HUNDREDS AND THOUSANDS: DIVERSIFYING THEMES IN CANADIAN LITERATURE THROUGH EMILY CARR’S MYTHOGRAPHIES

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Abstract:

In discussing themes in Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye offer metaphorical notions that encompass a universal Canadian mythology. Atwood’s “malevolent North” and Frye’s “garrison mentality”, while outmoded, continue to influence our sense of a singular cultural identity as constructed in Canadian literature. This premise, however, ignores the multiplicity of the Canadian experience, as with the West Coast Indigenous tribes written about by Emily Carr in her autobiographies. Here, Carr discusses a landscape radically different from Atwood’s North and with societies that do not fit neatly into a garrison schema. Rather, these cultures promote diversity in myth and culture that challenges a staid and fixed Canadian identity in literature. Carr comes under criticism for her colonial approach to Indigenous art and culture, and while this casts a shadow over her legacy, her contributions to Canadian literature, and its themes, remain relevant. Carr’s writings, therefore, act as a platform to diversify themes in Canadian literature.
“I am a Canadian born and bred. I glory in our wonderful West and I would like to leave behind me some of the relics of its first primitive greatness. These things should be to us Canadians what the ancient Britons’ relics are to the English.”

- Emily Carr, “Lecture on Totems”
Hundreds and Thousands:

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Introduction

Cultural mythologies sprout from themes emerging in the arts. These themes create a mythological mirror for us to locate ourselves and inform the ways in which we identify as individuals and as members of a cultural collective. We define ourselves by these thematic guides, positioning ourselves within the triangulated intersections of myth, culture, and identity. For example, Canadian literature in its short history reveals themes such as colonizing wilderness and the Aboriginals who inhabit it; monarchical influence; settlement and exploration; an unforgiving nature and its relentlessly cold weather; British and American colonization; a wealth of immigrant enclaves; French assertion of identity; Ontario as metaphor for Canada (Moray 320); and a cultural mosaic comprised of postcolonial experiences. The diversity of the Canadian landscape mirrors that of its people, demanding an assortment of cultural mythologies to choose from. It would be remiss to narrow these themes to one centralized symbol descriptive of all Canadians.

Canadian scholars Margaret Atwood and Northrop Frye argue that indeed there exists a single, universal cultural mythology that defines the essence of the Canadian experience. Atwood writes: “every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core” that “holds the country together” (Atwood 40). To illustrate, she cites “the frontier” for America, “the island” for England with “survival” as Canada’s central symbol (41). Atwood defines “survival” in terms of theme: “for
explorers and settlers, [it is] bare survival in the face of ‘hostile’ elements and/or natives; for French Canada cultural survival; [for] English Canadians the [threat of] Americans taking over” (41) and of course the hardy Canadian enduring harsh winters year after year. Atwood posits that “survival” resounds thematically in Canadian literature and creates a commonality amongst its authors and readers regardless of ethnic and cultural identity, and provincial or territorial residency.

Northrop Frye, too, singles out a cultural mythology for Canadians in the form of the garrison. To Frye, the insular world of the military fort represents the compartmentalized ways in which Canadians construct and reside in society and culture. A “garrison mentality characterizes the way in which the Canadian imagination has developed in literature” (545-6), where in the face of “a huge, unthinking, menacing and formidable physical setting”, Canadians retract into protective, “tight knit” (546) communities. It is worth exploring, however, the possibility that cultures can remain “Canadian” without the anchor of a single and centralized mythology.

In 2007, Quill & Quire magazine hosted a discussion arguing the relevancy of Frye and Atwood’s single mythologies in contemporary Canadian literature entitled “Surviving Survival”. The following authors appeared on the panel: Atlantic Canadian writer Lynn Coady, writer Noah Richler (son of Mordecai Richler) who won the 2007 BC Award for Canadian Non-Fiction for This Is My Country, What’s Yours? A Literary Atlas of Canada, and Toronto Star journalist Philip Marchand. Marchand posits that Survival, “heavily influenced by Northrop Frye’s archetypes” is “outdated” (Weiler 2007). He describes Canada “as a very different fictional world than the one presented in Survival”
exemplifying “Antanas Sileika’s postwar immigrants from Lithuania, M.G. Vassanji’s East Indian immigrants or Dionne Brand’s young multicultural characters” as the “barometers of the state of our literature and culture”. Coady counters that though *Survival* “may be a product of its time” we see its “cultural truth” – that of survival - continuously reviving in our contemporary culture. Richler agrees to the timelessness of *Survival* as it has “stayed with an admiring public for 35 years”. He states that the concept of survival, a rumination on identity, still holds in our “more obeisant sense of ourselves in the face of perhaps not monstrous but still awesome nature”. For Richler, “thematic studies” like Frye and Atwood’s, “are perfectly legitimate. They are enquiries, forays, portraits, volleys throwing an explanation of our condition into the public forum”.

