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Woman as American Landscape

The language within the many stories that we have read in American Literature characterizes the landscape as female. Does applying a gender to the landscape make it more acceptable to cultivate, dominate and prostitute the land? How does this 'mind-set' affect the various women writers from the past and in the present? Is their approach quite different?

In Annette Kolodny's The Land Before Her, she points out the instances in which the "American husbandman was cast as both son and lover in a primal paradise where the maternal and erotic were to be harmoniously intermingled" (Kolodny 4). In Samuel Purchas' "Virginias Verger," the land is characterized as "her": "thus Virginia hath roome enough for her own" and "Virginia is Daughter of the same Heavens, which promise no lesse portion to this Virgin, then those Matrons had for the foundation-stock of their wealth and glory" (Lauter 141). In naming Virginia the 'virgin land, these "psychosexual" fantasies of domination over women are being encultured.

Annette Kolodny also points out that this fantasy of male domination is "reincarnated" in such male heroes as Daniel Boon, Natty Bumpo and Davy Crockett with the fantasy components of a strong man and a feminine terrain (Kolodny 3). The woman writers seem to approach the difference of both 'the other' (Native Americans) and landscape quite differently than these other heroic tales.

In the Journal of Madame Knight, Madame Knight does not approach her journey and the people with her on her journey with an omnipotent

attitude. Although she is frightened of the "very Dark," she speaks highly of John, her travelling companion, who "had encountered a thousand and a thousand such Swamps, having a Universall Knowledge in the woods; and readily Answered all my inquiries wch. were not a few" (Andrews 90). Madame Knight questions what is going on around her, but her questioning is not without the religious implications of Nature:

> the dang'ros River could entertain my Imagination, and they were as formidable as varios. . .Sometimes seing my self drowning, otherwhiles drowned, and at the best like a holy Sister Just come out of a Spiritual Bath in dripping Garments (Andrews 92).

Although Madame Knight is a woman travelling into the wild(her)ness when many women did not dare to travel in the wild, she has been conditioned to be afraid of that wild(her)ness and to believe that it will destroy her.

The attitude of the hovering wilderness is an ominous characterizating of the land; however, during this time period, people were still dying due to the roughness off the landscape. This is quite a different view of the landscape than in the "Virginias Verger."

In Hobomok, written a century later, the "other" is looked at through the eyes of a woman. In chapter 1, the narrator addresses the changes in how the people in the novel approach the landscape and the reader approaches the landscape. In 1824, the "thriving villages of New England" associate the previous wilderness with "her picturesque rivers, as they repose with peaceful loveliness. . .two centuries only have elapsed, since our most beautiful villages reposed in the undisturbed

grandeur of nature" (Child 5). The land which was once peaceful has been conquered not only by "commerce," but also with religion, "fearful worship of the Great Spirit of the wilderness, was soon to shed its spendor upon the altars of a living God" (Child 6). This religious tone which also ties in with the patriarchal view of women has been a "rationalization" for not learning to approach "the other."

During the 1880's, regionalist women writers began to look at the approach of the landscape and of others in order to begin defining themselves. In looking at difference and in trying to communicate across the difference, such women as Celia Thaxter and Mary Austin made connections with the landscape and how they could redefine difference.

In Among the Isles of Shoals, Celia Thaxter longs to "speak these things that made life so sweet, to speak the wind, the cloud, the flight, the sea's murmur" (183). As Thaxter describes the islands off the New Hamshire coast, Thaxter also tells her story of approaching the nature around her. Through the use of detail in her descriptions of the island and her experiences on the island, Thaxter acts as an interpreter of nature. Thaxter's methods of approach strengthen her relationship between herself and nature, and allow her to "mingle" with the natural world.

Thaxter arrives "among the Isles of Shoals" when she is five years old. Although she is "unaccustomed to these new surroundings, she admits, "even then I was drawn, with vague longing, seaward" (174). Yet, Thaxter approaches the island as a stranger. She objectifies the island as "the other." She does not know how the language of this new region nor how to communicate with island. Therefore, her first impression is what identifies the region for her: the "masts of ships"

and sailing (174). Her first approach is as an outsider who is immersed into new surroundings.

As a child, Thaxter studies the different relationships that others have with the surroundings of the island. She mentions a "Star-Islander," an outsider to the her island, who lays waiting for wild-fowl "with his gun" (175). Thaxter notices the inequality of this approach when she mentions the seal: "A few are seen every winter, and are occasionally shot; but they are shyer and more alert than the birds" (175). Thaxter notices that the hunter has no intention of communicating with these animals. Yet, just by watching the hunter in his pursuit of wild-fowl, she has begun to see the differences in many human approaches to nature; however, she does not choose to experience the island in the same way.

