

## Eleanor Wachtel / AN INTERVIEW WITH DAPHNE MARLATT

“The birds don’t sing here”: finding a sense of place in the west coast

Vancouver writer, Daphne Marlatt, spent her early childhood in Penang, a northern Malaysian island in the Indian Ocean. Her family moved here when she was nine years old and she spent her teenage years earnestly trying to assimilate into the strange Canadian life of North Vancouver.

For her, one of the attractions of becoming a writer was that, as an outsider, she could write her way into the world she wanted to be part of. “You write your own script and include yourself.” This notion fit right into a concern with the local that characterized the TISH group of poets she encountered at UBC in the early sixties. And it resulted in books like *Vancouver Poems* and her major work of the seventies, the prose poem, *Steveston*, which started out as an oral history project of the Japanese fishing community, the old cannery camp on the Fraser River.

Daphne Marlatt has always been fascinated by language, the roots of words, the ways in which language shapes and frames reality. It’s not a recent, faddish interest. She grew up in what she’s described as “a colonial multi-cultural situation”; five languages were spoken in her house. The sensation of having her world turned upside down by the move to Canada gave her a sense of the relativity of both language and reality.

Perhaps the biggest upheaval since that early one has been her growing awareness and exploration of the way language informs gender perceptions—a recognition that has been preoccupying feminist writers in Quebec, confronted as they are with the overt masculine and feminine of French, but which has only recently been probed by English-Canadian writers and critics. Since Marlatt was already working and playing with language at the edge, it meant a simple but profound shift in focus.

As someone attuned to both the immigrant experience and the manifestation of its nuances in language, Daphne Marlatt was an obvious interview subject when I was embarking on the dubious project: to find out what was distinctively west coast about the literature that originates here. With the peculiar synchronicity that characterizes the media, both CBC radio and *Books in Canada* expressed an interest in an exploration of this subject. Because of the way in which Marlatt has perceived particular linkages between this place and the way language is used here, her observations deserve more than the capsule treatment they received elsewhere.

*EW* Where were you born?

*DM* Melbourne, Australia. I lived there till i was three, then my parents moved back to Penang, Malaysia, where we lived until i was nine. In 1951, we arrived in Vancouver.

*EW* In terms of the immigrant experience, you've written about growing up with two nostalgias—for England and for Penang. How did you relate to the west coast of North Vancouver?

*DM* In junior high school, i did a “job study” on E. Pauline Johnson whom i thought of then as the epitome of the west coast. Her retelling of the Salish legends of the Capilano band (*Legends of Vancouver*) gave me a sense of the place here, it meshed with my immediate sense of the woods and rocks yet gave me a sense of what it was like before i got here. Sheila Watson once said that you don't really see a landscape until it's been imaged for you in art—you see it through that human version, you hardly ever see it unfiltered. So my first image of the west coast was through Johnson's legends, a suede-bound book of them that my great-uncle gave me in the first month or two of our arrival.

*EW* Did Indian material remain as a source for you or were you wary of it?

DM I've gone through two phases. Only in the last decade have i felt very wary of using it, mainly because i was made conscious that it isn't mine to use. The songs belong to the original singers, and i suppose the stories belong to the tellers. That's why we have to make up our own. But during the sixties and early seventies, i spent a lot of time reading Franz Boas and others. I was fascinated by that vision of spirit and matter, together, inseparable. It's surfaced in much of what i've written. It made the underlying structure in *Our Lives*, was very much a part of *Vancouver Poems*, and, in Mayan form, appeared in *Zocalo*.

EW You once joked that you were going to be Rimbaud and Vancouver was going to be your Paris. . . .

DM *Vancouver Poems* got written out of homesickness. I started writing them in Indiana when i was reading Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and thought what a magical form, i wish i could write like that. And of course, the longer i stayed away from Vancouver, the more magical it became for me. I was conscious of the history of a place, that whatever had happened in a place left an energy stain, a Rorschach imprint. Language is my plumb line in that book: it sounds the feel of a street or beach. Of course it's also sounding itself too.

EW Do you feel a spiritual resonance with the west coast?

DM Yes, this is the place I belong in, that feels like home. When i started writing it came from a need to get at what this place was about, to materialize it in language. I felt that I had a mission—to articulate in as much complexity and detail as i could, the phenomenal breadth of this place and the historical depth of it. Part of that came in reaction to my mother's sense that there was no history here, coming as she did from England. And coming from the tropics, she'd say the birds don't sing here, they just make noise, and i felt offended since i was busy embracing this place. Perhaps my secret audience in writing was my mother—i wanted to convince her.

EW Is this place 'graspable'?

DM I feel a bit like Kawabata or Tanizaki must feel because there is an old Japan that they evoke that is gone or going. I feel there is an old Vancouver that was here when i arrived but is now gone, replaced by a metropolis. The Vancouver i knew had an intimate marriage between houses and nature. In the fifties, it was still a small town. Now there is so much concrete, so much commercial activity that the place itself seems to recede. It will never recede completely, like Toronto where you can't see the lake or know where you are, except by subway map. Toronto is an exclusively human environment while Vancouver is still in places a garden city, though you can see the gardens going rapidly in Kitsilano. Think of what English Bay was like when Ethel Wilson wrote about in it *The Innocent Traveller*—it's not the same place at all now.