Richard Cavell, a professor of Canadian Studies at the University of British Columbia, takes this discussion a bit further by arguing a need to “decenter” Atwood’s and Frye’s “clichés” of “localizing the question ‘where is here?’ by articulating identity in terms of place” (Cavell 2000). Like Marchand, Cavell sees Canada as shifting geographies like “Rohinton Mistry’s India” and “The Urban Prairie” as Canadian regions. Cavell recognizes the place Atwood and Frye hold in the instruction of Canadian literature saying that a “thematic approach remains a pragmatic” teaching methodology for “our ‘hereness’ is defined as much by where we have been as by where we are going” (Cavell). In this respect, it becomes relevant to revisit the mythological constructions of Frye and Atwood in order to comprehend our current interpretation and embodiment of cultural identity.
In understanding how we define ourselves within the changing social and
cultural parameters of Canadian experiences, it is important to recognize that the
“decentering” Cavell discussed did not happen in reaction to the centralized myths
promoted by Atwood and Frye in a ‘that was then, this is now’ binary. Concepts of a
more fluid diversity of the Canadian experience emerged in earlier writings, like those of
Emily Carr. In her travels, Carr explores a variety of West Coast Indigenous tribes and
uses her writings to endorse this multiplicity of social identity. Her understanding of
Aboriginal diversity confronts the suggested appropriateness of a single myth for all
Canadians and the multitude of problems inherent in “native” as literary trope. Carr’s
contributions to Canadian literature include acting as an artistic bridge between “white”
Canada and the tribes of West Coast Aboriginals; adding a British Columbian voice to the
Ontario-dominated cultural narrative; and winning the Governor General’s Literary
Award for Klee Wyck. However, before I continue with how Carr diversifies themes in
Canadian literature, it is important to pause and address the criticisms of her dealings
with Indigenous peoples.

First, Carr regarded the numerous Indigenous tribes she encountered in her
journeys as endangered species. Her perception of these tribes as a dying race put her in
the position of preserver, recorder, explorer, collector and later curator of her
observations and discoveries of their cultures. This essay’s opening quote underscores
this attitude in her terminology (“relics” and “ancient”) and sense of purpose (“I would
like to leave behind”), suggesting a consequence of extinction without her artistic
intervention. This threat leads to romanticism where, as Atwood says, “Indians can be
idealized only when they’re about to vanish” (Atwood 109). Robin Laurence writes that “today, Carr’s work may be seen as a manifestation of an essentially paternalistic mission of ‘salvage’ whereas at the time it reflected a sincere desire to preserve evidence” (Laurence 11). Thus, Carr “could be criticized for a benign racism that romanticized native people” (16) and exploited their exoticized position in Canadian society to boost her professional reputation.

Second, that in pursuit of her artistic vision in which “I was going to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could” (11), Carr committed acts of cultural appropriation and trespass. An example of this controversy in action occurs when Judy Stoffman of the Toronto Star wrote a preview of the Emily Carr retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in March 2007. In this article, Stoffman interviewed Emily Carr scholars Susan Crean and Shirley Bear who jointly call Carr “a racist”. The article also mentions curator Peter Macnair who charges her with “cultural tourism” (Stoffman). At first glance, the artwork chosen to accompany this piece appears shocking and racist in subject matter with what looks like stereotypic and offensive renderings of Indigenous peoples. However, upon review, these are paintings of D’Sonoqua, a mythological wild woman represented on a totem pole that moved Carr immensely (Carr 67). As with all her totem pole paintings, she did not use cameras (195) but took the time and patience to sketch them as realistically as possible, later painting them in full size and colour in her home studio. Carr describes the carving before sketching it: “the stare was intense. The whole figure expressed power, weight, domination. She was unpainted, weatherworn, sun-cracked. It seemed that the voice of
the [old cedar] might have burst...from her mouth” (Carr 67-8). Stoffman decontextualizes Carr’s images to enhance the controversial appeal of her article.

Taking Carr out of context can easily place her in a position of cultural robbery and white oppression. Accordingly, Carr operates as an agent of her time. However, Emily Carr scholar Gerta Moray situates Carr’s position by clarifying that “we are locating Carr now in a historical context” (Stoffman) as a “colonial artist and writer” (Moray ix). To yank her from this contextual milieu is to “demythologize” (Frye 103) Carr and the thematic images that she helped to bring to national visibility. Through this historical lens we can see how Carr challenged the tendency to clump Indigenous people under a single reductivist umbrella. She formed friendships, some lasting 40 years, with Indigenous people she fraternized with during her travels. She “questioned the prevailing attitudes towards Natives held by the settler population of British Columbia” (ix). Copycat artists who “falsified” Indian art to make money angered Carr for she “hated seeing the art distorted and cheapened by those who did not understand or care” (Carr 281). Carr’s reputation as a preeminent artist stands on a deep reverence for the West Coast Indigenous people, their art, and how it shaped British Columbia as a mythological source of creativity.

