

## An Ecocritical Reading, Slightly Queer, of *As for Me and My House*

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This essay argues that *As for Me and My House* is very much in need of ecocritical approaches that resist the kinds of cultural marginalization that have long been a part of the Canadian experience. The essay offers a fresh approach to Ross's extensively analyzed novel, beginning with comments about the under-representedness of Canadian regional literature in the burgeoning field of ecocriticism (a field itself robustly American) and then developing a case that the distinctively Canadian context and traditions to which this slightly queer novel responds require a criticism that both differs from the American nature-celebration mode often associated with ecocriticism and addresses the novel's complex representations of social responses to sexuality and to the natural environment. Such an approach reveals that the unpredictability of the land on the one hand and the compulsions of Philip on the other share a kind of theoretical alliance; an ecocritical approach allows us to hear the silenced voices of the land and of Philip, while affirming the importance of continued readings of this very central morsel of Canadian literature.

Le présent article fait valoir que le roman *As for Me and My House* (*Au service du seigneur*, 1981) gagnerait à être lu selon des approches éco-critiques résistant aux types de marginalisation culturelle qui appartiennent depuis longtemps à l'expérience canadienne. L'article présente un point de vue novateur sur le roman considérablement analysé de Ross, en commençant par des commentaires sur la sous-représentation de la littérature régionale canadienne dans le domaine émergent de l'éco-critique (domaine lui-même vigoureusement américain), puis en expliquant que les traditions et le contexte forcément canadiens auxquels ce roman quelque peu gai réagit nécessitent une éco-critique qui diffère du mode américain de célébration de la nature qui lui est souvent associé. L'article discute en outre les représentations complexes que le roman propose des réactions de la société à la sexualité et à l'environnement naturel. Une telle démarche révèle que le caractère imprévisible de la terre, d'un côté, et les compulsions de Philip de l'autre, forment une sorte d'alliance théorique qui nous permet d'entendre les voix silencieuses de la terre et de Philip, tout en confirmant l'importance de lectures ultérieures de ce roman central à la littérature canadienne.

One of the most heavily discussed texts in the Canadian literary canon, *As for Me and My House* offers unique possibilities for an ecocriticism that engages deeply with questions of sexuality, gender, and identity, raising discussions of the varied Canadian receptions of both ecocriticism and *As for Me and My House*. The distinctively Canadian context and traditions to which this slightly queer novel responds require an ecocriticism that both differs from the American nature-celebration mode often associated with ecocriticism<sup>1</sup> and addresses the novel's complex representations of social responses to sexuality and to the natural environment. A central position of this article, therefore, is that responses to sexuality and nature within this novel are, if not conjoined, then at least structurally similar and ideologically confluent. To explore this matter and to help sketch the theoretical contours of Canadian ecocriticisms, this article will use and expand developing theories about ecophobia. Adding to the enormous amount of work done on regional contexts (less because such work is inadequate than because it predates both ecocriticism and the kinds of connections made possible by ecocriticism), this article proposes that though Canadian and American ecocriticism are similar, a crucial difference between the two is in the opposing and ambivalent Canadian tensions between region and nation to which Canadian ecocriticisms respond. For *As for Me and My House*, ecocritical readings of nature differ from purely thematic ones in that they seek to situate regional concerns within a larger environmental context, in terms both of theory and historical contexts. This essay will argue that by voicing slightly queer subjectivities (a concept which will become clearer below), Ross gives voice and subjectivity to the natural world, so much so that it often (and as often ambivalently) becomes as much an antagonist as any character in the novel. One of the tasks for ecocriticism must therefore be to ask how the environmental ethics of this novel structure the limitations of the fictional characters, both as fictional performers with fictional moral and ethical abilities and identities, and as representations of and for material worlds outside of the text; in asking these questions, this article seeks to offer challenges to the heterosexism that structures and limits much of mainstream American ecocriticism.<sup>2</sup>

To get to these matters in *As for Me and My House*, it is necessary to recognize that the commitment to praxis in ecocriticism, as in queer theory, produces analyses that are less about thematicism and textuality than about the implications of the text's ethics for the world outside of the text. Ecocriticism has always sought to uncover connections and offer readings that are committed to praxis and engagement. If, as Wendy Lynne Lee and Laura M. Dow so succinctly argue, there is a "link between theory and practice intrinsic to the feminist, environmental, and lesbian/gay rights movements" (2001, 2), then there are three broad

concerns (which motivate—though they may not be fully addressed in—much of what follows below): first, there are important connections between ecocriticism and an anti-homophobic project; second, a canonized and heteronormative Sinclair Ross corpus does specific ideological and cultural work; and third, some kinds of destabilizations are possible, and one of the tasks of slightly queer ecocritical readings of Ross is to determine exactly what kind of praxis might be achieved through such academic readings.<sup>3</sup> Of course, before we can get to these important issues in *As for Me and My House*, there is a lot of foundational work that we need to do, and part of this work has to do with recognizing both the history and the plurality of ecocriticism: it is now no longer just the Midwestern American project that it was in the mid-1990s. Ecocriticism has risen north of the forty-ninth.

