

"time is, the delta": *Steveston* in Historical and Ecological Context

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Frank [Davey] and George [Bowering] were much more aware of the tradition they were battling than I was—and they were Canadian. I was an immigrant, and so I had an experience of otherness that I could work with right from the start. When you feel excluded or marginalized, what you work toward is synthesis. (Marlatt 1994)

The publication of Daphne Marlatt's *Steveston* in 1974 was a milestone in the history of West Coast writing. Until its appearance, poetry in Vancouver was dominated by men, chiefly the founders of *Tish*, the poetry newsletter that had championed early postmodernism and initiated the decentralization of Canadian poetry in the 1960s. Inspired by American writers such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, Frank Davey, George Bowering, James Reid, David Dawson, and Fred Wah had introduced into Canadian writing a new aesthetic. Delightfully phenomenological in method and content and attuned to multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity, non-linearity and unpredictability, this aesthetic was celebrated as "the triumph of particularity over philosophy" (Davey 1974, 21). *Tish* postmodernism was, however, securely grounded in Heraclitean philosophy, which turns on the concept of the dynamic conflict of opposites—specifically, the conflict between creative and destructive forces in nature. Indeed, the aligning of West Coast writing with "the elements of an environment in which no one element fully controls another" (Davey 1974, 20) gave Heraclitean process status as a theory of knowledge. When translated to the level of literary politics during the 1970s, however, this epistemology of conflict seemed to have more in common with Darwin than Heraclitus, for the West Coast writers saw themselves as locked in a struggle for survival with what Davey called "the control and logic-oriented criteria of modernism" that dominated Canadian critical practice (1974, 22). Postmodernist pressures in the literary ecosystem were forcing criticism to evolve in tandem with poetry. Thus "the survival of the fittest" became a prominent theme in the critical discourse, a theme made explicit in the title of the groundbreaking article, "Surviving the Paraphrase" (1976), Davey's challenge to the Canadian critical establishment.

The celebration of conflict as the transformative dynamic of a Heraclitean, post-Einsteinian universe precluded any serious critique of conflict, thus making a kind of social Heracliteanism possible. While this was entirely in keeping with the New Left politics of the 1960s, it was out of step with the feminism of the early 'seventies which was beginning to question the traditional hierarchy of values that elevated competition, autonomy, and independence above the qualities of nurturing, intimacy, and interdependence. By the mid-seventies, West Coast writing was ready for a subtler approach, which *Steveston* appeared to embody. Davey, who reviewed the poem in manuscript, may have intuited this when he described the work as "a truly relevant kind of writing that would initiate us into the intricacies and depths of the post-modern age" (1974, 197). Indeed, long before the degeneration of race/class/gender into the dogma it has now become, the poem not only sensitized readers to that complex intersection, it also insisted on the treatment of race, class, and gender in historical and ecological context. While the main antagonists in Marlatt's poem/history of the British Columbia fishing town are the Fraser River and the fish cannery, the conflict between them not only provides the context for, but is also contextualized in, the particularities of individual lives—including the poet's and the reader's.

Privileging aesthetics, Davey found the "most important ideas of Marlatt's poetry . . . implied by its form," its reading of the world as "a mélange of cues and signals," and its invitation to the reader "to abandon his logical, linear, and superficial attitudes toward experience . . ." (1974, 195). Yet he couldn't entirely resist the pull of external referents and their ethical implications, as is demonstrated in his enumeration of the poem's "many foci":

the exploitation of natural resources, the exploitation of early Japanese-Canadian fishermen who were eventually rescued from economic servitude to the fish packers by their internment at the start of World War II, the exploitation of all weaker groups (the Indian, the Chinese, the Nisei, the poor, the female) by wealthy and legally-sophisticated corporations, the heroic tenacity of the exploited in living their very real, sexual, and substantive lives in the mud and storm to which the abstract powers of corporate finance have confined them. History in these poems becomes both personal and contemporary; the "political" implications of the facts Marlatt discovers reach into both her life and the reader's.

(Davey

1974, 195)

By foregrounding the continuity between "the exploitation of natural resources" and "the exploitation of all weaker groups," this content summary

invites an exploration of the poem's ecological focus, which focus has already intrigued many Marlatt readers, including Brenda Carr (1991) and the ecocritic D.M.R. Bentley (1990). Such an approach would emphasize synthesis and connection without denying Heraclitean conflict and would pay special attention to Davey's observation that what Marlatt discovers as an aural historian "reach[es] into both her life and the reader's." This kind of approach would acknowledge that *Steveston* is not merely a linguistic *tour de force* but also a blueprint for an ethical alternative to the epistemology of conflict.