In this essay, I will first look at the central mythologies identified by Atwood (the malevolent North) and Frye (the garrison mentality). I will compare these understandings of Canadian culture with the following themes that resonate in Carr’s autobiographies: the lush and fertile Western landscape, the humanity of the Indigenous people, and the totem pole and the cedar as examples of axis mundi. Then, I
will discuss how Carr became a “living myth” as an emblem of British Columbia and as a legendary artist. These legacies question the simplicity of a central cultural mythology as Carr embodies the idea that we, as a young country, are myth in the making. With numerous contributions and incarnations to our cultural narratives, we must expand past one unifying theme to embrace a harmony of mytho-Canadian identities.
I. Themes in Canadian Literature: The Malevolent North

Atwood envisions a “malevolent North” as the single thematic crisis a person must survive in Canadian literature. The North’s “only season [of] winter” (Atwood 59) encapsulates the thematic motifs that define it as a malevolent space. Symbolically, winter antithesizes life, fertility and growth, for it exists in a frozen and dormant state. The crushing and isolating weather of the winter season precludes survival, jeopardizing the character’s ability to thrive. Atwood attests that “Canadian authors make sure their heroes die or fail” (44) as failure epitomizes “the only thing that will support the characters’ view of the universe” (44). In this respect, the universe refers to the malevolent North.

Atwood identifies two states of survival in the North. First, the “obstacles are external[ized]”(42) such that one must confront physical manifestations of the North. For instance, this place ensures failure with its “fatal accidents, frozen corpses, dead gophers, snow, dead children, and peril lurk[ing] behind every bush” (39). Atwood observes that a “bumper crop of sinister Hecate-Crones” (237) populate this thematic area reinforcing the images of death, mortality and infertility. Here, nature roars and hunts, wielding its weather and unfurling an inhospitable topography for the voyager. Alongside climate and landscape skulks the “hostile native” (41), an anthropomorphized fauna. Atwood relates the two – “Death by Indian has something to do with Death by Nature” (67) – relegating the Aboriginal to a thematic device that helps scaffold the concept of a malevolent North.
The crone appears in the second state, that of emotional and psychological survival through her characterization as an “icy and savage femme fatale who will drive you crazy and claim you for her own” (108). If one bears the “famine, exposure and snow blindness” (30) at the hands of the North they will not be able to endure the “intolerable anxiety” (42) waiting for the person traversing its landscape. Atwood writes of the inevitability of getting “lost in the frozen North – and going crazy there” (3) for “going mad is what you do in the North” (19). This grim picture worsens when Atwood explains that while the North encapsulates a thematic Canada, it also represents a “state of mind” (10). Thus, the psychological explorations we pursue are tough and feral exploits with unpleasant outcomes.

Atwood admits to some broad generalizations in her design of a Canadian monotheme: “please don’t take any of my oversimplifications as articles of dogma which allow no exceptions” (40). In “acknowledging this reliance on generalizations” (McKay 19) Atwood is able to entertain, with full liberty, a centralized mythology that includes the Aboriginal as literary device and not as an actualized Canadian in their own right. Kristy McKay questions the success of such a disclaimer when “these diffusing statements follow, not generalizations, but lengthy schematics. It is unreasonable to expect other critics to abstain from seriously challenging Atwood’s claims simply by virtue of her having stated her awareness that they are not sound” (23). Atwood attempts to slip under the veil of “this displaced responsibility” (23) to skirt her oversight of using Aboriginals as motifs in her malevolent North.
Ethnoanthropologist Franz Boas warns that to oversimplify a people results in a “dwindling down of an elaborate cyclus of myths to mere adventures, or even to incidents of adventures” (Boas 2). Therefore, to present “Indian as tormentor” (Atwood 111), “Indian as victim” (111) or Indians as “projections of something in the white Canadian psyche, a fear or a wish” (109) results in a reductive enterprise. In this context, “Indians”, cast as cardboard motifs or ethereal spirits, peregrinate the malevolent terrain on one of the following campaigns: sadistically pursuing whites for capture, playing tour guide to the Northern landscape or an emanation of nature in one of its volatile, supernatural, romantic, or unpredictable embodiments.

The Garrison Mentality

Northrop Frye articulated a theme he found residing in Canadian literature: the garrison mentality. The garrison is a “closely knit and beleaguered society, its morals and social values unquestionable” (Frye 546) where its residents work as a group, as in contexts such as “war, rescue, martyrdom, or crisis” (546). Unlike the “wild abyss” (108) of the Atwoodian North, Frye neatly portions Canadian society into an organized schema of communities. Though an extensive and formidable nature does surround the garrison, it is not the subject of one’s terror. Rather, the “terror of the soul” flares open when “the individual feels himself becoming an individual” (545-6). Here, the “conflict within” proves a more complicated feat than the “struggle of morality against evil”(546) that forms the philosophical basis for these societies. This person, now an individual, veers
from the “dominating herd-mind” which follows the garrisons as they “multiply” (546) into offspring hubs.

