are not just trees and rocks and moss. These elements become personified and sublime, developing a nearly hidden narrative about the park as a living environment: it has "[v]oices. The sound of movement, of life and activity" (Taylor 105); it is "full of life" (106). From it emerge "[f]aces and forms [and the] sudden, immense sound of a

⁴ This process replays when Jeremy rambles around Lost Lagoon (Taylor 215-16) contemplating finding his hidden father. He is "drained empty of every sense but that of being alone," he knows he will be lost "without guidance," and he questions his reality. The trees are impenetrable, "[forming] a wet mass of separateness he [can] not enter"; he decides he must pursue the Babes in the Woods story in order to get in and reach his father, who "[plays] God" in the park (Taylor 216). The Babes in the Woods story, the pursuit of which expresses Jeremy's search for and devotion to finding his origins, functions as a kind of blood sacrifice to the forest, and it opens another investigation of what must be repressed—in this case, literally buried—in order to mount the fetishized vision of Stanley Park.

thousand people" (119). It reveals and expresses the wisdom of ages, not just of the land but also of humanity. It is "pure and unimpeachably good" and "[m]ore like a church than a real church" (118). In the park, nature equates aboriginality: a place of origins, of original people who are still there, as it were, in the spirit of the forest, through which they exert influence and impart spiritual blessing. Here, nature no longer is designated to the real world (and situating the park as Eden situates the real, or outside, world as fallen); rather, it is a "green heaven" (216), associated with a higher order with one specific purpose: to embrace and heal those who stumble, ramble, or run to it for grace. This is not just an appropriation of aboriginality. The story is too hidden and beautiful for that to be so. It takes appropriation a step further, into fetishization: it stimulates desire and produces satisfaction on a level that is beyond reason, and approaching divine.

The novel presents Stanley Park as a place from which a distinctive culture emerges. By emphasizing the characteristics of the forest and the land and their effects on the park's inhabitants, the novel fetishizes Stanley Park. Fetishization constitutes a regional appropriation of nature, echoing Canada's nationalist narratives on a local scale. As Coady observes, the other side of fetishization is marginalization. In this case, the novel's vision of the park, by appropriating its Aboriginality—that is, by presenting it as a geographical space that is somehow intact and rich in available resources, as an original space—necessarily represses the history of that place as Aboriginal land. Now, its Aboriginality is not its culture but its essence; in this way, it is experienceable, but unseeable.

The grove scene demonstrates how this narrative, though operating on a regional scale, works to "equate Aboriginal people with the land and with nature" (Mackey 158). What Jeremy witnesses in the grove is both the most explicit instance of appropriated Aboriginality in the novel, and a view into the novel's dark heart—its most hidden, secret essence. The scene immediately signals origins: Jeremy hears "the peculiar feline mewl of a baby crying" (Taylor 106). This description is not entirely human or familiar; instead, it is strange and animal. The woman holding the baby by the fire is "crouched" and "sitting on the ground near the heat" (106) suggesting maternal instinct, defence, and survival. In the "low ring of light," the men, too, show animal instinct: "One looked carefully into the darkness, his eyes passing slowly over Jeremy hidden in the blackness, while the other crouched" (106). The scene is low-lit with "darkness" and "blackness," indicating things

barely seeable, and things hidden. Jeremy is “eavesdropping, peeping like a Tom, hovering like a ghost, or a god, or a conqueror” (106). “God” and “conqueror” firmly delineate the status quo, juxtaposing Jeremy with the grove and its occupants. Even “a ghost” figures him as disembodied, suggestive of looking in on another time in an unreal, slipping-through-the-veil, manner. Most importantly, the language he hears is “an entirely unfamiliar string of sounds. Like insect sounds” (106). This animal quality quickly becomes elevated from insect to sublimely nature-based:

Popping epiglottis, singing in the blue night. An ancient-sounding tongue that [mirrors] the sound of cedar branches hitting one another in the wind overhead, or sound of wave slaps on algae-ed stone, the sound of sappy softwood popping in a dying fire. (107)