I've organized this paper around some reflections upon the writing of *Steveston* which Marlatt shared with me over dinner in the spring of 1994. In keeping with this informality, I've also subordinated an orderly pursuit of my thesis to an approximation of the way in which *Steveston* accretes layers of meaning as it flows forward and backward through time and across space. Hence I've layered in several theoretical digressions wherever the textual tide seems to pull for them. Most important, I've adopted the position that language is less opaque than current fashion would have it— that, indeed, the assumption that language is exclusively self-referential leads to a pernicious linguistic determinism, which *Steveston* implicitly problematizes. In this, I'm responding to sociologist of art Janet Wolff's call for a more ecologically responsible approach to language. In her search for a more inclusive theory of modernism— including contemporary modernism, "sometimes called the postmodern" (20)—Wolff rejects "a too radical poststructuralist position, in which social structure, institutions, and power relations evaporate in a commitment to the view that everything is (only) discourse.

For . . . [while] it is crucial to be self-reflexive about the way in which "the environment" and its problems are formulated, . . . discussions about the environment cannot be premised on the assumption that everything is only "text," or that social and economic relations, being merely discursive constructs, are somehow merely fictions.

(Wolff 17)

What's needed now, Wolff claims, is a theory that "stress[es] the dialectical relationship between text and context" (7), an approach that honours the "two-way relationship" between texts and experiences (22). Marlatt's experience of otherness is a good place to start, for it does give her certain epistemic advantages.

One could say, maybe, "I can imagine how you feel" because that ability to imagine your way into another reality is crucial to any sense of dialogue. . . . We talk about Otherness all the time in terms of other human beings—

who we can actually communicate with. Where the otherness is really important, though, is with species. We can't even begin to imagine what life would be like as a single-celled amoeba in the ocean.

Yet, this is exactly what Steveston invites us to do. Here's how it begins:

Imagine: a town

Imagine a town running
(smoothly?)
a town running before a fire
canneries burning (83)

"Imagine" is quite literally the key to the poem. Followed by a colon, the word establishes the precondition for reading the poem, much as the turn of a key in a machine's ignition establishes the precondition for its running. The word turns the poem on, setting it running, unsmoothly, against the shape of itself on the page, a shape full of droplines and short lines, hazards and hairpin turns. This is the beginning of trying to imagine what it might be like to make a journey upstream to spawn—or even downstream, over rocks, through the delta, against the incoming tide, and out to sea. If the perils of this journey appear to reinforce the primacy of conflict and opposition—fish at odds with river—then we need to imagine more complexly. At the centre of this poem is the delta, a place where time is spacialized and space is dynamic: "time is, the delta." A "triangular alluvial tract at mouth of river enclosed or traversed by its diverging branches" (OED), the delta is a transitional space whose natural architecture helps to dissipate the overpowering energy of opposing forces, reconciling incoming with outgoing waters, giving incoming or outgoing salmon a chance to swim through.

I'm interpreting the delta as a transitional space because the concept is useful for tracking the way in which the poem attempts to move beyond conflict and reach toward interconnection and synthesis. Transitional space is associated with the psychoanalytic premise that "[w]e recognize ourselves in the other, and we even recognize ourselves in inanimate things" (Benjamin 1988, 21). In 1982, Donna Bassin argued that spatial imagery is often employed by women poets to express the sources of creativity (200), and psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin concurred when she observed the same phenomenon in the narratives of her female analysands. Benjamin took the argument further, theorizing transitional space as intersubjective space, a place between self and other where both meet in a web of intersubjective connection (1986, 92-95). The advantage of a theory of transitional, or intersubjective, space is that it accommodates both separation and connection: in Benjamin's construction, subjects are interconnected, not merged, and thus remain subjects in their own right.

Neither self nor other is ever entirely singular, as the image of intersubjectivity as a web suggests. It's therefore more accurate to talk about *selves* and *others*. This accommodates multiplicity, which Marlatt expresses paradoxically as "multiplicity simply there" (90). The intersubjective web also has theoretical implications for the nets and networking imagery that floats like a *leitmotif* through Marlatt's work. Although not everywhere present as a concrete image in *Steveston*, the net nevertheless casts its influence across the entire text. Indeed, the delta, with its implied network of river branches, is only one of the net's several permutations. As Brenda Carr has noted, "the image of the net or web as a metaphor of [the] sense of interconnection between human life and all life forms in the environment" is central "to the ecological vision that [Marlatt] conceptualized in *Steveston*" (104). But Marlatt's nets are more complex than that. Laurie Ricou has described them paradoxically as "containers made up of holes" (1986, 207). The fluid movement of subjects in and out of intersubjective connection and the fluidity of the boundary around intersubjective space introduce time into the paradox and thus may help to resolve it. However, nets also connote deadly entanglement—especially for a fish—which cannot be resolved by simply invoking paradox, that convenient concept for keeping the contradictions inherent in language under control.