Eventually, the garrison moves from “fortress to metropolis” in which the cultures become more “complicated” (551) in composition. Frye describes this transition as being a “revolutionary garrison within a metropolitan society” where its patrons eschew conformity for social distortion. It also means a refusal to support the officers who produce the mentality, those of the prevailing “ruling class” (555). This civil disobedience can lead to separatism, which represents to Frye a “death of communication and dialogue” (546). For example, in the evolution of garrison to metropolis we can identify applications of this theme in the immigrant subgroups adhering in clusters amidst a foreign landscape, the appeal of French separatism in an English speaking culture, and the huddling together against onslaughts of British colonial and American cultural influences. We can also see this in the compartmentalizing of Canadian languages and literatures into a dualized construct of French and English (Frye 538).

Frye mentions “Indians” in a cursory manner when describing the “pastoral myth” which tells of “the habitant rooted to his land” (556). According to Frye, the Indian’s “rapport with nature” (556) symbolizes the purpose of the myth. If “literature is conscious mythology” (552) then to connect the indigenous body with nature in opposition to civilization is to reinforce their “domain” in the wilderness. Atwood writes: “the character isolated in nature sees too much of the wilderness, and in a sense becomes it, leaving his humanity behind” (Atwood 67). Thus, the Aboriginal cannot
participate in the civilization (humanity) of the garrison since they are thematically assigned to nature. This raises questions about how to define “civilization”, and whether or not the garrison model acts as an appropriate cultural mythology for Indigenous cultures.

II. The Organic West

Through autobiographies like Klee Wyck, Hundred and Thousands, The Heart of a Peacock and Growing Pains, Emily Carr envisions an alternative to the image of Canada as a frosty death knell (Atwood) or sequestered urban outcroppings of closed societies (Frye). As well, since her writings record her travels to the Indigenous villages both on the British Columbian mainland and on Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, and smaller islands along the coast, Carr introduces a British Columbian take on Canadian literary themes. Both Atwood and Frye offer their centralized images within an Ontario-as-Canada paradigm, politically, geographically and metaphorically.

Carr’s writings cultivate a West Coast perspective on themes in Canadian literature by personifying the British Columbian wilderness as an organic entity; promoting the humanity and diversity of various coastal Indigenous peoples; focusing on the totem pole as a mythological protagonist; and revering the forest as axis mundi. In this construction of West Coast identities, and despite her affection for the landscape and its indigenous peoples, Carr does not glissade in naïveté over the austere realities of the coastal landscape or the religious colonization of the Indigenous peoples. Instead, she aggregates images of arborous beauty, treacherous shores, the devotion shown by
an indigenous group for their dead, the horrors of infant mortality, poverty, sophisticated wood carvings, and the simultaneous loneliness and solitude found deep in West Coast nature, into a multifaceted, organic West.

Atwood’s abrasive North disregards the succulent fertility of the West Coast. She attempts to connect the two as examples of a similar “threatening environment” and while British Columbia may not be “the freezing North” it does host “impenetrable rain forests” (Atwood 116). The basis for this antagonizing landscape is a “distrust” of nature for “Canadian writers are always suspecting some dirty trick” (59). Should nature deviate from its motifs of “death, [an] active hostility to man” (59) and its home during “winter” (78), then it becomes “unreal” or unnatural. Carr’s British Columbian landscape must exist in this unreal space for it lacks the hostility of Atwood’s North, does not release weather harbingers of death and appreciates nature’s monstrosity not in cruelty but in vastness.

Carr’s West Coast emphasizes ”stillness tense with life“ (Carr 37). Her autobiographies teem with imagery of a natural world robust with “mist” (56), “cherry blossoms” (57), “great yellow slugs” (100), “surfbeat” (99), “eagles and porpoises” (98), “mosses” (100), “cats with firelight eyes” (100), “nightingales and frogs” (156), “skunk cabbages gold and brimming with rank smell” (83) and “luxuriant beaches” (48). Carr’s heightened wilderness rises three dimensionally from its roots, boasting sensuality and texture in its composition. For instance, “water was not wet or deep, just smoothness spread with light” (152). This sensuality can also be seen when Carr asks her friend Jimmie why she felt something “slithery” under her makeshift bed on the boat. Jimmie
responds: “only the devilfish we are taking home to Mother. They’re dead; it won’t hurt them when you roll over” (48). Carr evinces the tactility of her environment by “sprawling like a starfish” (123), feeling as though her “veins were filled with sea water” (119) and needing to “shout to be heard above the surf” (100). Carr conceptualizes the West Coast setting as a visceral surge of life and death. Atwood’s North seems two dimensional in comparison to Carr’s observation that even water, a key facet to the West Coast landscape, escapes a single definition, “we chugged and bobbed over all sorts of water” (43). As well, Carr’s onomatopoeic descriptions transport the reader to experience the West alongside her.