In the relatively short history of ecocriticism, *place* is a governing concern.<sup>4</sup> With a novel such as *As for Me and My House*, where the physical immediacy of such a profoundly distinctive prairie region is at once so definitive *and* so ambiguous, so containing *and* so uncontainable, place is central. There are several issues here. The ambiguity of the place has, historically, been troubling to Canadian critics working within a community that is very clearly concerned with, as Dallas Harrison has put it, the nationalist project of keeping “our cultural capital within our borders” (1997, 143). Indeed, Harrison—among others, including Frank Davey (1991), Paul Denham (1980), E.K. Brown (1941), and David Stouck (1974)—has worried about the ambiguity of national setting in the lack of clearly identifiable Canadian place names in the novel: for many miles south and many kilometres north of the forty-ninth parallel, the prairie landscape is pretty much the same. Another key matter here is about the notion of *region* itself. The definitiveness of place has typecast the region into a kind of conceptual stasis, an effect, perhaps, of what Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh see as an attempt “to consolidate Canadian prairie writing as a field of study and to establish a distinct canon” (2001, 6). What is of definitional importance here, then, are two borders: one between nations defining a distinctively Canadian ontology, and one between regions defining a distinctively prairie place. These two borders are each important for very different reasons in the discussion that follows. On the one hand, Canadian spaces (like Canadian ecocriticisms) struggle for identity in the face of a dominant southern neighbour; on the other hand, as Calder and Wardhaugh have suggested (13), the very notion of *region* may have worked against the very notion of *nation* in which Canada (at least relative to the United States) is somewhat deficient. Among other things, then, I will be showing how ecocriticisms north of the forty-ninth are unique in giving voice to what seems sometimes a distinctively Canadian, slightly queer set of opposing and ambivalent desires, theoretical and textual, for containing what at some points becomes a very queer nature.

A substantial boost to the brand value of Canadian ecocriticism came in June 2009, when, for the first time, the American branch of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE-US) held its biennial conference in Victoria, with a host of powerful Canadian names topping the list of plenary and keynote speakers. Ecocriticism, now a teenager,<sup>5</sup> has grown very diverse. Although a clear and disproportionate imbalance weighing heavily towards celebrating American landscapes, American literature, and American ecocriticism remains in much scholarship throughout the world,<sup>6</sup> a distinct Canadian ecocriticism has emerged. Characterized from the start by a suspicion of the American nationalism in so much of ecocriticism,<sup>7</sup> Canadian ecocriticism has rooted itself in the distinctive and fertile soils of the history that has defined Canadian difference from the US from the start and continues in many ways to do so. Whether we are talking about Frye's ideas regarding "garrison mentality" (1965, 351) or Atwood's notions about "survival" (1972) in the face of very antagonistic natural environments, the Canadian tendency, as Stouck has so admirably noted, is to write its geographies as "threatening and hostile," as "space [that] is punitive" (1974, 142). This does not mean that all Canadian writers do so or that American writers do not also, at times, write hostile environments, but this tendency has been a defining feature of Canadian literature. If American ecocriticism responds to a history of frontier thinking, of a movement through, a conquering, and an exploitation of the natural world, Canadian ecocriticism responds to a history of, in some sense, battling with an antagonistic nature just to survive. Indeed, as Robert Kroetsch has argued, "historically, the frontier had in a sense 'closed' by the time the Canadian prairies opened to settlement" (1991, 115).

If we may, for a moment, consider ecocriticism itself a "new frontier" opened up by American ingenuity, then we may also argue that it remains a frontier that has, despite brilliant advances, in some ways lacked direction. One of the things American ecocriticism has specifically lacked is an adequate vocabulary that brings to the study of nature what terms such as misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism give to the study of the representations of women, race, sexuality, and Jewishness respectively. Perhaps it is understandable, given the history of Canada's relations with the natural world (and the legacy of these relations in the collective Canadian consciousness), that a term such as "ecophobia" should come from a Canadian ecocritic (Estok 2009).<sup>8</sup> The term is useful to discussion of *As for Me and My House* because it allows us to articulate in theoretical terms precisely how and to what ideological effect (and with what consequences) Ross pictures nature. If we work with a definition of "ecophobia" as being an aversion towards nature (sometimes pathological), an aggravated form of anthropocentrism expressed variously as fear of, hatred of, or hostility towards nature, we

may understand ecophobia as having many manifestations, ranging from the fear of nature underpinning much of the cosmetics industry to compunctions to lawn care. Basically, ecophobia is all about fear of a loss of agency and control to nature—but how does this relate to *As for Me and My House*?

Certainly it is no exaggeration to claim that the setting comes to take control of everything in *As for Me and My House*, the characters often (though not always) becoming little more than a dim backdrop to the tastes for ultimates that the prairies serve up. Regional traditions of prairie writing have, as many scholars have noted, focussed on the thematic importance of the prairie environment, on the flatness, the solitude, the harshness of the prairies, and how these physical characteristics translate into the themes of endurance, isolation, and survival.<sup>9</sup> Sinclair Ross presents an “indifferent, liplessly mournful” nature that terrifies and taunts: the “houses are helpless against the black wetness ... the town seems huddled together, cowering on a high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind” (1982, 5). It is a hostile environment. There is hope and a giving back from nature, “like the strength and darkness of the soil” (19), for instance, but this is not a novel that celebrates the beauty and accessibility of nature. It is a nature that changes people, breaks them, spits them out, and remains itself unchanged: Mrs. Bentley complains, “Sky and weather have put the ... look of stillness in [Philip’s] eyes” (20). There is a relentlessness about this nature, the wind, the dust, and more of the wind: “mile after mile of wind poured by,” Mrs. Bentley explains, “and we were immersed and lost in it” (38). Nature is the grist for Philip’s art, “the bare essentials of a landscape, sky, and earth” (59). It defines the possibilities for everything in the small and insignificant human world, a small insignificance Ross is at pains to expose repeatedly. For a thematic reading, there is no shortage of material.