Contradictions are always set up by language because language works in a bipolar fashion. So it's difficult to use language to get at the enmeshment that is one fabric—which the poem is always reaching for.

Past and present collide and intermesh at the delta. The past makes its initial appearance in the image of men driven by fire toward the water's edge: "the bodies of men & fish corpse piled on top of each other." The present silts up over the past: "rot, an endless waste the trucks of production / grind to juice, driving through . . ." (83). The collision of nonhuman and human initiated processes results in an especially noxious enmeshment through which corporate privilege can drive, impervious. Three poems later we get a better sense of how this privilege functions. The "corporate growth that monopolizes" is a growth in more than one sense: it's a tumour, a malignancy that "sucks them dry, these men," "these women in white, tired, or wearily hopeful, drained / by the ditches of their unsatisfied lives" (89).

Distinguishing villain from victim becomes more personal as *Steveston* progresses. The trucks of production appear again, "loaded with offal for what / we also raise to kill, mink up the valley" (90). It's not difficult to imagine other trucks, loaded with fish-torsos—the "harvest," the "subhuman facets of life we the / town (& all that is urban, urbane, our glittering table service, our white wine, the sauces we pickle it with, or ourselves), live off" (90). In other words, it's all connected at this delta, silted up, layer upon interconnected layer, suggesting a multiplicity of positions from which to

imagine. If you're a poet, it's easier to trace this kind of conflict than it is to reach beyond it. If you're a reader, it's easier to "[retreat] into the metaphor that language is its own ecology" (Ricou 1991, 3) than it is to critique it. If you're a fish, it's easier just to die right here in this delta, "ringed with residue" (83), than it is to negotiate it. It always comes down to the fish in this one-industry town—salmon whose chances of making it even as far as this filthy delta are not what they were: imagine what the journey might be like when "boats equipt with the latest machinery, radar, sonic scan" (122) and driftnets are lurking just beyond the delta. Or back up even farther in time and imagine what it's like swimming in the opposite direction, through "water / swollen with its filth, with sewage, milldirt" (86) from sawmills and canneries passed along the way. If you're a yearling salmon, what are your chances?

Chance is very complex. . . . It's not just a lucky card, or just accident, hazard. It's bigger than that. Chance is a name that we give to a force that we can't control. So we call it evil, or we personify it—Lady Luck, or whatever. But chance is operating all around us. It's so large that we can't see its whole shape.

Chance is personified—or, more accurately, fishified—in the opening poem. But even in this somewhat more manageable size, it's not easy to see its whole shape. Now you see it, now you don't: "enigmatic" to the end, "chance lurks / fishlike, shadows the underside of pilings," vanishes under the rot and the refuse, surfaces in the closing line, "flicks his tail & swims through" (83). Meaning is as slippery as a fish in *Steveston*, and it's not easy to follow the ecological thread: now you see it, now you don't. A multiplicity of reverberations is set up by the appearance of chance as a fish who, by chance, makes it through all the treacheries that lurk in wait at the delta. But amidst the uncertainty one thing seems certain: it's not by chance that chance is invoked so early in the poem, for it's the single most important signifier in Western culture's construction of the natural environment.

At the close of the eighteenth century, the fossil was already showing signs of displacing the Bible as the text that tells the one true story of nature. But while the fossil recorded *change* as the norm instead of the exception, it could not edit the Prime Mover out of the story; that task was left to Darwin. Darwin's nature-story, which was more "a form of imaginative history" than a theory (Beer 16), argued that it was *chance*, not some divine plan, that determined the outcome of change. What this meant for science was nothing less than its liberation from theology and its investiture as the epistemological authority. In addition, evolutionary theory provided overwhelming support for the construction of nature as science's absolute Other. Unlike Darwin's nature, science left nothing to chance. Science was about keeping all the variables tightly under control, stripping nature of its context, dissolving its interconnections, including its interconnection with

the scientist. Science was also about having the answers (hypothesis) before you've even asked the questions (experiment). This is what's still involved in practising the time-honoured scientific method—which isn't really a method at all, but rather, a theory of knowledge in itself. Katherine Hayles, who started out as a scientist but ended up a literary theorist, has this to say about the scientific construction of knowledge:

Somehow the idea got started, sometime in the seventeenth century, that we know the world because we are separated from it. Objectivism led to some scientific advances but also to a profound alienation about which many writers and philosophers have meditated. What if we started from the opposite premise that we know the world because we are connected to it? Then to discover that one's views have been shaped in conscious and unconscious ways by one's experience, culture, history, and traditions . . . is to discover that one has a position from which to interact with the world. . . . The result is a much less alienated vision of the world, and also a truer vision of the world, since it acknowledges that positionality is always already affecting the picture we see.