An organic West cannot be built on nature alone. Boas disregards the necessity of “a poetic interpretation of nature as the primary background of all mythologies” (Boas 343). Nature provides atmosphere but it needs an active cast. Mythologies, according to Boas, must address “the social life of people” (Boas 343). Atwood’s North extends into icy climes without running into a soul. She refers to stock characters like the white explorer and the “Indians seen as animals once free, wild and beautiful, now caged, captive and sickly” (Atwood 119) who may materialize from time to time. She describes the Aboriginal village but does so in terms of absence: “abandoned, decaying, and rotting totem poles” (absence of culture), “the missionary teachers (absence of Indigenous autonomy), the squalor, the indifference, the unfinished houses, (social absence) [and] the pidgin English” (116) with its absence of heritage. The Aboriginal does not appear in Frye’s discussion of the garrison, for he describes Canada as a “no
man’s land with huge rivers, lakes and islands that very few Canadians had ever seen” (Frye 541).

Another example of missing Aboriginals in Canadian themes occurs frequently in the Group of Seven paintings, of which Carr’s work hovered in its periphery. Gerta Moray describes the dearth of native peoples in the Group of Seven work:

The Group of Seven’s landscapes were constructed as utopian fictions of a promised land, of an empty, ‘virgin’ Nature that awaited conquest. It seemed culturally to be a blank slate, offering humanity the chance to start over again. Particularly relevant is the absence of human figures in the landscapes even though the ‘wilderness’ they sketched was the home of Native peoples. The Group’s paintings showed the landscape as pristine and empty representing no place for the “Indian” [and] an erasure of history and of Native claims to a share of the land (Moray 320).

Carr sketched and painted images of Indigenous people in situ. She wrote that to understand the West Coast environment, “you must learn to feel the pride of the Indian in his ancestors” for they could “show the way to the big thing that means Canada herself” (321).

In her autobiographies, Carr tells stories of the people she met on her travels to Aboriginal villages, which brought her from Victoria to Sitka, Alaska; to Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii and numerous islands in between; and across the mainland to places like Bella Coola and Pemberton. These travels introduced her to numerous Indigenous tribes such as: Haida, Nisga’a, Gitxsan, Wet’suwet’en, ‘Nakwaxda’xw, Gusgimaxw, Kwagu’l,
Kwikwasuttlinexw, Lawitsis, Mamlilikala, Da’naxda’xw, We-wai-kum, We-wai-kai, Sitka, Ucluelet, Mowachaht, Pacheedaht, Nlaka’pamux, St’at’imc, Sechelt, Squamish, Songhees, and Esquimalt (Moray xiv). *Klee Wyck*, in particular, explores the humanity of the Indigenous people in sketches like “Sophie” which details Carr’s 40 -year friendship with a Coast Salish woman from North Vancouver. Carr avoids turning Sophie into a device that flatters Carr’s earnest open mindedness. She also sidesteps pivoting Sophie as a sociological illustration of life on a Reserve in the early twentieth century. Carr tells the story of Sophie in a way that, despite the problematic Pidgin English, characterizes her as a full person. Carr describes seeing Sophie “glad, sad, sick, and drunk” (57) in the many years of their friendship. She follows Sophie who visits the graves of her children, “Casamin, Tommy, George, Rosie, Maria, Mary, Emily and all the rest were there under a tangle of vines. We rambled, seeking out Sophie’s graves. Some had little wooden crosses, some had stones” (58). Sophie visited Carr in her studio where she “drank tea with me” and looked at Carr’s “parrot, dog, white rats and the totem pole pictures” (63).

Carr dedicates *Klee Wyck* to Sophie.

In other sketches Carr portrays a man in Ucluelet “luscious with time like the end berries of the strawberry season” (Carr 40) who stops sawing branches off a dead tree to warn Carr of nearby cougars. Or, of the woman who “clamped” her baby between her knees, “rigged a flour sack in the canoe for a sail” and gestured for Carr to join her as she set out across the “ugly waters” between “Yan and Masset” (94). In “Ucluelet”, Carr reveals her Chinook name, *Klee Wyck*, means “Laughing One” (36). Carr also tells stories of her Haida travel companions, Jimmie and Louisa who taught her how to
negotiate the dangerous waters of Haida Gwaii (98), invited her to their home for a visit (112) and confided in her about the Missionaries desire to put their children in residential schools (114). Carr rails against the Missionaries throughout *Klee Wyck* as their actions bothered her considerably. She worried that it “must have hurt the Indians dreadfully to have the things they had always believed trampled on and torn from their hugging” (37). Carr uses her writing to share the distinct and personal stories of the Indigenous people she met in her travels. In doing so, she departs from characterizing them as invisible or as stereotypical embodiments of the land.

