

“Meat and Bones Don’t Matter”: Mythology in “The Tent Peg”

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THIS PAPER ANALYZES the various uses of “mythology” in the three published novels by Canadian writer Aritha Van Herk (born 1954), *Judith* (1978), *The Tent Peg* (1981) and *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986), with special emphasis on the second novel.

1. “Mythology” as Storytelling

The term “mythology” needs some explanation. It is used here in the literal sense of “storytelling” rather than in the “mythopoeic” sense often given it in “archetypal” or “myth” criticism. Thus, the emphasis will be more on the “logos” than on the “mythic.” Myths are understood as traditional tales that are incorporated historically through an individual’s socialization into everyday cultural usage, and which writers and readers may draw from as more or less common cultural stock, defined, however, by regional culture specific traditions rather than being innate and universal.

This would also be an approach to “myth” which Aritha Van Herk would share, although in an unpublished interview with her in September 1987, she gave programmatic explanations of her uses of “myth” which would allow for both this and the more “archetypal” interpretation:

Well, one of the things that has always disturbed me is the way that the stories of women have been effaced. They haven’t been lost or utterly destroyed, but they seem to have been erased, so that they’re fuzzy. They are like pictographs that have been smeared over by smoke, you know? They’re not very clear any more. And I think that, what has intrigued me, has been trying to take those old stories and put them in a modern context, because we recognize for instance the importance of *The Odyssey* to our world . . . but

that's a male story, right?! Now, I mean it seems to me that the things that we do are inspired by the women stories as well, that we've effaced that. We don't recognize that as common myth. And so, what we need, is some contemporary retelling of those wonderful old stories! And that's what I did with Judith, that's what I did with J.L., that's what I did with Arachne, the woman who dies because she can weave better than Athena, — and I know I will keep on doing this because there are no new stories! We're only retelling old ones. And we're finding new forms and new versions. But they're all stories that already exist, and you only appropriate them, you only take them over and re-imagine them. I think all stories are kind of in our, — you know, resting in the backs of our heads and it's up to us to understand them and to retell them. I — in many ways — I think of a writer as only a translator. (Lutz/Van Herk 6ff.)

Van Herk's starting points, then, are common stories and myths which she scrutinizes for the female content and messages stowed away in them, and which she then rewrites in a perspective derived from her situation as a woman in a contemporary western society still largely determined by patriarchal structures. Just as feminist literary criticism has often started with a revisionist rewriting of literary history, disclosing the secrets of madwomen in the attic, of warrior women and witches, of sirens and silent sisters alike, so Van Herk as a writer conscious of her special female position writes revisionist modern feminist myths of women who, in her own words, "take certain kinds of desires in their fists and say 'I'm gonna try and do what I want to do, even if I fail!'" (Lutz/Van Herk 4ff.). The revision of the established literary canon along paradigms developed from the experiences and the study of marginalized groups — women, minorities or the poor — opens up perspectives and insights into cultural mores and social structures inherent even in mythology, which are easily overlooked when approached from within the mainstream tradition.

2.1. *Circe*

In Aritha Van Herk's first novel, *Judith*, the protagonist breaks off her debasing relationship with a married man, and like her biblical namesake enters "enemy territory" by moving on to a small farm in Norberg, Alberta, where she establishes herself as a pig farmer. Gradually, through her everyday routine with ten preg-

nant sows Judith drops some of her nervous tension and accepts herself and her surroundings in a more relaxed and satisfying manner, an acceptance encompassing her relationship with Mina Stamby, the neighbouring farmer's wife, and Jim, Mina's son and Judith's lover. The parallels with the Circe myth in the *Odyssey* are obvious: there is an insularly isolated mysterious woman, Judith/Circe, there are the pigs, and there is the man from the outside, Jim/Odysseus. However, Judith herself is also the wandering one, seeking a haven, while at the same time, for the people from outside, she is a witch figure, an independent, insolent and even violent woman who fights men in a bar brawl. However, it is not Judith, who like Circe transforms men into wild animals and pigs, but rather the pregnant and mothering sows — *feminae!* — who are possessed with the mysterious power and wisdom to transform Judith and Jim into a new more humane perception of themselves and others.