(qtd.

in Stites 106)

In contrast to the scientific method, which is thought to yield "objective knowledge," positionality informs a method which Hayles calls "empowering reflexivity"—empowering because it incorporates subjectivity and thus yields a truer, more complex knowledge. The subjectivity of the knower is not a variable that the knower can control for through some magical act of self-transcendence—an illusion that *chances* partial and even perverse understandings of the reality under study. Reflexivity is a method of knowledge production that not only acknowledges the experiences of the knower but also uses them as a significant indicator of the reality against which hypotheses are tested. By inviting us to imagine, *Steveston* invites us to integrate subjective and "objective" knowledge. This process is enacted in the ironically titled "Life Cycle" (114-5), which is about the death-cycle: descriptions of dying fish from an authoritative treatise on Pacific salmon are integrated into the poet's experience of the fishing town and its inhabitants, once as lively as newly hatched fish but now cycling into idleness and decline. The interconnection results in a knowledge truer and more complex than either objective fact or subjective experience generates on its own.

To return to the living fish, if the fisheye-view in *Steveston* seems to stretch the imagination beyond reason, then besides pointing out that all poetry does that, I would argue that this particular poem is in good company. Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock stretched her imagination so far beyond scientific reason that not even what life in the ocean is like for a

single-celled amoeba could have entirely eluded her. Here's how she describes her experience of studying chromosomes:

When I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. I was right down there with them, and everything got big. I even was able to see the internal parts of the chromosomes. It surprised me, because I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends. . . . As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself.

(qtd. in

Keller 1985 165)

This is empowering reflexivity at work. McClintock called it "a feeling for the organism" (198), and her biographer associated this feeling capacity with McClintock's otherness, which gave her an epistemic advantage in a male-dominated scientific community that ignored her groundbreaking work for many years. Her distance from the centre gave her a better view of the limitations of the scientific method: "You get lots of correlations, but you don't get the truth. . ." (203). As Davey's reviewing of *Steveston* in manuscript implies, Marlatt was far more fortunate than McClintock in that her work was celebrated even before it was published. However, her feeling for the organism has never enjoyed the kind of status conferred upon her feeling for the language.

While not identical, a feeling for the organism and a feeling for language are closely linked. To swim through language as a fish swims through water isn't necessarily to retreat into the metaphor of language as its own ecology. That retreat, which Ricou calls a refusal to see the connections (1991, 3), is a refusal to see "the mesh of the net" we are caught in, "the accretion of all our / actions, how they interact, how they inter/read. . ." (113). Like McClintock, who achieved unique insight into the life of chromosomes by asking herself what she would do if she were one, Marlatt challenges herself and us to dive in and interpret "the reading . . . the sea makes of *us*." She can do this because she knows that self-reflexivity is more than just a function of language. It's both a capacity and an epistemological standpoint. Take, for example, "Response":

'I think the fish like their water clean too,'
she says, with a dry laugh where: this outgoing
river, this incoming tide
mingle & meet. To take
no more than the requisite, *required* to grow,
spawn,
catch, die: required to eat. (111)

The deceptively simple words of this fisherwoman articulate *Steveston's*

ecological vision. The capacity for self-reflection implied in the word "too" is the capacity to interpret the reading the fish make of *us*—or, more accurately, the industrial waste and other sewage that *represent* us in their underwater world. As suggested in her humorless laugh, her comment is no romantic flight of fancy, no sentimental notion about fish with endearingly human preferences. Rather, it's intersubjective knowledge—the kind of knowledge that incorporates positionality. As if to reinforce this, the poem positions her in transitional space, that place where tide and river enmesh. Marlatt can't let the fisherwoman's insight stand without comment; otherwise, you get lots of correlations, but you don't get the truth. So she risks a "Response"—a response that comes to her as a flash of insight, something she *sees as she writes*. Every bit as self-reflexive as the fisherwoman, she reaches toward balancing the requirements of the whole interdependent ecosystem—*the enmeshment that is one fabric*.

One of the things I really wanted to talk about in Steveston was the women—the absence of the women [in public spaces], I mean. They were either in the canneries or at home. It was such a male world, the fishing world, which was why I was so delighted to find my single fisherwoman.