EW Are city and landscape in opposition?

DM One dominates the other, unless you have a very small town. In the heart of downtown you don't have a sense of landscape, except for the mountains you occasionally glimpse between the skyscrapers. One of my concerns in writing this novel [*Ana Historic*] is to re-capture that sense of old Vancouver where you had buildings next to woods, skunk cabbage just off the sidewalk.

EW Fred Wah wrote that at UBC you had a feeling for the west coast.

DM I felt very much on the outside of the writers i met at UBC who were legitimately west coast in a way i wasn't. Almost all of the TISH poets were BC born. They were older and better read and more sophisticated, able to discuss poetics. I had no poetic then, just a feel for image. The first things i wrote were steeped in traditional English lit., what we inherited from the Romantics. At home, i was reading Keats and Tennyson and Shelley so it was very hard for the place itself to filter through. That's another reason i was interested in native myth—it was the first human take on something that up until then was not given in words, so i was intrigued with how it was being told.

*EW* Were you influenced by Olson and notions of literalism and locale?

*DM* Very much. Olson's permission or rather prescription to get into your own place and write about where you stood, what was immediately underfoot—that worked beautifully with my original enthusiasm for the place, so it gave me a method.

*EW* How did you get involved in collecting oral history in Steveston and Strathcona?

*DM* Strathcona was interesting to me because i had never realized that there was such a strong immigrant history associated with one particular neighbourhood. I grew up in North Van and for me the city was downtown. I knew there was Chinatown around Pender Street but i was never east of Main in more than an occasional way. When i began to live there, in what is now residential Chinatown, i found vestiges of previous waves of immigrants—Little Italy, Powell Street Japanese, the city's first Jewish community, the first synagogue. It was like doing some kind of dig. With Steveston, my interest was occasioned by taking a Sunday drive there in the spring of '71 or '72 and finding Star camp, the last extant cannery camp, little houses, shacks still standing—it was about to be torn down, the people had moved out. You could sense a whole life there in what they had left behind. Again i wanted to find out more about it, about what that life had been like.

*EW* What happens to a place when you transmute it from documentary to poetry?

*DM* First of all, the place goes on no matter how much you verbalize or image it, it still exists in a certain untapped way. You can only get at a small part of what's there, the part *you* see. Documentary is a very misleading notion because it's based on the false premise that the documenter isn't a filter but only a neutral observer. There's no such thing. Poetry is much more upfront in its subjectivity.

*EW* Do you think of yourself as an urban poet?

*DM* Yes, i'm urban, though landscape outside of the city has a great fascination for me. I suppose it's that sense of crossing boundaries. One of the things i've always felt about this landscape is its softness. It's something Nicole Brossard mentioned in *Journal Intime*. The softness of the air, of the vegetal growth, it feels very female to me, compared to the prairies or the east. It's an easy landscape to live in, there's a voluptuousness about it. The constant rain dissolves edges, boundaries become elusive, permeable. I felt that very strongly in Steveston, that the boat basins—that meeting place between land and water—had a female sensuality to them. It's only natural that boats be named after women when fishing is such a male activity.

*EW* What happens when you visit your pasts, Penang and England?

*DM* If my parents had wanted to perpetuate a sense of the tropics in their children, they couldn't have chosen a better place than Vancouver. This southern corner of the west coast is Canada's tropics, the growth is tropical in its lushness. So it was an accentuation of this to go back to Penang. Both England and Penang are islands crammed with people but Penang still has jungle areas on its hills. England, at least southern England where i was, is more of a domesticated landscape. Even the pubs are like extended livingrooms. People have learned how to live with each other jostling shoulder to shoulder, they've learned to be incredibly polite in order to create a little space for themselves.

*EW* Did it give you a new perspective of the west coast?

*DM* It made me value more the sense of space here, the solitude you find in the bush. In England, the closest i could get to being out in the bush was out on the moor and there weren't trees there, just stone walls and sheep. Here you can go half an hour and get a sense of being in the wilderness. In Penang the jungle was off-limits—poisonous snakes, scorpions, biting ants are more of a constant threat than the occasional bear. West coast people, even if they're very urban, have this sense that they don't have to go very far before the "trackless wilderness" begins and it's a relief, a place to go to get away from the city.

*EW* How does the possibility of vastness affect your writing?

*DM* In two ways. For one thing, it makes for a sense of openness in the writing, avoiding closure, and that's why there has been so much experimentation and innovation in west coast writing. Frank Davey feels that the serial poem is most at home on the west coast. There's a way in which we think that seems to have to do with the ongoing, with a continual linking of bits and pieces that do not close, that are fragmentary, that keep opening out into further pieces. Also because white history is relatively recent here, we have a sense that we're in the process of making history, making it up even, so we can be imaginative. West coast writers flirt with documentary but we're much more fascinated by myth, which is the imaginative equivalent of history. I think somehow too that there is a quality of immersion in west coast writing. We're more immersed in landscape, and many writers are more willing to let themselves get lost in syntax, in language, and find their own route out. In the east, there's a much clearer sense of direction, of mastering the form, that's why it took a while for my generation of writers to have our work accepted back east, because it seemed to them to be amorphous and excessive—"those romantics out on the coast."