*Axis Mundi*

The *axis mundi*, also known as the tree of life or cosmic pillar, stands as a distinctive image in Carr’s organic West. This takes two manifestations: the totem pole and the far stretching living cedar. Frye describes the *axis mundi* as a “vertical dimension that connects our world with the others above and below it” (Frye 15). The *axis mundi* communicates a language in its architecture, a “mythos, a story of immense scope” (17). Carr sees mythos in the totem pole, a “high elaborately carved cedar column peculiar to the North West Coast” (Carr 177). The geographical and cultural prominence of this artistic structure, reaching far in height and rooted in the land acts as an *axis mundi*. Carr recognized that “such a pole or perch is symbolic of the pivotal point around which all things turn (the *axis mundi*)” (Campbell 12) and so embarked on an artistic endeavor to “picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as
I could” (Carr 257). In doing so, Carr recreates the poles in a variety of incarnations suggesting a cross section of mythological material.

Carr invested time and research into this art form by learning about ethnography, the intention behind particular poles (Moray 101) and their “legendary and social significance” (Willmott 75). She appreciated the mythological purpose of the pole, not only for the family it was designed for, but also how it contributes to a conception of an organic West. Carr reinforces the totem pole’s mythological significance through the repetition of it as protagonist in visual and written form (Gill 23). Carr accomplishes this with her numerous realistic renderings of poles and in her writings that depict the poles as organic entities growing into and from the landscape. Examples of this include: “hollows of the totem eyes followed them across the sea” (Carr 96), “mosses which grew in their chinks” (100), “in the lightning, the totem poles went black, flashed vividly white and then went black again” (143), and the holes cut into the bottom beaver carvings of a pole so that “people could enter and leave the house through the totem” (45). Carr’s description of seeing the D’Sonoqua pole, “appearing neither wooden nor stationary, alive in the dead bole of the cedar” (74) underscores her intention to treat this image as an emerging *axis mundi*.

Anthropologist Viola Garfield warns that the “collection, recording and publishing of myths demands certain responsibilities of the collector” (Maud 9). Carr took her artistic interests and interactions with the West Coast Aboriginal people seriously, including a foray into ethnography to bolster her scholarship (Moray 66). Yet, there remained the issue of responsibility with this “systemic collection” where one
must choose if they will “include tales taken down in English” or step back and allow the
“tales to be taken by natives themselves” (Boas 341). Group of Seven painter and
longtime Carr correspondent, Lawren Harris, asked her to ponder “leaving the totems
alone for a year”. Harris felt it problematic to portray the totem pole, regardless of
Carr’s desire to value it as an axis mundi, since it stands as a “work of art in its own
right” (Moray 318). This prompted Carr to find another cosmic connection in the British
Columbian landscape: the tree.

The tree, a living creature with hundreds of years of life pushing it higher and
expanding it wider emanates myth in motion, the axis mundi in full colour. Carr initially
thought to entitle Klee Wyck “Stories in Cedar” (Carr 4) as these trees frame most of her
narratives. As Carr endorsed the totem pole as myth through repetition of imagery, she
does so for the tree. Carr envelops them in mythological imagery: “the mighty cedars,
primeval, immense, full, grand, noble from roots to tips” (88), “god was to be found
among his forest spires” (Tippett 136), “the pine towered above his fellows, his top
tapering to heaven like the hands of the praying Missionaries” (Carr 38) and “tree boles
pillared the forest’s roof” (Carr 109). Carr’s incarnations of trees become conduits for
myth and metaphor.

The regal quality of these trees embraces Carr and helps her develop a picture of
an organic West in which the forests, the poles, the Indigenous peoples and herself all
play roles. Her trees become what Joseph Campbell calls the “mythological symbols
touching and exhilarating centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason”
(Campbell 4). She discovers that the tree becomes this link, the axis mundi, and that it
holds a multiplicity of mythological blueprints. For the Indigenous peoples, Carr says “the cedar has a far reaching influence on their lives” (178) and goes on to explain the multifaceted uses the tribes find in the cedar from food and pillows to coffins and art. Carr reflects: “I learned a lot from the Indians, but who except Canada herself could help me comprehend her great woods?” (258). By delving into the woods, she invests in the myth of the organic West for in the trees she found “something peculiarly my own” (Carr 306) – an identity. Then, by metaphorizing the cedar as the heart to her mythology, she heralds a “new vision of the forest” for British Columbians (Tippett 136) to define themselves by.