The link between sex and death goes back a long way in literary history. But whereas sex as death is the time-honoured convention, in *Steveston*—as Marlatt herself has pointed out—the convention is turned inside out in a couple of ways. First, "the movement of the river out towards the sea, where it disappears, [is] a movement into the invisible that [has] to do with birthing and dying [and] in fact the two [are] metaphors of each other" (Carr 103). The second reversal—or, more accurately, subversion—of the convention has to do with sex *in defiance* of death. "Woman's body," Marlatt notes, "has been so repressed in our culture—fetishized on the surface but repressed deeply in terms of our actual sexuality and the force of our desire" (Carr 99). Perhaps it was a sense of the repression, or containment, of her own sexuality that permitted her to interconnect with a similar kind of repression at work in the lives of Stevestonians, for Marlatt's sexuality was still contained within the norms of heterosexuality. Perhaps it was her nascent desire to break out of that containment—her response to "the bio-feedback of [her] body in the act of composition"—that motivated the subversion of the sex-as-death convention.

Paradoxically, imagining what life is like for others—fish, men, women, river—entails imagining what death might be like. All forms of life that converge at the delta confront the possibility of a similar kind of death, namely, death by containment—containment in nets, norms, cans, and/or canneries. The ultimate in containment is the goal of the fish-canning process. It's not enough to turn a living fish into a corpse; it must be contained in such a way "That no other corpus work within it" (90). Those cans of "Pacific Ocean flesh" also contain the lives of those who can it:

caught, gutted, packed, steamed, and served up "in a crimson sauce of their own blood," they are contained in the stasis of a living death.

The lives of the women in Steveston are contained by the cannery even before they are old enough to work there. Stasis rather than process is what characterizes the life of the young girl in "Imperial Cannery, 1913" (84-5). Now that "she is old enough to be her / mother inside, working," she stands just inside the door of the cannery, "leaning into the / threshold, waiting for work," waiting for the turn of "the wheel that time is," waiting for her turn at "the wheel that keeps turning / turning, out of its wooden sleeve, the blade with teeth marked: / for marriage, for birth, for death." What connection are we being invited to imagine here? Did the cycle of this young woman's life, regulated by the canning industry of 1913, differ so radically from the cycle of women's lives as regulated by the patriarchal gender norms that characterized the rest of capitalist culture? Moreover, do the lives of women in 1913 differ so radically from the lives of women at the time of *Steveston's* writing? Gender norms are like the blades of the cannery wheel—the "iron chink" that "beheads each fish": they work to eliminate a woman's intellectual life and chop the rest down to marriage, childbirth, and death. The patriarchal status quo, like the Imperial Cannery of 1913, relies upon the containment of women's lives within this narrow conception of the female life cycle. It's this continuity of female experience through time and across space which the poem invites us to imagine.

The men of Steveston appear to have more freedom of movement in space than the women do: they walk through the streets (95-6), work on the docks and the open decks (97-8), visit Christine's coffee shop (101-2), and drink in the Steveston Hotel bar (89). But they, too, are "stopt up, burning, slow, nowhere to go, no crowds to / light, no strange women, no gambling games, no risk" (89). Steveston no longer gives young men the opportunity to flex their masculine muscles. "Except [for] the occasional storm outside, the rare failure of guaranteed equipment, / the unexplained accident," the masculine rivalry and adventure of primitive free enterprise has been "forced out, bought up," a victim of corporate takeover.

But it's more than just the ecological crisis, triggered by overfishing, industrial pollution, and monopoly capitalism that constrains the lives of these men. Their character is crippled by the constricting norms that give them such obvious gender advantage. Like the girl poised on the cannery threshold, the three boys of "Low Tide. A beached vessel" (95-6)—boys as "idle" as their fathers in the Steveston pub—are poised on the threshold of manhood, where they're learning the masculine "orders of power." They have already cultivated competitive acquisitiveness as a masculine ideal: "the fear somebody's beating somebody to it." Hence they hurry to rip off whatever they can from a beached gillnetter: "Hold this, hurry, I can rip the door off." An adult passer-by, higher up on the male hierarchy and thus free to impose

his authority here, challenges their trespassing. Men in training, the boys assert their developing masculinity, "try it on for size." This counterchallenge works: the man backs down, "unwilling to meet their eyes." He "walks off"—but not before invoking the authority of someone even higher up the hierarchy: "If the patrolman comes along you'll be in trouble."