More than just the imagery in this passage shows its representation of “harmony between humans and nature, and the untouched and virgin natural land that comes to represent Canada’s beginnings” (Mackey 158). The poetry of the words—“the sound of cedar,” of “wave slaps on algae-ed stone,” “of sappy softwood popping” (Taylor 107)—imitates what Jeremy hears. The narrative voice evokes both his desire to hear it thus and his almost instant satisfaction by means of the blending of these sounds with the surrounding forest. This language-as-nature further roots its speakers into the woods as natural residents there and fetishizes the park as a holy place. This presentation establishes a fantasy that such an organization of the natural world has always been so: the ancient peoples are present in and consistent with the trees and waves and weather; more importantly, as such, they have always been and are now available to those bold and devoted enough to seek them in—or as—the natural world.

This scene exemplifies Mackey’s argument that “native people have begun to represent Canada’s heritage and past, and they are idealized as nature itself” (160). The scene is a set piece, a careful and elaborate narrative move that offers a voyeuristic perspective, but quickly reassures the voyeur that all is well, because, the narrative affirms, what has been spied is sacred. Thus, the voyeur—Jeremy, the reader, the nation—is elevated to the ranks of the chosen. This scene exposes the marginalized culture that is hidden in order to realize the park as a holy place of beginnings. By revealing just a glimpse of this hidden essence, the novel effectively appropriates what is there simply by following

the chain of associations: original people, hardly differentiated from the natural environment, Aboriginal culture, and ultimately, the place itself, the place as heritage, its availability now as a sacred, healing place offering reconciliation, salvation. The equation of Aboriginality with nature is made seamless by the desire—in fact, by the fundamental human need—to go back to the beginnings, back to nature in its purest form and most divine interpretation.

Jeremy's father, cast as God (216), affirms that Jeremy has witnessed a "great thing." In settler-nation narrative style, using the authoritative voice Taylor has bestowed on him, he both identifies and sanctifies the people in the grove/the grove itself. He names what is there: "An ancient tongue. An aboriginal language, nearly extinct," and he maps it: "Cultural holdouts. . . . Homing in on a place that cannot be taken from them" (135). In doing so, he confirms the appropriation of Aboriginality, equating it and indeed locating it unequivocally in the natural world: "The words themselves are linked to specific things: a bend in a creek, a bank of stones, the old Beaver Lake salmon run" (135). Such appropriation produces this geographical space as a fetishized natural environment. More, it claims the location as essentially available to Canada as a settler nation, on Canada's terms. Further still, Jeremy's father mightily expounds upon the subject:

"This great locus of civic pride, this Stanley Park. It can't be expropriated, built up, paved over, strata-titled. These speakers of an ancient tongue, their actions are the sociolinguistic equivalent of taking sanctuary in a church. These woods, this is the church." (135)

He uses official language, settler nation perspective, and the tendencies of a nationalist narrative to romanticize and glorify Aboriginality, to assign its peoples' sanctuary in their natural environment. Their presence as such will save the land; more importantly, the nationalist recognition of Aboriginality in/as nature constitutes an inclusion of Aboriginal culture into Canadian culture as it tries to develop a national identity and find a home. Ultimately, this constitutes a nationalist land claim that cancels, by inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in its wider context, the land claims of the First Nations. Moreover, it claims Aboriginality, the spirit of the land, as decidedly heritage, and primarily Canadian. Mackey examines the implications of celebrating "Canadian national 'heritage'" thus: "[It] entails no less than the erasure of the history of *conquest*. Aboriginal people become the ancestors of

the nation who pass on an inheritance, not the survivors of conquest and colonization” (Mackey 160). *Stanley Park* is a fetishized fantasy that allows the place itself to become Taylor’s “familiar soil.” Essentially aboriginal, the park is a heritage sanctuary wherein everyone can “*become* Canadian and progress together into the future” (154). The novel emphasizes the park as a natural place of origins, locates Aboriginality at its heart, and represses conquest by claiming it as a sanctified, spiritual place of salvation for those who finally return there looking for home. Thus, *Stanley Park* emerges as a regional narrative that works towards Canada’s nation building goals to develop a national identity and claim its spaces, Stanley Park included, as truly native land.

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