*EW* Is there a sense that this is the fringe, the end of the road?

*DM* Yes, definitely, and that's what gives us the freedom to go our own routes, to find our own paths formally. We're faced by the utter wordlessness of wilderness. It doesn't speak. I don't think you'd have a Bill Bissett or a Fred Wah or a Maxine Gadd in Toronto—they seem particularly west coast. Even someone like George Bowering, who is constantly shedding old poetic skins, experimenting with form, that transformational quality seems very west coast to me. I'd claim bp Nichol too as west coast in a similar way—after all he was born here. The transformational, *and* the silence, also appear very strongly in Phyllis Webb's work. And there's the same engagement in various forms.

*EW* Do you feel that landscape is simply inhuman or benign?

- DM* It's benign here in terms of its temperature, but not in terms of its density. You quickly get lost in a rain forest. There are all sorts of spirits in the woods the native people were aware of, spirits who would lure you out of your skin.
- EW* Do you think that here on the west coast it's the opposite of Atwood's *Survival*, that instead of victims and survivors, we have celebrators of the splendour and generosity of the land?
- DM* Yes, i think we've learned from nature here. We've learned the transformational tricks of rain forest growth, we've learned to tell lush and extravagant stories, to write lines that run on as endlessly as rain.
- EW* Do you think west coast writing developed as an offshoot of the Romantic movement? pantheism, nostalgia, individualism?
- DM* The Romantics made us see nature, and there's a pretty strong inheritance of that sensibility on the coast. If you don't feel that life is a fight for survival, then you can afford to feel awe and exhilaration and freedom, sheer sensual pleasure even, when you're out in nature.
- EW* You've remarked that writing about the immigrant experience is a perfect seedbed for the writing sensibilitiy.
- DM* Because everything is outside you and you're fascinated by it and you want to be included. You write your own script and include yourself. I was romantic about this place because it seemed exotic and foreign and appealing. When i was a young writer the other young writers around me who had grown up here seemed to have more of a sense of humour about the place. I couldn't afford to have a sense of humour because i was trying to be part of it. Hence, the romance. Once you've begun to make a place for yourself inside it, you see the reality, which is that you will always be on the outside to some degree—in nature because you're human, and in human society because you're a woman. In mainstream Canadian lit. because you're west coast or experimental or feminist. It goes on and on.
- EW* Is being a writer in BC affected by being marginalized and overlooked by Toronto-centrism?
- DM* Yes, definitely. It makes it all the more essential to materialize this place in the work because to Eastern eyes it



seems like a weird fringe somewhere off on the horizon. That push to make it present, vivid, to give it its place on the literary stage, can be seen in a lot of the writing. And then part of the experimentation has been let's just junk those forms that were sanctified in all the Toronto anthologies, let's do something different.

*EW* BC seems to be a place of polarities and extremes: the highest rates of suicide, divorce, drug use, etc.—political polarities. Does this sense of extremes percolate through to the writing?

*DM* You can see a concern with violence and you get a definitely leftist political stance in the work of writers like George Stanley, Brian Fawcett, Lionel Kearns, Barry McKinnon, Norm Sibum. Also, in a different way, in Robin Blaser and some of George Bowering. You get it in Maxine Gadd, Carole Itter, and to some extent Gladys Hindmarch—though with these writers it's filtered through a feminist consciousness. I was concerned with those extremes when i was writing *Vancouver Poems* because it seemed to characterize a feeling of the city at a certain level. When i was commuting to UBC in the early '60s, those were the days of the suicides off bridges. If you worked your way west and you finally arrived in the city which was your last hope, so to speak, there was nothing but a great immensity in front of you, so what could you do? you could jump off a bridge *into* it. It has something to do with a greater awareness in west coast writing of the unspeakable. It has to do with being at the end—of the road, of your rope, of a sentence.

*EW* Do you think the west, the last frontier, implies a more pagan life force?

*DM* Perhaps it has to do with the multiple nature of islands. Here the land is constantly being broken up by water so we have a sense of spirits abiding in different places, not one overriding one. There was also a strong shamanic bent in the '60s and '70s when people were experimenting with hallucinogenics. The shaman is the one who learns how to escape his own body to find the escaped souls of others. That sense of journeying through realms of consciousness is pretty apparent in west coast writing. The trips tend to be through the self, again immersion, we're in the midst of it and you might as well travel through yourself as through the woods. Or if you travel through the woods, maybe you're travelling through yourself.

*EW* Do you see yourself as an ambassador, explaining the region to the rest of the world, or more like a shaman, interpreting the region to itself?

*DM* I'd rather be a shaman anyday, but i don't feel like either. I find interpretation or how one reads anything much more interesting than explanation. And my region, i mean the region i'm writing out of, is not so much place or landscape these days as life as a woman.