Further, whereas in Homer's story Odysseus, endowed with the magical powers of Hermes, forces Circe at sword-point to rehumanize his companions, in Van Herk's revision of that motif Judith, in a crucial scene that is both naturalist and super-naturalist, takes the castrating knife from Jim to carry out the operation which will make her male piglets more manageable and docile. Thus, Van Herk adds another "mythological" dimension to her story, playing upon male fears of castration and impotence on a symbolic level, and establishes Judith as a strong person in charge of herself and her surroundings. When in the end she decides to stay on the farm and not to return to her former lover, she exclaims "Pigs . . . Pigs . . . Pigs, . . . you win" (181). In a second, more mundane and also more American reading of the text, the lightskinned pigs in their orderly pens have, of course, associations with white society, the term "pigs" having been applied to whites by militant Afro-Americans. A third mythological dimension of her novel would be the Robinson Crusoe motif, seeing Judith as a female Robinson who survives "in the wilderness" against all odds, building her own economic independence and thus turning the story of the successful *homo faber* herding goats on an island in the Caribbean Sea into that of a *femina faber* raising pigs on an Alberta prairie farm. Thus, the "revisionist version" of the Circe myth is rooted in a

decidedly modern Canadian setting that is described both convincingly and realistically, so that readers have been inclined to mistake this first novel as an autobiographical piece. As her Master's Thesis in Creative Writing with supervisor Rudy Wiebe (Nischik 126), with its original title "When Pigs Fly," it drew on some of Aritha Van Herk's experiences as a farmer's daughter in Alberta, but she is adamant in her rejection of confusing autobiographical writing with fiction.

2.2 *Arachne*

In her latest novel, *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey*, Aritha Van Herk's protagonist is the travelling saleslady Arachne, whose indomitable spirit of insubordination and her insistence on sexual freedom clash with the double standard of the society in which she lives. However, like her classic namesake, Arachne is an expert in her trade. She wins first prize as the most successful seller of "Ladies' Comfort," a brand of ladies' underwear. Her unabashed physicality makes her a challenge to all males, who wish to touch and possess her. However, Arachne stays free, but she pays the very high price of annihilation, losing herself in the Mackenzie Mountains between the Yukon and the Northwest Territories, falling off the edge into "four-dimensional nothingness" (317), but leaving traces of her existence spread all over the North: "... panties . . . gray with dust but their scarlet invitation has not faded. *Ladies Comfort*. . . There is no end to the panties; there will be no end to this road" (319).

Again, the parallels with Greek mythology are obvious. Mythological Arachne was a Lydian weaver's daughter and became such an accomplished weaver herself that she challenged Athena to compete with her. Athena herself, while being a female goddess, is also a product of male power, having sprung from her father's forehead. Significantly, in the contest, Arachne weaves into her tapestry images of Zeus' lechery, portraying scenes of his fornication with humans, thus inflaming Athena who destroys the tapestry and turns Arachne into a spider — *the Spider*. And again, in Van Herk's novel the ancient myth is revised in a feminist modern setting. Van Herk's Arachne never gives in, and again and again she

manages to escape male oppression and brutality, often resorting to force and even murder.

She is also a decidedly "American" figure, but in a Canadian and feminist manner. Unlike Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) who is forever striving after success, trying to be somebody he really is not, Arachne as a saleslady has all the success she wants. For her the "Dream" is not a chimera but something very concrete for which she works hard and meticulously, and her setting is not New York or New England but the Western Canadian prairies and Rockies. Her car, also a symbol of U.S. culture, is her means of independence and freedom of mobility, but again, it is not an American one but rather an old-timer of foreign descent, a vintage Mercedes.