III. Living Myth

In “Pathography and Enabling Myths” Anne Hawkins defines the pathography as “autobiographies and biographies about illness” (Hawkins 222) that “gives the ill person a voice” (223). Hawkins writes “the myths and metaphors that one finds in pathography function not just as heuristic devices that give meaning to the illness but ‘in form’ it” (230). In a metaphorical way, Atwood’s thematic prescription falls into a pathographical understanding of nature and identity. Conversely, Carr does not write about illness, but of a developing cultural mythology that entwines the nature and art she observes in the Native Coastal villages. Frye says, “literature creates an autonomous mythology and that society itself produces a corresponding mythology” (Frye 559). In Carr’s case, the organic West myth grows as she mythologizes herself in art and autobiography. Rather than a pathography, Carr’s narrative becomes a mythography - life through myth.
Carr’s mythographies address “an experience one seeks to communicate through signs [that] will have the value and force of living myth” (Campbell 4). Carr’s legacy thrives in a variety of venues and representations particularly in contemporary Vancouver and Victoria. Emily Carr is British Columbia’s sweetheart, in the same way that L.M. Montgomery is synonymous with Prince Edward Island. Carr’s personal life is historicized in Victoria at the Emily Carr House and the Ross Bay Cemetery. Her successes lead to the accolade of the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. Her sketches and paintings reside in a superb collection at the Vancouver Art Gallery and a current three-year exhibition entitled “Emily Carr: On the Edge of Nowhere” at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Carr is the subject of a Governor General’s Award winning biography, and the topic of graduate research in the fields of art composition, art history, ethnography, and literature. Carr’s “talent in writing” (Carr 11) awarded her the Governor General’s Award for Klee Wyck and resulted in a posthumous collection of autobiographies, journals, letters, and sketchbooks.

Her legacy stems from a single intention to “find a language for the big land of the West” (Laurence 18). Through art and mythography, Carr showed the British Columbian how to think and see the landscape as a living and dynamic entity. This love for a mythologized West continues to surface in our contemporary culture. For instance, advertising campaigns for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and Tourism British Columbia promoted a “Super, Natural British Columbia” with one urban shot to a handful of ocean, forest and mountain scenes. Second, photographer Courtney Milne released a coffee table book entitled Emily Carr’s Country pairing quotes
from her autobiographies to shots of the lush trees and mossy landscapes that envisaged British Columbia as her “sacred space” (Milne), and her “country”. As well, Carr writes in *Hundreds and Thousand* of a letter she received that said, “we have had a glimpse of British Columbia through your eyes and want to thank you. We lived in it, climbed in it, camped in it and found it just right” (Carr 151). These examples mirror Carr’s affection for British Columbia’s “underlying spirit, the mood, the vastness, the wildness, the eternal big spaciousness of it. Oh the West! I’m of it and I love it” (Carr 24).

Her courage to travel and create art in the face of considerable socio-cultural and gender-based obstacles made her decisions difficult and unpopular. As Carr says, “What I have done, I have done alone and single-handed. I have borne my own expenses and done my own work. Whether anybody liked them or not I did not care a bean” (Carr 202-204). This creative fortitude remains intrinsic to her legacy. It also defines her as a national myth sharing company with icons like Dr. Norman Bethune, L. M. Montgomery, Farley Mowat, David Suzuki, Pierre Berton, and Terry Fox. These living myths continue to reinforce Canadian mythologies.

Yet, despite the earnestness of her creative endeavours, it is important to remember that Carr’s legacy stands on culturally sensitive ground. Carr lived and produced her images within a colonial society that had settled in the territories of various Native groups whom it was working to displace and assimilate, physically, economically, and culturally. This colonial society granted power and privilege to European ideals and enterprise, while it selectively appropriated or discredited Aboriginal
beliefs, social and cultural structures, and claims to sovereignty. Carr herself worked within modes of representation and drew upon institutions that maintained this racist structure. Her production was inevitably a part of it (Moray 5).

Carr’s reputation resides under some shadows created by the following questionable practices on her part. First, Carr, a white ethnographer traveling through ‘undiscovered’ country, appropriated Native art for her own creativity and self-aggrandizement. Second, Carr endorses an idyllic exoticism that further exploits the West Coast indigenous people as sources of entertainment and intrigue. Carr, “like Van Gogh, became larger than life because she crystallized insistent fantasies of her time” (Moray 2) such as the romantic othering of Native people. Third, approaching her role as an observer frames her art and literature as toursty European snapshots. This colonializing mentality “severely limits her understanding of their reality” which underscores that her findings “in Native culture and imagery was a projection of her own biases and interests” (349).

Fourth, Carr’s impetus to capture the totem poles before they disappear reinforces the arrogance and presumptuousness of the European outsider intruding upon a closed society for its own selfish pursuits. Carr, “one of Canada’s most famous painters, writers, and cultural icons” (Moray ix) carries a legacy eclipsed by the enmeshed controversies of a white, colonial artist approaching an Indigenous culture as an ethnographic land of plenty. While Carr “regularly acknowledged the limits of her own knowledge and stated her respect for Native traditions” (19), and remains a beloved figure in Canadian
mythology, her legacy carries colonial and postcolonial implications to the perceptions of and contributions from Indigenous peoples in our contemporary Canadian society.