What is so interesting here from an ecocritical perspective, however, is the prominence in the story of the natural world as “itself an actor, a presence, a subject that needs to be taken into consideration as an equal rather than as an object, as being integral rather than background” (Sandilands 1995, 78). This notion is central to the argument I am making about how characters are so often mere supplements to Ross’s powerful depictions of agential natural environments. Something else very important is going on here as well, and it comes to the question of the kinds of queerings the novel writes and the ways in which the natural environment is implicated in those moments. Ross gives voice to nature. There is no question about that. In looking at how the novel voices a hostile nature, the reader is encouraged into an ambivalent desire for again silencing an unpredictable and uncontrollable nature—ambivalent because we want enough noise for the story to continue. At the same time that we have this writing of an ambivalent

affective desire for the silencing of nature, we have a man who is unable either to understand or to predict his desires, a text that seems compulsively ambivalent about unmuffling his voice, and a narrator who transgenders the text.

It is important at this point to comment on how, in a disturbingly inaccurate understanding of the state of Ross scholarship, Bonnie Hughes claims that "*As for Me and My House* may not continue to be the focus of many future studies because it has been analyzed so thoroughly, leaving little room for new approaches" (2005, 98). We must respond to this comment, since any kind of ecocritical reading of *As for Me and My House* is new, and queer ecocriticism is cutting edge. Indeed, as Timothy Morton argues, what we are talking about here is "a field that doesn't quite exist—queer ecology" (2010, 1). It is a field that has at least had its ground broken,<sup>10</sup> though that ground has been broken for quite some time now, with calls for links between queer and environmental topics predating ecocriticism by about two years, beginning with *Queer Nature*, the 1994 special issue of the Canadian journal *UnderCurrents: Critical Environmental Studies*. The purpose of the special issue was to "open a discussion between queer and environmental politics" (O'Donnell 1994, 2) a discussion that has, more than a decade and a half later, in many ways failed to materialize. In this special issue, York University's Catriona Sandilands argues that differing agendas between queer and environmental movements do not justify lack of dialogue between the two, and that the inclusion of "queer" into environmental politics would, among other things, allow us to ask questions about how our ordering systems organize and perpetuate certain kinds of relationships (1994, 22). Greta Gaard's 1997 response to the articles in *UnderCurrents* is that they initiate explorations but fail to develop connections between queer theory and ecofeminism (or what some theorists are now calling "feminist ecocriticism"). What makes the work of Sandilands, who has become one of the few lone voices queering environmental politics, substantially important is that it seeks understandings of ways that "heterosexism [forms] part of the web of oppressive power relations through which human relations to nature are organized" (2005).

For *As for Me and My House*, what this means is that the relationship between Philip and the natural environment, on the one hand, and his relationship with Steve on the other, is a profoundly important area of study. It is the indifference of this boy, real or imagined, that makes him so deliciously inaccessible to Philip, and, as a kind of voice for Philip's tortured subconscious, Mrs. Bentley explains that "Steve isn't the kind of boy you pick up every day. There's more to him than just good looks" (S. Ross 1982, 76). When she goes on to talk about "a very great faith that such indifference on the part of its deity cannot weaken" (84), it is obvious that the subtext is about Philip's worship of Steve. At the same time, the

confluence of indifference in this “ominously good-looking boy” (41) and in the natural environment is surely not to be missed. Before proceeding with this queerish ecocriticism, it is good to review some of the important findings of recent scholarship, proceeding on the understanding that because so much of what has been done is so important to what has yet to be done with this text, such review is necessary.

There have been many questions about sexuality in *As for Me and My House*, and the answers have been varied. Keith Fraser's posthumous outing of Ross as “homosexual” has certainly added spin to these questions, but with or without the controversy Fraser has generated, there is no doubt that “sexual confusion ... [is] at the heart of [Ross's] best fiction” (Stouck 2005, 60). A lot of interesting biographical information has been written on Ross, and perhaps no one does it better than David Stouck. One of the interesting biographical matters Stouck suggests is that Ross

could not fully identify himself as a gay man because he was not without sexual interest in women ... [that] he recognized in himself a physical attraction to both men and women, with a strong emotional need for men, but a social preference for the company of women. (2005, 182)

Certainly this is an interesting goblet of information about the personal life of Ross, but what makes Stouck's amazing biography different from a lot of other work done is that it *does not* go on to read Ross *into* Philip—and why should it: what difference should the author's sexuality make to the work itself? Andrew Lesk seems very sensible in asking a version of this question, stating that “how one might go about reading the work of an author discovered to be heterosexual might be instructive” (2002, 67): the point implies a need to move away from the biographical accounts about which Lesk writes.

Indeed, “putting Ross on the couch” (Lesk 2002, 69) seems a poor way to do literary criticism, but one wonders how much better putting Ross's characters on the couch is. Timothy R. Cramer mentions a woman in a graduate class “who wondered out loud whether the protagonist, Philip Bentley, might be a closeted gay man” (1999, 49), a question Mareike Neuhaus certainly seems to echo and expand upon in discussing “not only ... Philip's but ultimately ... the novel's queerness” (2003, 60). Cramer elaborates, asking, “what if the reason Philip does not, will not, or can not desire Mrs. Bentley is because he has other desires?” (1999, 52). This kind of commentary, though, seems to have limited value and to give an unduly generous amount of agency to Philip, as if he “were a portion of real life,” to borrow a phrase from John Moss (1991, 138). We do well to remember that we only see of him what Mrs. Bentley presents, and it seems merely an

academic exercise to psychoanalyze a fictional character, twice removed. Philip is, after all, the product of Mrs. Bentley's unreliable pen, and she is the product of Ross's very human hand.