And what about the gillnetter, convenient object upon which to exercise one's developing masculinity? Here's a place where *Steveston* reinforces Jessica Benjamin's claim that "we even recognize ourselves in inanimate things." The small vessel is perched on the rocks, "beached, bleached, like some dying fish." "Her sullen cabin's locked," but two of the boys "violate" her by a side window and find a key. "Inscrutably closed, she allows no keys to hold, nothing so easy. . . ." Once the threat posed by higher orders of masculine power has been successfully challenged, the boys return to their plundering: "Back to the joyous act of 'making' her." This poem makes it possible to recognize which gender has the dubious honour of providing the foundation for masculine hierarchy. Marlatt does this by flouting pedantic cautions against pathetic fallacy, false projection, and anthropomorphism, cautions informed by arbitrary rules upheld largely by those who subscribe to the very objectivism that poetry seeks to subvert. If we can't recognize ourselves in the artifacts of human culture, how can we ever expect to recognize our interconnection with nonhuman nature?

Equally important, "Low tide" provides a clue to the way in which containment within restrictive gender norms is subverted. In acting out their erotic fantasies vis-à-vis the gillnetter, these boys make it possible to survive their oppressive containment at the lowest rung of the male hierarchy. Similarly, the girl who awaits a life contained by the tedious hours of cannery work is poised on the threshold of sexual experience. She's "in her element, dreaming of sails, her father's, a friend's son . . ." (85). (The son of a friend of her father's?) She is also "dreaming, of fabric she saw at Walker's Emporium, & the ribbon." (A new beribboned dress in which to impress the son of a friend of her father's?) These are the erotic dreams of the young—dreams that break open the containment of their lives. Moreover, 1974 is not 1913, and there are options: "'The kids grow up & go elsewhere,' she said, / *not* fishing, not limited to that. . ." (92).

Erotic dream is also the survival strategy of their adult counterparts who never go elsewhere. It's true that "the plant packs their lives, chopping / off the hours, contains *them* as it contains first aid, toilets, beds" (91), but in a long vacated house "back of the carpentry shed," there's still "the vestige of a self-contained life," suggestions of an autoeroticism in defiance of containment. Here, "a nude on the wall glints / kittenish," and an iron bed, a "sleeping place between shifts," suggests "wet dreams, pale beside the / clank of forklift, supply truck, welding shed." Somewhere under all the oppressive norms that regulate gender arrangements and harness men's and women's

libidinal resources in the service profit, there flows a river of the erotic that strains at the dykes of containment. This irrepressible river of desire echoes the Fraser itself: "Over the edge of the / dyke a river pours, uncalled for, unending. . ." (83).

The feminism of the 1970s was still very much focused on analysing gender stereotypes and searching for an androgynous ideal. Thus it's no surprise that Marlatt was so delighted at finding her single fisherwoman, who makes several appearances in *Steveston*, two of which balance her between private and public space. She can be read as the poem's primary interconnector—and not just between the human world and the underwater world of fish. She operates in domestic space but she is not confined in it. She articulates gender norms: "Seems like, with men around, you're always at the stove"(107). She also transcends them: "She went to town to pay the bills, 'somebody's got to look after that.'" She does it all. She "walks, from counter to stove, with a roll"—the same roll that balances her on the deck of her boat, balanced against "the river's push," "rolling, *with it. . .*" (109). "She runs in the / throat of time, voicing the very swifts & shallows of that river," voicing, too, her knowledge of all the forces that collide in transitional space, "this amphibious place, / half earth half water, half river half sea" (108). She understands the returning fish, the filthy river, the polluting industries, the weather, the wind, the waves—and the market forces that are indifferent to them all. Marlatt gives more poem-space to the fisherwoman's exact words than to those of any other Stevestonian. In the act of writing out the fisherwoman word-for-word, she experiences a flash of insight: "Somehow they survive, this people, these fish, survive the refuse bottom, filthy water, their choked lives, / in a singular dance of survival, each from each" (110). Heroic survival notwithstanding, this separation, each from each, suggests a dangerously disconnected community—an ecosystem whose survival hangs in the balance.

If you point to something too obviously, it destroys the balance. Connections are there but they're not foregrounded. It's all a matter of shading.

Photographs like the ones Robert Minden contributed to *Steveston* aren't really black and white. The connections among the various parts of a photographic image emerge only as a function of the myriad shadings of grey along the black-white continuum. Indeed, things rendered exclusively in "black & white we only half perceive" (112). It's all a matter of shading. Shading implies shadows, in which so many things lurk in this poem. Steveston is, after all, a shadow of its former self: "Shadowy, this / piratical emblem of another era. Boomtown" (100). Dead past and living present seem in conflict—a conflict which only an aural historian, as distinct from historians of the dead past, can reconcile. The aural historian moves through the shadows of Steveston, a shadow herself, prompting Ricou to call her the

"elided Daphne, the silent interviewer [who] emerges in [Marlatt's] absence. . . . Daphne Marlatt is the absent woman recording" (1991, 207), and what she's recording in her interviews is living memory, thus integrating the past into the living present. Most readers are fascinated by the unclosed parentheses in the text; fewer make much of the quotation marks, always closed, holding the words of her living subjects in their respectful embrace and turning the text into a transitional space, where subject(ivity)s meet in a web of intersubjective connection.