IV. Hundreds and Thousands

In 1948, Douglas LePan wrote the poem “A Country Without a Mythology” in which he describes Canada as having “no monuments or landmarks” (LePan 1), “no law, no atmosphere” (13), “no emblem in the sky/ for who/ will stop where daubed/ with war paint, teeters some lust-red Manitou?” (33-36). The notion of a mythology-less Canada abounds despite a wealth of Aboriginal histories dotted across this country. The non-Aboriginal glances over this rich mythology and determines that a Canadian identity does not exist. Frye blames this on “diffidence” (Frye 64) whereas Atwood likens the search for Canadian identity to the lazy and tedious rifling for “mislaid car keys down behind the sofa” (Atwood 9). The tendency is to search for a single, meaningful mythological construct, and when the only one visible comes in Indigenous regalia, it, according to Atwood, creates a crisis for the white person. In examining this conflict, Atwood frets “what do you do for a past if you are a white, relatively new to the continent and rootless?” (125). Frye suspects that one “withdraws from the country without mythology into a country of mythology” which infers “forsaking the Canadian for the international” (Frye 556). This implies an intentional dismissal of a Canada built on Indigenous roots in favour of an identity linked to foreign ancestry.
Atwood exemplifies Frye’s assumption by saying that the ‘Canadian’ “attempts to find in Indian legends mythological material which would function for Canadian writers much as the Greek myths and the Bible long functioned for Europeans” (Atwood 124). Atwood then unsuccessfully tries to find a mythological equal for her interpretation of the Algonquian beast, the Wendigo, in “Polyphemus, Jack the Giant Killer, Goliath, and Frankenstein’s monster” (82). Atwood continues, “the difficulty is that a European writer could assume in his readers a knowledge of the original myth he was using, whereas the Indian legends are not generally known” (124). Further to this, Frye’s description of a “post-literate world” (Frye 19) revitalizes his notion of mythology as a European enterprise that refutes the potential for Aboriginal oral mythology to act as an autonomous mythological engine.

Frye suggests that “literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become habits of metaphorical thought” (552). This infers that Canadian literary themes will too evolve, multiply, drop from sight, become heavy or wither into clichés. As our nation swells with increasing numbers of immigrants bringing their stories to the Canadian narrative, the cultural mythologies available must be flexible and porous to reflect this dynamic population. In this context, LePan’s absent mythology and the desire to adopt a Europeanized one become inappropriate. Promoting and accepting multiple mythologies under a wide Canadian umbrella may be the path to laying down roots or discovering that they are already wiggling their way through the dirt.
There are three conditions to ensuring a multiplicity of cultural mythologies. First, non-Aboriginals must familiarize themselves with Indigenous cultures and reconcile the reality and immortality of this influence at national, provincial / territorial and local levels. Carr argues that our current landscape arises from this rich, indigenous history and that it infuses our sense of a Canadian geography, history and culture. Carr reiterates that this land grows from ‘Indian dust’: “the earth was richer because this [Indian] had lived” (Carr 42); “these strong young trees were richer for that Indian dust” (53); “life spread a green blanket over the Indian dead” (134), and “lovely tender herbage bursts from the graves” (135). Acknowledging that as we grow as a multicultural nation the more intertwined we will become with Indigenous mythology, which in turn forces us to view cardboard themes like the malevolent North, or impermeable societies as outdated modes of interpreting Canadian culture. To increase “fluidity in communities” (Kambourelli xxii) is to demand options other than these rigid themes that exclude on principal. Recognizing the ‘Indian dust’ in our roots also illuminates serious problems in the “two solitudes” (Verduyn 14) of a dual language construct, as this construct continues to “ignore, misunderstand and dismiss Native cultural production” as “simplistic” and irrelevant (14).

Secondly, a reworking of terms like ‘ownership’ and ‘possession’ in relation to the land necessitates action. Atwood proposes that “white Canadians adopt a more Native attitude towards the natural world” (Atwood 72) instead of demanding an entitled approach to land ownership. Canadian land can be ‘my home’ and ‘your home’ simultaneously. Perceiving our relationship to land as impermanent and ever changing
in its demographic allows us the freedom to construct cultural mythologies in reference to a shifting Canadian landscape.

Finally, there can never be “a single, orthodox myth. As our circumstances change, we need to tell our stories differently in order to bring out their timeless truth” (Armstrong 11). Just as there is a “multiplicity of spirits” (Carr 180) in Indigenous culture, there can be a multiplicity of mythologies influenced by ancestry, landscape, culture, and themes buoying in literature and mythographies. A commonality keeps these multiple mythologies from zigzagging off in anarchical chaos: being Canadian. The mythologies collaborate to summarize what this means, knowing that meaning is fluid and all definitions are organic and impermanent in design, changing in composition every few seconds like a kaleidoscope. Or, perhaps Carr wrote it best:

Hundreds and Thousands are an English kind of candies, so tiny that they have neither flavour, crunch, nor colour, each in her own right. One single candy would only fill a cavity in your tooth, but when spilled in quantity over a birthday-cake, they make it a glory, sprinkled over the snow white icing. They were blue, pink, red and yellow and they make a delicious crunch. A deliciousness compounded of hundreds of nothings (Carr ix).

Works Cited


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