Of course, queerness is there in the novel, not because Ross *told* Keith Fraser "It's there" (1997, 41), but because we cannot get the narration to straighten out. It is not a question of "what if Philip is gay," which is Cramer's mode of attack, one that seems along the same lines as trying to decide about how many angels dance on heads of pins. Cramer's essay, like Neuhaus's, seems to grant unconditional organic unity to fictional characters, plots, and settings along the principles of a naïve New Criticism. More compelling than imagining little scenarios and what-ifs for off-screen fictional characters is to look at how the novel draws a thematic link between, on the one hand, compulsions and inexorabilities in the natural world that are totally at odds with the life that is trying to survive in that world, and, on the other hand, a man whose desires put him at odds with the community in which he is trying to eke out a living. Such an approach combines the subjects and approaches of ecocriticism on the one hand and queer theory on the other. It becomes significant through such a reading that Ross writes an environment that assumes its own agency, an agency that Ross's narrative for the most part demonizes through characters who seek to replace that agency with a human order and yet themselves remain overdetermined by that which they seek to muffle.

Philip—who is as much a product of the social environment of Main Street as of the natural environment that so relentlessly wears him down—"has," over the long years, "curbed and hidden and choked himself" (S. Ross 1982, 72). Restricted in his movements (social, sexual, financial) by what his environment (social, natural) will allow, Philip is, in many ways, *equated* with a very regional part of the natural world and is tied to the inexorabilities, the inexplicable and incomprehensible compulsions of that world, and their implications. This is "the bond to the land" of which Laurie Ricou speaks (1973, 6),<sup>11</sup> and it is a reductive bond in the sense that it strips Philip of much of the humanity that he (and we in reading) would rather not see stripped, resulting in a sense of him having to face what Edward McCourt might call "his own curious duality—that he is at once nothing and everything" (quoted in Ricou 1973, 1) on this two-dimensional land. Like the soil in which they try so desperately to grow their nourishment, the Bentleys have "been blown out, dried out, hailed out; and it was as if in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe, they were trying to assert themselves, to insist upon their own meaning and significance" (S. Ross 1982, 19) and three-dimensionality. The slip in my discussion here from Philip to "the Bentleys" is nominal and irrelevant: the book is about Philip and his consciousness, Mrs. Bentley (without even a first



name) serving a peripheral role (despite her centrality as the narrator), reduced in relation to Philip as Philip is to nature: as he pits himself against nature, she finds that she is "pitting herself against him"—and enjoying it (20).

Much has been done to recuperate Mrs. Bentley from this peripheral role. Perhaps Anne Compton is correct in her brilliant and nuanced discussion of the questions arising from Ross's handling of his female narrator. Perhaps "Ross succeeds in ... imagin[ing] a tough-minded, ruthlessly frank female narrator, one whose words name, and in naming overcome, the condition which threatens her" (Compton 1992, 74), but perhaps we also have to wonder if it is really possible for an author to overcome and step outside of the condition of gender, if it is really possible for people to transcend the limitations of their own gendering, their own gendered understandings of other genders, and to thereby produce a viable and reliable narrator across genders. Perhaps we have to wonder what to make of comments, again purportedly from a woman, that "he has never quite forgiven me for being just a woman" (S. Ross 1982, 23); or comments about the freckles on Mrs. Holly and "how lovely they would be if she weren't a woman" (26); or Mrs. Bentley's comments about "how little it can amount to wanting a woman at night, putting up with her in the daytime" (110). Perhaps we should take at face value Mrs. Bentley's understanding and characterization of Philip as a man who thinks his wife "keep[s] on ... trying to possess him" (75), and that this is the kind of thing she would think and confess to her diary. Would a female author characterize a female narrator as asking, "What woman doesn't like being exasperated with a man and finding that he pays no heed?" (20)? Helen Buss deftly, succinctly, and accurately defines her as "a patriarchal woman," if not a "misbegotten man" (1991, 195).

While one might wonder how Mrs. Bentley might differ if Sinclair Ross were female, however, it does not seem very productive to go into "Biographical accounts ... that read Ross directly into (and out of) his writing" (Lesk 2002, 67); even so, knowing that the author is male and the narrator female does, perhaps, raise some issues. Terry Goldie argues that "a trans-gendered text inevitably poses a homosexual question" (41), and *As for Me and My House* is transgendered (with its male author and female narrator). One might wonder if Mrs. Bentley might be the product of male fantasies and imaginings of what and how women must think. Queer she is, as a kind of a "misbegotten man," a projection and incorporation of male fantasies, a narrative she-male who strays significantly from the other "Main Street ladies" in her affinities for the roughness of the natural world into which she wanders seeking comfort and solace. We can say that much. We might even be justified in arguing that there is an "almost moment" of lesbian intimacy she shares with Mrs. Bird. As Mrs. Bentley describes the encounter,

She was in slippers and dressing-gown, reading a magazine and eating candy-coated biscuits out of a package. "Not a stitch on underneath," she assured me, parting the dressing gown an inch or two in proof. "I like it that way—makes me feel elemental. The doctor's away on a country call, but you can wait and have tea with me." (60)

An invitation to tea this certainly is, and it seems to have at least some signals (verbal and enacted) that might be interpreted as offering a different kind of an invitation—but reading for much more begins to strain at the seams of what the text allows. This is not a book about Mrs. Bentley; it is a masculine consciousness that this novel follows, a consciousness whose possibilities and permissibilities are contoured by the environmental ethics of the novel.