Finally, there is again a mythical reference to marginalized minorities in North America, not Afro-American here, but native American. On the concrete level, there is the fascination with Crowfoot, the Blackfoot Chief who in 1877 signed Treaty No. 7, and at whose grave at Blackfoot Crossing on the Siksika Reserve Arachne meets Joseph, the senex who becomes her father figure, lover and pet in one. On the mythical level, the Arachne-Spider connects her to mythical Spider Woman of native American mythology (Allen 13 ff.).

Thus, again, Van Herk combines ancient Greek mythology with American "myths," both white U.S. and indigenous. This combination of the ancient European and native American with the more recent and contemporary Canadian, all based on a feminist perspective, is highly characteristic of Van Herk's fiction in general, and in *The Tent Peg* the question of a Canadian national "myth" is even more complex and more prominent.

3. *Jaël: Striking Male Temples*

One of the ironies of *The Tent Peg* centres on the heroine's name, "Jaël," which she abbreviates into "J.L.," thus obscuring her gender and winning employment as a seasonal bush cook in an all-male crew of geologists who are prospecting for uranium in the Yukon. For several months J.L. is all alone with the nine men in the tent camp, and the ensuing conflicts form the material of the

novel. While the men remain immature, mostly flat characters (except perhaps two), J.L., who is “not so much a real character as an emblematic figure” (Lutz/Van Herk 6), masters all situations and gains an unbelievably “super-womanly” status, in which she is supported by letters, songs and memories of her lover and friend Deborah, as well as by a female grizzly bear who visits the camp.

3.1. *Biblical References: The Tent Peg and Male Hubris*

The central symbol is named in the title “The Tent Peg,” the stake that is driven into the earth to fasten a tent, to make a home, and, in the biblical reference, the instrument with which biblical Jaël kills the sleeping Sisera. In chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Judges Deborah is a prophetess and judge, sitting under a palm tree in the mountains. She commands the Israelite Barak to go out and destroy Sisera, the general of the heathen Jabins. Barak asks Deborah to go along with him and help in the fighting, and she does so on the condition that the honour of killing Sisera will go to a woman. Barak then unites several tribes and leads them into battle, while Heber, the Kenite, pitches his tents further downhill. Barak’s troops rout Sisera’s large army and Sisera flees on foot, reaching the tent of Jaël, Heber’s wife. She welcomes him, gives him to drink and covers him with a blanket. After he has fallen asleep, she “took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples . . .” (Judges 4), thus freeing Israel from its oppressor. Afterwards, Deborah and Barak sing a victory song in praise of Jaël’s deed.

In *The Tent Peg* J.L.’s lover and friend, the singer Deborah, sends J.L. her victory song, which is an almost literal version of the biblical one, but, significantly, using “tent peg” instead of “nail” and “mallet” for “hammer.” It is given in the novel after the sequences voiced by Jerome, J.L., and Mackenzie, in which J.L. has managed to overpower Jerome, who had tried to rape her in her tent. Instead of castrating him with his own “Magnum” gun, she humiliatingly exposes his ridiculous male chauvinism through simple threats. The song in Van Herk’s rendering reads:

Most blessed of women be Ja-el,
 the wife of Heber and Kenite,
 of tent-dwelling women most blessed.

He asked water and she gave him milk,
 she brought him curds in a lordly dish.

She put her hand to the tent peg
 and her right hand to the workmen's mallet;
 she struck Sisera a blow,
 she crushed his head,
 she shattered and pierced his temple.

He sank, he fell,
 he lay still at her feet;
 at her feet he sank, he fell;
 where he sank, there he lay dead. (223)

This crucial but not central scene in which J.L. wields deadly power over her defeated oppressor is prepared carefully within Van Herk's text. When the cook and the other prospectors decide to play a trick on Jerome, whose authoritarianism and meanness have embittered them all, J.L. says in her inner monologue:

"I would like to take him down a *peg*, he gets cruder and more miserable every day." (139; emphasis added)

On the other hand, Jerome himself, infuriated by his lack of success and his declining authority, plots revenge, and before going to her tent to threaten her with his gun and to rape her — the ultimate dehumanizing male act of subjugation — says to himself:

I, for one, think it's time she got put in her place, taken down a *peg* or two. The little bitch needs to be taught a lesson and I guess I'm the only one with balls enough to do it." (218; emphasis added)

Ironically, it is exactly that part of his body which Jerome feels gives him the "balls" to put J.L. in her place, which proves his most vulnerable.