At the risk of destroying the balance by pointing too obviously, I want to point to two "webs, / of strange connection" (119) in *Steveston*—two perfectly balanced poems located side-by-side in the text. These poems flow into each other like the sea and the river, creating a transitional space, in which past shades into present and time shades into space. "Ghost" (117-8) speaks directly to a Japanese Canadian fisherman, himself a ghost (a shadow? a shade?) of his former self—one of the dispossessed, one of the so-called enemy aliens banished to a wartime internment camp and impelled by some strange inner necessity to return to Steveston like a salmon to its stream of origin. Why this return? Returning from confinement, what was there here to find? "Were you fined? Did you cross the border inadvertently? Did chart & compass, all direction, fail? Interned,

your people confined to a small space where rebirth, will,
push you out thru the rings of material prosperity at war's
end fixed, finally, as citizens of an exploited earth:
you drive your own car, construct your own house, create
your
registered place at Packers' camp, walk the fine (concrete)
line of private property. (117)

The reference to rings recalls Marlatt's *Rings*, her poem cycle celebrating the birth of her son, his journey out of confinement in the womb, down the birth canal, and out through the vaginal ring. Here, by sheer act of "will," this ghost of a dispossessed Japanese fisherman is reborn into postwar prosperity. He's balanced on the fine line between exploited and exploiter, repossessed of property and, paradoxically, possessed by it. All the connections in "Ghost" are feminine. This fisherman's wife, daughters, and granddaughter are his "ties to shore." The feminine connects him also to the past: "teachers, cabaret girls, longlegged American army wives you chauffeured, cared for, daughters, / friends of your daughters, down thru the water smiles of easy girls, / caught, kore" Kore, daughter of Demeter and maiden of the flowering earth, is the sum of all his past connections to the "natural world"—feminine connections reduced in the present to "erotic ghosts of the flowering earth" who haunt his dreams, now that he has "return[ed] to a decomposed ground choked by refuse, profit, & the / concrete of private property; to find [him]self disinherited from / [his] claim to the earth."

Paradoxically, this poem of connection is also *Steveston's* clearest articulation of disconnection—the disconnection of the realm of refuse, profit, concrete, and private property from the interconnected world of nonhuman nature.

The temptation here is to formulate the dislocation of culture and nature in gender terms. Nor would it be altogether inaccurate to do so, for despite the simple dualism of the culture/nature opposition, the poem does return again and again to the idea that human culture invites its own disinheritance from the earth by treating nature the way it treats women: "white women, white bellies of salmon thieved by powerful boats" (118). Moreover, although Marlatt's feminism was not yet well integrated in the early 'seventies, she had read *The Second Sex*, in which Simone de Beauvoir exposed male transcendence and female immanence as the most important assumptions upon which Western patriarchal culture rests. Insofar as *Steveston* is an exploration of the "immanence of things" (119) and frequently associates immanence with the feminine, de Beauvoir's influence on the poem is apparent—which brings me to the other poem in this balanced pair, the poem titled "Or is there love" (119-20).

What a fisherman's children can inherit from their disinherited ghost of a father is his wealth—or what passes for wealth—in this case, a house, "handed down from father to not son but daughter," a house now "webbed with weaving, leaf tracery & light (of pots, plants), a house she / inhabits, immanent, at the edge of town a field. . . ." Now under female proprietorship, this house, located on what was once a field, a "wild place—where foxes / might live," no longer seems quite so thoroughly disinherited from nature. Indeed, positioned "at the edge," on the boundary between culture and nature, it occupies transitional space and is itself occupied by one who mediates between culture and nature.

The idea that women are mediators between culture and nature first appeared in feminist scholarship in 1974, the same year in which *Steveston* was published. In other words, it was an idea whose time had come, so it's no surprise to find it in Marlatt's poem. Much critiqued and refined since it first captured the feminist imagination, this idea was introduced into the literature by anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who conjectured that "culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with, nature" (69). "Intermediate" or "middle status" on a hierarchy of being from culture to nature, Ortner explained, "may have the significance of 'mediating,' i.e., performing some sort of synthesizing function between nature and culture. . ." (84). How you construe women's synthesizing activities depends on who you are. If you're an anthropologist trying to understand woman's place on the margins of man's culture, synthesis serves to maintain the patriarchal

status quo. If you're a poet trying to understand woman's place in the ecosystem, synthesis serves to maintain culture's connection with nature. An artifact of culture, this female inhabited house is surrounded by "summer's wilder growth," is backed by a garden of beans, "lettuce, children, friends," and is set "under the trees that sway like / underwater weeds, connecting things."