If we accept the argument that Steve, in his indifference, is comparable to the prairie and its indifference, then what are the implications? What are the implications of an object that just will not *give*, that just will not satisfy Philip's "hunger for the boy" (S. Ross 1982, 49), that just will not "have need of [Philip]" (75) the way Philip has need of him? One of the implications is that this boy becomes, in a sense, an antagonist in the narrative—certainly to the narrative voice. An astonishing parallel, both in terms of the narrative and the action of the novel, is the profound indifference of nature: as Paul puts it,

Man can't bear to admit his insignificance. If you've ever seen a hailstorm, or watched a crop dry up—his helplessness, the way he's ignored—well, it was just such helplessness in the beginning that set him to discovering gods who could control the storms and seasons. (19)

The implicit co-location of boy and environment throughout the book effects a kind of bi-directional sweep. It is not *just* that the boy becomes a kind of object; it goes the other way, too. Nature becomes a kind of subject, an agential force to be reckoned with, and Philip himself is equated, bound up with, and inseparable from the natural environment: "like the wilderness outside of night and prairie, with this one little spot of Horizon hung up lost in its immensity. He's as lost, and alone" (25). The obvious implication of this equation between Philip and the land is that he is subject to and structured by the same rules of ethical considerability that apply to nature. Equated with, he is also both voiced and stifled with the natural environment.

This is not an easy book. On the one hand, there are obviously numerous connections we can draw between ecophobia and social hegemonies that seek to amputate the agency of "others," between kinds of muffling; on the other hand, this text *does* voice Philip's queer desire as well as the overwhelming agency of

nature, an agency to be negotiated with rather than forced. Though not reducible to a pithy quotation in the novel, this need for negotiating with nature is a pervasive implicit theme—and a very green bit of interventional praxis at that. At the same time, writing a natural environment with such a hostile voice as Ross does is surely *culturally* detrimental to the natural world. We can see this by analogy: voicing Asians in film as bad-guy kung fu artists is surely disadvantageous to multiculturalism; voicing queers as commodities of humour and envy for a heterosexual community is surely not going to result in increased social freedoms for sexual minorities.<sup>12</sup> The first is as surely ecophobic as the second is racist and the last homophobic. Indeed, there are links between ecocriticism and an anti-homophobic project. Simply noting that there is something queer going on in *As for Me and My House* is not enough—not when there is such a heavy hostile environmental presence in the book. It is here that a queer ecocriticism (and the connections it uncovers) comes to have such significance. In one stroke, *As for Me and My House* voices and quashes the possibilities for agency, in a gesture of resounding ambivalence that is both ecophobic and homophobic, and yet neither, all the while enacting “strong connections between the regulation of sexuality and the containment of nature” (Sandilands 2001, 173).

The ambivalence sticks like honey to every page of this very queer book, and it would be radically unfair to label it either ecophobic or homophobic. In a lot of ways, Ross actively resists the ecophobia that crowds the pages, actively resists assigning volitional hostility to nature. Mrs. Bentley explains at one point, “The stillness and solitude—we think a force or presence into it—even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us—for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness, where we may have no meaning at all” (S. Ross 1982, 100). Ross also actively resists queering Philip. Indeed, the text normalizes Philip’s love for Steve at least in part by writing it in contrast with the “twisted, hybrid love” (111) that Mrs. Bentley offers—the only love she can offer Steve; nor is it the case that Philip is alone in his inexplicable compulsions. Mrs. Bentley, too, is driven by feelings she cannot understand or control: for example, following a stressful dinner peppered with conversations about money, she “went out again afterwards, driven by a feeling that it would be easier to be alone outside” (159). Thus it is not the intent here to be monolithic in discussing the positions *As for Me and My House* advances; rather, if Lesk is right to claim that the accumulated effect of all of the queer references “virtually solicit deciphering” (1997, 139), and if Valerie Raoul is indeed justified in claiming that “all ... [of the hints of queerness] initially appear ‘innocuous’ in their context, but the accumulation is insistent” (1998, 19), then it is no less wrong to look at the broad environmental strokes this novel puts on the canvas. Those broad strokes bespeak an affective ethics for an agential nature

that will comply and not compel, that will produce and not punish, and of a man who will not fly into the light like moths and die a victim of fierce and compelling "passions we live by" (S. Ross 1982, 113).

While Sandilands offers no term through which to assess the desire to contain nature, "ecophobia," as a term, is clearly functional here. When we are talking about connections between the regulation of sexuality and the containment of nature, the regulation in each case seems to follow similar impulses to deal with unpredictability and compulsion. Ecophobia and homophobia each loathe unpredictability, and for similar reasons: unpredictability and compulsion threaten the efficiency of commodity production, which is probably why contemporary mainstream culture has so vigorously attempted to appropriate and market "green" movements and other green things and "queers" in general, from camp to clothes. Certainly it is the fear of unpredictability and compulsion that forms at least one of the bases of the erotophobia that both Gaard and Sandilands identify as a kind of theoretical nexus for queer ecocriticism.

