

A Sequence of Readings of Ken Belford's *Lan(d)guage*

Reviewed by Rob Budde

*How must it be
to be caught in the Empire, to have
everything you do matter?
--John Newlove*

There once was a scene
of moose along a lakeshore and this
was what was thought
the poetry of land should be. The poet,
as photographer or hunter, thought
the scene mattered. Leisurely created
“first person shooter poems” (33).

And then
the vectors changed → → →

→

The contexts in which I am reading Ken Belford's *Lan(d)guage* stem from a current emphasis on the ‘placing’ of the contemporary intellectual and a growing body of work that contemplates the prospect of an ethically grounded ecopoetics. Both contexts would threaten Belford's writing with a reductive essentialism were it not for *Lan(d)guage*'s refusal of both ‘place’ and ‘eco-’ stable signifiers. The book, “a sequence of poetics,” curtails the easy economy of the political word as exchange and enacts a deft skirting walk through the landscape of writing along a seldom observed path—*an abandonment of style*—a refusal at the threshold of the contemporary business of Canadian poetry.

→

Place ends at the center of culture. (41)

Cultures are infectious—talking or sneezing,
the same common paths of thought.
Sea lice going back and forth between
wild and hatchery fish. (77)

→

Belford has never worked a day in his life but has been an outfitter and ecologically-conscious guide for much of the past 35 years. The intellectual environment of guiding wealthy Democrats in the headwaters of the Nass in Northern BC set Ken Belford aside from the trajectory of Canadian/American poetics; he became an outsider in many senses of the word. Other than. Abject. Invisible. He barely exists. ‘Peripheral’ in all the positions and powers such a life bestows.

an individual not in
the urban network, not in the same speech
community as the speakers of the urban
dialect. (35)

“Publishing is an urban industry” (15)—the assumption (power) is there in the gaze of the colonial cities. Books are suburban sprawl and reading is land starved. The “urban dialect” is a freeway interchange. Where are you?

Adjacent to a manner of living, he has approached a mode of poetry modeled after non-consumptive and sustainable existence. I am not sure a poet of this kind has entered Canadian letters before. Singularly remote, he fashions a poetics from the perspective of *out there*, looking back at the cities from the forest. Such a place as Blackwater Lake (T'amtuits'whl'ax, north of Hazelton in the Skeena Mountains) would be easy to idealize,

and even Belford's state of mind there might be romanticized. Difference, here, is not hierarchical (the right road), but remarkable (a new path).

This is all after a youth in Vancouver that found Belford guided by poets of the 1960s into a writing life that was not erased by his time away from the establishment. Self-educated, he is far away from the MFA feedlots (of the kind I come from). Sorry, but he is. Influenced, but not inculcated, by west coast poetics, his lan(d)guage erases the 'place' he came from.

The laws of poetry are discontinuity and non-locality. (33)

→

Para-eco-logic?

→

Counter-colonial in a broader sense of what 'colonization' entails in the unroaded countries that do not include "Canada."

There are two countries, one
at the top edge of the map,
the other at the bottom. (60)

As much a part of the Gitksan nation and a planet-wide community of the dispossessed as any other, he wrote this book in 1741.

There's a fictional literacy called access.
Some of us get there by going
a different way. (11)

→

Belford recreates a possible relationship with the land. This relationship is ancient and connected to language. The uncertainty and respect that Belford gives land and language has led him to fuse the two: “lan(d)guage.” Belford’s land is postindustrial and anti-development, but forward thinking and planet changing. But it’s also walking through the language: the assumptions of communication, the power structures, the classed striations, the vying views of schools of poetry.

A good guide doesn’t kill anything. Or leave much trace.

→

If text = landscape map, then he doesn’t want a whole bunch of people muddying the spawning beds.

Travel books destroy rivers. (52)

→

The experiential or in-process evocation of the subject separated from master narratives is described by Donna Haraway as a mode of “situated knowledge”:

We don’t want a theory of innocent powers to represent the world, where language and bodies both fall into the bliss of organic symbiosis. We also don’t want to theorize the world, much less act within it, in terms of Global Systems,

but we do need an earth-wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities. (187)

This new ‘post-scientific’ (and so post-colonial) awareness is practiced by persons who

can no longer be, if they ever were, master subjects, nor alienated subjects, but—just possibly—multiply heterogeneous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents. But we must never again connect as parts to wholes [. . .] We must have agency—or agencies—without defending subjects. (3)

→

A vegetarian aesthetic and what that means.

What it means to be on the side of the animals for once, against the language of “animal prejudices” (38)—but this too a movement of differences. So, a consciousness

I slept beside a grizzly, each of us unaware
[. . .]
Nothing meaningful
occurred. (9)

but one with all the uncertainty that contemporary thought includes. Writing the awareness of the language of oppression that hovers over the nonhuman:

Sometimes, when I read poetry,
I think of the observation of caged animals. (23)

Plus the conviction not to eat anything with a face . . .

→

Well, I am not sure if you could call it geocentric, but it is sort of molecular in a sense. I would take something that is of interest at that moment, like a phrase or word, and I hold it up and tilt it a bit, then reflect from it. Maybe if I was at a school I would put the word up on the blackboard, and there would be some reflections that come off of it that would be up here, (his hand points level above his head), or a grouping of them or a list even. Then another antithesis over here maybe, (points chest level to his right), which is not exactly subjects or nouns or verbs, just notions that are echoes. And a phrase may then come out of this and I would think ‘oh, this means it is ... a love crime or something’ and then I right down love crimes. So I literally draw the poem out like that. Then, I will take this word, (grabs from the air to his right) and love crimes and a couple of other words and create it back into a kind of sentence that is only a bit like a sentence, but not completely like a sentence. I find my way in it. (Belford, “Viewed”)

→

The singular self-realization of Belford’s poetry arrives at a state of “dissensus” a term developed by Alan Carter in *A Radical Green Political Theory* that calls for a resurgence in personal or singular competence as an “egalitarian, decentralized, participatory democrac[y], oriented towards an environmentally sustainable way of living” (300). It is acts of individual empowerment performing a singular civil disobedience that functions as a larger social force. Poetics = living.

Belford lives displacement politics through his poetics.

→

Place is where one works (51)

→

A trespasser on the land that has been 'claimed' by the School of Quietude (if it exists)—the ranchers, farmers, and leisure class that has fenced off usable images and established park boundaries for the aesthetics of landscape.

→

And what would

- a) culture be like if it were not connected to money?
- b) a language of the land be?
- c) a post-avant non-urban aesthetic be?

→

analysis, in the conditional voice
of the critic, is filtered from the bottom
up, with a frame-to-frame separation
that drives me around the bend. (14)

← ← ←

Works Cited:

Belford, Ken. *Lan(d)guage*. Halfmoon Bay: Caitlin, 2008.

---. "Viewed from the Mountains: A Conversation with Ken Belford." Foster, Justin. *It's Still Winter*. Ed. Graham Pearce. January 31, 2009
< <http://www.itsstillwinter.com> >

Carter, Alan. *A Radical Green Political Theory*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Rob Budde teaches creative writing at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George. He has published seven books (poetry, novels, interviews, and short fiction), his most recent book being *Finding Ft. George*, a book of poetry from Caitlin Press. Find him at writingwaynorth.blogspot.com.