Thaxter's winters are spent indoors in which she feels "one gets close to the heart of these things" (166). Although Thaxter feels that "Books. . .are inestimable," she finds communication is important also (166). An example of this is her "delight of letters" which she receives only once a month (166). "Reading" is not enough for Thaxter. Thaxter begins to see that communicating with one's surroundings not only requires "reading," but also listening. Thaxter attempts to communicate with nature by using the language which is familiar to her, human language. She begins to illustrate the "heart" of these things through her "reading" or interpretation of the island.

Since Thaxter considers nature "precious and dear" as humans, she personifies the world around her, as in her description, "The whole aspect meditative and most human in expression" (169). The

island and the sea are depicted as having "voices." The sea "whispers" (162), and "The wind wailed sorrowfully. . ." (168). Thaxter's similes also reflect human experience, "stairways cut as if by human hands. . ." (161). Thaxter attempts to communicate nature through human experience. Yet, she finds she cannot communicate nature fully , it is only a "step" in her descriptions and urge to communicate, "who shall describe to me that wonderful noise of the sea among the rocks, to me the most suggestive of all the sounds of nature?" (162)

Thaxter finds that human language does not fully describe what she has "read" in nature. Thaxter finds that nature has a different language, perhaps even a dialect of the region. Knowing this, she attempts to bridge the language of nature and the language of humans.

Thaxter takes everything she knows as a human and everything she has "read" in nature and compares them. She finds a conflict between the the continuity of nature and the "intrusion" of humanity. The lighthouse is haven for the inhabitants of the island, yet "imposes" upon nature; "the lighthouse, beneficient to mankind, is the destroyer of birds" (170). She also sees the destruction of the human inhabitants when they fail to "read" the world around them. "The weather becomes of the first importance to the dwellers on the rock" (165). This is the transition in which Thaxter realizes that communication with nature, i.e."reading" and listening to nature, is vital to all the inhabitants' survival, human and non-human.

Thaxter sees it as not only human to communicate. Her first "contact" is with the birds who "beat the boat with their beaks" and

"come when you wave a white handkerchief. . ." (169). By using and "reading" this different language, she discovers that even Hog Island moans when a storm is approaching: "No one knows how that low moaning is produced. . ." (172). Thaxter's triumph is learning how "to imitate their [the birds] different cries" (171). In this way she cannot only "read" and hear the language of the island, she can also communicate with the island itself.

Thaxter's communication with the island is astounding; yet, she admits that she does not have the words to completely communicate the language of the natural world. It is a "vain longing" to describe such things as "a sudden rainbow, like a beautiful thought beyond the reach of human expression" (174). Her description of nature is only a partial translation of natural expression; no "human" words nor "expression" can describe the "language" of the island.

Among the Isles of Shoals ends in an acceptance of the inability to "speak" the narrator's surroundings; however, this does not end her longing or her attempts to describe nature.

> I was fain to mingle my voice with her myriad voices, only aspiring to be in accord with the Infinite harmony, however feeble and broken the notes might be (184).

Although she considers it a "vain longing" as a human to be able to describe the relationship between herself and nature, Thaxter's voice and the "voice" of the ocean blend together, rising and falling like the sound of the waves. The mingling voices are very similar to that heard in a sea-shell, very strong and reminiscent; yet, only a very small

"note" from the ocean.

Another regionalist author, Mary Austin, links her story "The Basket Maker" to create a text which approaches "the other" (Seyavi) by including the narrator's relationship to the region and by preserving some of Seyavi's Paiute culture through written language. The narrator "weaves" together two cultures in a "regionalist basket."

Austin begins by re-telling the his(story) of the Paiutes in the Bannock War of 1878. The reader is urged "to understand" Seyavi's culture and to weave together the "coarse" relations between the "overlording whites" and their "rape" of the Paiute women and land. "The technical precision" of Seyavi's baskets "warns of humanness in the way the design spreads into the flare of the bowl" (Fetterly & Pryse 574). This "humanness is woven into Seyavi's baskets and is part of the basket; even the "humanness" of the "overlording whites" is woven into the basket. Yet, the common thread holds them together: "The weaver and the warp lived next to the earth and were saturated with the same elements" (Fetterley & Pryse 574). The materials of Seyavi's basket can extend further into a metaphor of Austin's story itself. This regionalist "basket" is an effort to connect and hold Seyavi, her story and her culture together including all elements of humanness.

Austin does not conclude that this story about one Paiute woman will replace the time that needs to be spent listening and re-reading "the other's" stories' rather it is a prompting text which preserves some of Seyavi's Paiute culture through written language. Austin's "The Basket Maker" bridges the spoken Paiute culture and the written culture together hoping to encourage the usefulness of weaving a "regionalist

basket." Perhaps, these regionalist "approaches" can help mend and weave together the cultures and the lands that have been separated and othered for so long.

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