The cultural work that a canonized and heteronormative *As for Me and My House* does is one at best of muffling and at worst of erasure; the cultural work that a slightly queer ecocritical reading does has to do with connections. Heteronormative readings, in failing to see (or to see the significance of) connections between the regulation of sexuality and the containment of nature, muffle voices that queer readings trumpet. Hostile though it is in this novel, nature is an actor, and ecophobic though the images often are, the novel opens a space for the experience of nature as other. Sandilands carries the theory a bit further, drawing on Karen Warren's rock-climbing story (Warren 1990, 134-35) to imply that part of the process of reconceptualization requires a *relational* understanding of nature. Rather than discontinuity between self and nature, there is a mutuality. It is not a mutuality that Philip enjoys, and yet the ambivalent equation the text draws between Philip and nature obviously raises the question of nature as an actor ethically entitled to the rights of voice. At the same time that we see Philip defined by his relationship to nature, we also see a kind of reconceptualization of nature that brings questions about identity into discussions of environment and allows (indeed requires) us to move in a direction far, far from the discontinuity that has characterized the disastrous human/nature relations until now. It is not a dream that is realized in this text, but it is one that is implied—and that is something. It is something, moreover, that a queer ecocriticism uncovers.

In a canonized and heteronormative Sinclair Ross corpus, Philip's inability to understand or predict his desires, like his wife's inability to conceive either a baby or a notion that her husband might be queer, never come up as serious theoretical questions (let alone as questions that might be related to environmental ethics). In a very real sense, ecocriticism can help where other theory has struggled with this

book, and it is less a case of what Morton Ross laments as a “progressive enlargement of the reader’s responsibility for contributing meaning” (1978, 205) that the canonization of *As for Me and My House* has performed than it is an absence of critical movement outside of paradigms that ignore difference, whether it is the radical difference of a nature that is ethically entitled to the rights of voice or the radical difference of a trebly closeted queer protagonist. Unmuffling voices that are in the text is surely work that is worth doing, and it is new work.

A text such as *As for Me and My House* allows us to move beyond drawing easy parallels between, on the one hand, the details of setting and history and, on the other, the philosophical positions that the novel takes regarding matters of sexuality and environmental ethics. While Morton Ross certainly seems to be right in arguing against the notion that the novel makes broad universal claims, it seems no more correct to suggest that the text is *representative* of its regional context. Indeed, this novel is destabilizing; it is a dissident voice rather than a representative one that we hear; it is one that voices things, connections, sexualities, positions; and we struggle to make sense of it all. One of the things we can see is that, if the environmental ethics of this novel structure the limitations of the fictional characters, then no less do these environmental ethics structure the possibilities for the play of these fictional characters in material worlds outside of the text, whether simply in interpretive academic communities or in the role models that they endorse. There are very real consequences at stake here. This is one kind of praxis (hard though it is to quantify) with which queer ecocriticism is concerned.

## Conclusions

Under-rated, under-valued, and under-represented in relation to its more culturally dominant and dominating southern neighbour, Canada suffers from a lack of cultural clout in much of the world. Narrowly nationalistic drum-beating about *As for Me and My House*, though, is probably less likely to be good for Canada than an honest appraisal of the real merits and real problems with this book.

Traditionally, there has been huge resistance to the queering of things—whether scholarship about Sinclair Ross (until recently),<sup>13</sup> literary studies in general, marriage, or (judging by the relative lack of published queer ecocritical scholarship) the burgeoning purview of ecocriticism. Defining ecocriticism and its component parts is only a small piece of the problem: ecocriticism has the added burden of not having adequate terms equivalent to queer theory’s “homophobia,” a problem compounded by a generalized skepticism towards theory. It is this skepticism, however, that has allowed both queer and ecocritical theories to avoid assimilation and maintain the urgency of praxis. Indeed, in some ways, the very lack of definition is at once an obstacle and a strength. Opposed to totalizing

gestures, a queer ecocriticism defies the control that heteronormative muscle seeks to assert, reassert, and maintain. Ecophobia and homophobia are so closely linked because they share similar assumptions about the kinds of things—such as unpredictability—that threaten power and the production of use-value commodities. Responding to ecophobia and homophobia means making alliances. We are going to have to ask questions about where to draw lines of considerability and to follow Sandilands and extend the lines of democratic privilege beyond the human towards a recognition that nature is “in and of itself an actor, a presence, a subject that needs to be taken into consideration as an equal rather than as an object, as being integral rather than background” (1995, 78).

In *As for Me and My House*, environment is so integral that it becomes virtually the singular thing motivating and advancing the plot. So strongly linked are the images of Philip’s inexplicable compulsions and nature’s equally inexplicable forces, so interwoven in the narrative are the indifference of Steve and the indifference of the prairies, that this novel subtly but persistently forces the reader to consider the ethical commensurability between humankind and nature, to at least *think of* extending ethical considerability to nature (and, similarly, to think of what it means to extend the lack of ethical considerability for nature to humankind). The novel highlights a land that, like Philip’s sexuality, is silent, voicing both this land and sexuality through the narrative Mrs. Bentley offers. We witness, both in this land and in Philip’s desire, an agency that is threatening, and we find an ambivalent containment of this threat ultimately accomplished through the narrative—but these voices will not be denied. Whatever his strengths or failings as an artist, there is no question that Sinclair Ross succeeds in giving voice both to nature and to Philip’s queerness, both of which emerging and distinctively Canadian ecocriticisms seem to be very well suited to discuss.