But it's not just the reconnection of culture and nature toward which this poem reaches. It also reaches for an understanding of the paradox of home and homelessness. The internal necessity of untangling that paradox was the primary motivating factor in the creation of *Steveston*. Marlatt was drawn to Steveston by its strange familiarity—strange because she knew very little about Japanese culture, familiar because the Asian aspects of Steveston, both Chinese and Japanese, reminded her of her childhood in Malaysia. At home in Vancouver, yet oddly out of place there, she found expression for her dislocation in the context of a house inherited by the daughter of a disinherited Japanese Canadian fisherman: "To live in a place. Immanent. In / place. Yet to feel at sea." If you're marginalized, your distance from the centre of things is not just where you live; it's also who you are. Who, for example, is this Japanese Canadian woman who drives the distance from town, following the westward push of the water, out to her house at "the end of the road"? "Who also" this Canadian poet-from-elsewhere, who "drives back, late, by the shining / water roads from town" after an evening at the "Western Front," Vancouver's centre of things literary? Two different journeys from two different centres end in a single question that links the women intersubjectively: "who are you now / you've cut yourself adrift, alone?"

Who you are is a function of where you are and how you got there: it's all a matter of *place*. Steveston is a place where a web of cultures is mapped onto nature, a place where individual cultures once put down roots and now put out seed: "the place itself, mapt out, a web, was grass: / tall, bent grass swaying heavy with seed. Cottonwood whose seeds make a web in the wind." Grass and cottonwood intermingled? For better *and* worse, this is time at work on space, culture at work on nature, home at work on homelessness. The fisherman's daughter doesn't consider herself a part of Steveston's Japanese community: ". . . I don't belong to Buddhist Church, I don't / send my kids to sunday school." So why does she stay? Here's where it all comes down to place: "well, I *live* here." Here, in place, you (she? the poet? the reader?) "find a self, under the trees that sway like / underwater weeds, connecting things." Submerged, the connections aren't always visible but they're there. You have to imagine your way into them.

In the 1970s, West Coast postmodernist writers were fond of quoting a particular Heraclitian aphorism which for them expressed the transformative conflict of opposites that informed both natural process and the processes of

language: "You cannot step twice into the same river." Anyone who's returned to Marlatt's Fraser as often as I have over the twenty years since its first appearance can hardly deny this truth. But more to the point, there is indeed something in this aphorism that suggests conflict—perhaps it's the emphasis on the negative. Heraclitus had second thoughts, however. He was apparently aware that his dynamic resists a strict application of the law of contradiction, for he amended the aphorism to read, "We step and we do not step into the same river; we are and we are not" (frag. 81). This shift is a subtle one but it's nevertheless radical, for it throws the whole dynamic into a kind of reverse field: synthesis emerges while conflict recedes. Indeed, the revised aphorism anticipates the Hegelian view of becoming as a synthesis of being and nonbeing (Capék 390). But whether Marlatt is more Hegelian than Heraclitean becomes a trivial question in the larger context of her feminism.

In an interview with Brenda Carr—aptly entitled "Between Continuity and Difference"—Marlatt describes her project and her positioning vis-à-vis West Coast postmodernism:

Working for change is what makes feminism different from the postmodernism I learned from the *Tish* days. . . . [P]ostmodernism, although it critiques the master narratives of our culture, the institutions and the codes, still ends up being complicit with them because it has no program for change. A program for change means valorizing a difference, and as soon as you valorize a difference you're moving out of postmodernist deconstruction into a position of . . . belief or trust in a certain meta-narrative. It's a difference at such a basic level that I think it's often been overlooked, but it's a difference that leads to a radical shift in world-view.

(Carr 106)

The shift from conflict toward connection and synthesis makes all the difference, a difference that amounts to an epistemological shift into the empowering reflexivity of positionality. There is a position—a third space—between the two elements of many binary pairs, a place where synthesis takes a turn now and then, and where an act of imagination brings together text and context, knowledge and experience, continuity and difference, culture and nature, poet and reader in a web of interconnections. In making this epistemological shift, Marlatt steered her postmodernism around the trap of linguistic determinism implicit in the notion that there is no nature except the one we construct—a dangerous fallacy that alienates us from the world even more profoundly than does the objectivism of science. At the heart of *Steveston's* ecological vision is the conviction that there is a reality external to our constructions of it: language may stand between us and that reality but it also connects us to it. Indeed, it might even be said that we cannot be

separated from nature except by language, and that the extent to which our connections to nature exceed language is a measurement of our willingness to follow Daphne Marlatt's example and make the crucial epistemological shift.

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