*As for Me and My House* offers possibilities for distinctive Canadian ecocriticisms that are at once protective of the self in the face of a perceived hostile nature *and* defensive of the sovereignty of nature; at once responsive to a nationally distinct history *and* to transnational environmental futures; at once alert to Canadian literary desires to contain and consolidate the very notion of region (in the interests of maintaining a national identity) *and* willing to articulate resistance to conceptualizing geographical containment; at once heirs to the insights of distinctively American ecocriticisms, *and* advocates of voices, concerns, and identities that are distinctively Canadian; ecocriticisms recognize positions in and around *As for Me and My House* that are at once slightly queer *and* powerfully heteronormative.

## Notes

1. While certainly there are and have been substantial movements away from theoretically simplistic celebrations of American landscapes and ideals, the bulk of ecocriticism has historically been Americanist, more so, though, in the early days of the movement.
2. Timothy Morton argues in the March 2010 issue of *PMLA* that these kinds of challenges must acknowledge "the pathbreaking work of Catriona Sandilands and of the journal *Undercurrents*" (1). Both the journal and the scholar are, incidentally, Canadian.
3. The question of praxis is one that has beleaguered ecocriticism from the start and has produced various comments of varying value. Lawrence Buell proposes in *The Environmental Imagination* that ecocriticism is conducted with an aim of praxis in mind (1996, 430 n20). He has, since then, sharpened his comment, to make it very clear in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* that "criticism worthy of its name arises from commitments deeper than professionalism" (2005, 97). Michael Cohen asserts that "by definition, ecological literary criticism must be engaged. It wants to know but also wants to do.... Ecocriticism needs to inform personal and political actions, in the same way that feminist criticism was able to do only a few decades ago" (2004, 7). Simply claiming a commitment to praxis, though, is not enough, and it does not make the theory activist in any sense. David Mazel, apparently doubting the relationship that learning and knowledge has with activism, asks in an article entitled "Ecocriticism as Praxis" for evidence from "empirical research" to prove that "students who read and write about green texts turn into more thoughtful and effective environmentalists than they might have been otherwise" (2008, 42). He is disturbed at not finding such evidence.
4. Book titles such as *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (Ingram et al. 2007) and conference titles such as the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment's "the solid earth! the actual world!" (the Fifth Biennial ASLE-US Conference) are examples of ecocriticism's continuing emphasis on immediacy and directness. The aesthetics of contact characterizing mainstream ecocriticism have found a wide and largely enthusiastic (and often anti-theoretical) audience.
5. "Ecocriticism" really has three birthdays: one for the term, one for the critical school, and one for the beginning of ecocritical publishing. William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," which first appeared in 1978 (reprinted in 1996). With the establishment of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* in 1993 by Patrick Murphy, "ecological literary study," Glotfelty contends, "had emerged as a recognizable critical school" (1996, xviii). In 1996, with the appearance of *The Ecocriticism Reader* and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, the term and the school began to receive serious attention among scholars.
6. While I do not want to get sidetracked from the main discussion, it seems appropriate to give at least some empirical evidence for my contention that there is a continuing lack of Canadian visibility in ecocriticism and environmentalism, a matter that this article addresses directly. Nor do I mean to be polemical in claiming that Canada

simply does not have the intellectual or cultural significance that the US and its literature have; in many parts of the world, Canada is simply not considered worthy of study. While this seems a very obvious statement, an anonymous editor (for a much earlier—and rejected—version of this essay) defensively pointed out to me that “many academics in Germany, France, Sweden, Poland, Austria, Croatia, and the Czech Republic ... have students happy to take courses in and write graduate theses on Canadian literature.” Susie O’Brien’s lament that ecocriticism “is primarily American” (1998, 17) is one that retains profound significance in Asia generally, and in China, South Korea, and Japan specifically. For instance, among the 181 universities in South Korea, only 6 in this country of 50 million offer Canadian studies, and not one of these 6 has courses dedicated strictly to Canadian literature in its curricula. Japan—with its 128 million residents—is proportionally worse, with only 9 of its 806 universities offering Canadian studies, though just over half of these 9 actually do have courses dedicated to more than social conditions, multiculturalism, politics, social policy, and so on: 5 universities in Japan teach courses on Canadian literature. Of the 2,236 colleges and universities serving China’s 1.3 billion people, there are 45 centres for Canadian studies, with only 19 dealing, to varying degrees, with Canadian literature—while virtually every university in China, Korea, and Japan has courses on American literature (Canada 2009).

7. Indeed, in the very year that ecocritical scholarship began, I (a Canadian) commented on the “almost uniformly Americanist slant” that forms one of the main “organizational biases” (Estok 1996, 1244) of *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996), the collection that was to become the flagship of this critical fleet. Two years later, Susie O’Brien remarked that ecocriticism “is primarily American” (1998, 17), explaining that one of the reasons for the relative failure of Canadian ecocriticism is in part deeply rooted in the “legacies of colonialism, both internally, in the conflict between French and English Canadians, and externally, in the nation’s deference to the imperial authority, first of England, then of the United States” (24). Diana Relke places discussions of *nation* front and centre with discussions of ecologically oriented Canadian poetry (1999). Simone Birgitt Hartmann offers a more recent attempt (2006) to articulate a distinctively Canadian ecocritical space, but it is ironic that the article is front-loaded with three pages of American ecocritical commentary that largely ignores the proto-ecocritical work that has been done in Canada. As Laurie Ricou has argued, “nature has loomed large in the Canadian consciousness,” and ecocriticism has been “almost an underground phenomenon” in Canada (quoted in Relke 1999, 205).
8. It was the editors of *ISLE* (and not myself) who made a point of mentioning nationality: “Canadian” is the first word they use in the note to describe me in the list of contributors, notwithstanding the fact that I am tenured at a university in South Korea, where I have been living for almost 14 years. The article in which the term appeared is at the centre of a fierce and growing debate about the place of theory in ecocriticism, as the responses in *ISLE* 16 (4) attest. In turn, responses to *ISLE* 16 (4) itself have been so intense that by December 2009, the editor, Scott Slovic, had felt compelled to issue “a call for submissions to a special forum on the broader topic of ‘Ecocriticism and Theory’ that would appear in one of the 2010 issues of *ISLE*” (Slovic 2009).



9. Laurie Ricou gives a good but dated summary of such commentary in his introduction to *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*. A more recent review of scholarship related to the Canadian prairies is to be found in Calder and Wardhaugh's "When Is the Prairie?"—their introduction to a collection of essays that seek in part to call into question the notion of a static "unchanging and unchangeable" (2001, 4) prairies and to reframe traditional understandings of this region. As Carmen Pearson has insightfully pointed out, however, "although these essays are provocative, their approaches are often less original than the editors claim. In all the essays, the Canadian prairies and the human shadow across them still loom large" (2007, 272).
10. The fact that queer ecology and queer ecocriticism have received their strongest stimulus from Canadian sources rather than American ones is perhaps not surprising. That Canadian ecocriticism should defend minority positions against larger and more powerful majorities is perhaps the effect of a society such as Canada's, as Huggan and Tiffin explain, where the "majority culture is seen ... to be under permanent threat" (2010, 129). That threat, of course, is cultural and American. The late Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau once likened living beside the United States to "sleeping with an elephant," explaining that "no matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt" (Trudeau, 1969). We remain beside the cultural elephant. As I have been suggesting, however, there is more going on in Canadian ecocriticism than simply a defense of minority positions and we may read for queer natures in the novel's writing of the prairie itself. As this article seeks to demonstrate, Canadian ecocriticisms give voice to a fairly queer set of desires against which Canadian literary yearnings to contain nature have been largely ambivalent.
11. Many scholars have, in various ways, since spoken of the relationship between people and the land expressed in the novel. Lorraine McMullen has spoken elegantly about how "the indifference of nature to man is often revealed as an aspect of cosmic indifference" (1989, 269); Stouck notes that there is in this novel obviously a connection "between landscape and man's fate" (1988, 116); Kroetsch maintains that Mrs. Bentley, as a woman, "contains the space, speaks the silence" (1991, 77) of the prairies, and Anne Compton responds by asking who she becomes in such speaking (1992, 64). While it is a good question, ecocriticism might ask a slightly different question: of what kind of environment does Mrs. Bentley speak?
12. Indeed, the success of *Will and Grace*, Showtime's *The L-Word*, *Friends* (featuring caricature lesbian Carol Willick, a barely tolerated home-wrecker and one of the relatively few pre-*L-Word* lesbians of primetime TV), Canada's *Kids in the Hall*, Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Queer as Folk* (the British and the American versions) endorse relationships that, while nominally sexual, are far, far from being transgressive in any social or economic sense—at least no more than the Big Top Freak Show is transgressive. The successes of these programs certainly are not reliable indicators of a social acceptance of sexual freedom, as the ongoing struggle for queer marriage rights shows. Only nominally sexual (despite nipples and pubic hair or what the Japanese call スキンシップ—literally, "skinship"), the relationships these programs show in fact endorse virtually all of the values of heteronormative relationships and society; moreover, putatively

queer primetime characters have ironic social acceptability scripted as consumers for a culture that vigorously values spending and yet as vigorously gives lip-service to limiting consumption in this age of environmental disasters. The queer becomes the object of some mainstream envy, imagined as a site of virtually ungoverned appetite; heterosexual people, of course, presumably show more restraint, in the bedroom and the department store. Yes, the media have embraced and been successful in appropriating and marketing more humanized versions of the queer than was the trend in the past, but the queer remains a commodity whose nominal sexuality evokes the comedies of overconsumption and misrecognition and announces the kind of profound environmental disregard that seem so necessary for things like the Bush administration. "Queer" comic TV sites, like landscapes of ecotourism, offer zones of voyeurism, and are not much interested in subjectivities, identities, organizational potentials, and so on. Primetime queers reify an apolitical ideal that shows imagined queer communities out-of-touch with coalitional politics. With *The L-Word* lesbians dressed more like men's fantasies of lesbians and sex-scenes more in the line of pornography for men than expressions of the experiences and desires of lesbians, one really has to wonder about the kind of work the program does, apart from the commodification of women and of imagined sexualities.

13. Queer readings of *As for Me and My House* started appearing relatively late in the critical history of the novel, most of it appearing *after* Ross's death in 1996. This absence of published material on queer questions is, I am assuming, a tacit kind of institutional resistance. This is not, of course, to say that there are *no* readings before 1996 that recognize and discuss same-sex male eroticism in the novel. Perhaps the most notable is Robert Kroetsch's wonderfully accessible 1979 "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" and Frances Kaye's 1986 article about Ross's use of George Sand and Federic Chopin. Kaye argues that "Philip's emotional and sensual passions are for other men, first for the father he idealizes and then for the boy Steve, who so quickly usurps Mrs. Bentley's place as Philip's companion" (1986, 103). The bulk of the queerings, however, come after Keath Fraser's work and Sinclair Ross's death.

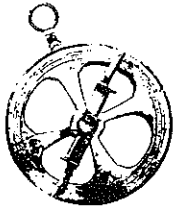
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