In the context of the strained relationship between Jerome and J.L., the "peg" is an instrument to either establish or deconstruct male hegemony. On a second level the tent peg is seen as a symbol of female solidarity and female wisdom, to be conveyed to un-enlightened males. Musing about the conceitedness of men who call their foreheads "temple," J.L. writes to Deborah:

How many of them have we seen posed, head ostentatiously propped on a fist. And temple it is, they worship themselves as intently as we poor females have never dared. . . . it's time we laid our hands on the workman's mallet and put the tent pegs to the sleeping temples, if ever we are going to get any rest. (172ff.)

So, if women now take it into their heads to enlighten men, the tent peg becomes an idea, a sudden realization of a truth that has long been hidden. The presumptuous hubris of traditional patriarchy, that men have an inborn right to feel superior to women, to possess and define them, is challenged. Again, there is an ironic flash in the novel, because Jerome, in contrast to unenlightened assumptions about male intellectual superiority, does not even use his "temple" to attempt domination — as J.L. had previously used hers — but rather his genitals. He uses them in a brutal macho form in combination with a gun, forcing J.L. to leave the protective cover of her sleeping bag. She describes her experience:

When I'm almost out and half lying on top of the sleeping bag, he fumbles at his pants. In a wild moment of lucidity I almost laugh at his ineptness. He's kneeling over me and he raises himself to get at his zipper just enough for me to bring my knees up and kick full force against his groin. . . . I knee him again and again, all the while fighting for that Magnum, trying to pry it loose from his rawboned hands. And then he falls and I've got it, I'm standing over him with a loaded gun. (219)

J.L. tries to fire, but the gun is on safety, giving her a second to think: "I unclick the safety, point at his crotch" (219). Quite clearly, men like Jerome are beyond salvation, and if the tent peg of self-realization cannot be driven into their temples, they must be stopped by force or by social isolation and ridicule. J.L.'s victory is both physical and intellectual.

Mackenzie, on the other hand, can be healed. Of all the men in the camp, he is the most positive, both capable and considerate. However, he has been wondering for ten years (!) why his wife left him, since, under terms of a marriage arrangement, he demanded nothing more of her than to be left to go prospecting each summer. When he tells J.L. that he would have never prevented his wife from doing what she wanted, J.L. explains to him:

That's it right there. The very idea that you could allow her or prevent her. That's why she left. (202)

When Mackenzie comes to realize the enormity of his own presumptuousness, he describes it in the terms of hammering home a truth.

It is the sound of my own assumption that hammers in my temple. I grip the handle of my hammer, try to drive away the hubris that I have committed, believing that another life could be at my disposal, that I had any right to try and make it so. The dizzy blackness is shame, nothing more or less than shame. (202 f.)

The tent peg of truth has reached Mackenzie and has changed his view of himself and the world around him.

On a third level, concrete and physical, pegs are driven into the "temple of the earth" (210) to stake the claims of the mining company for the gold that Mackenzie has found in the mountains. The discovery of gold instead of uranium is the climax of the group's work in the Yukon. It coincides with Mackenzie's self-realization through J.L. and with J.L.'s assertion of her independence and integrity vis-à-vis Jerome. Again and again, the excitement of staking claims, of hammering wooden stakes into the mountain's side, is described as the ultimate fulfilment of the geologist's dreams of success. So the tent peg image gives structural coherence to the novel on the plot level as well as symbolizing various stages of female-male interaction and perception.

3.2. *The American Myth: Hannah with the Tomahawk*

The symbolic action of J.L.'s hammering home a truth ties the novel to the old world biblical myth as well as connecting it with one of the most important New World "myths," the captivity of Hannah Dustan, "The Myth of the White Woman with the Tomahawk," as archetypal critic Leslie A. Fiedler calls it (50). Hannah Dustan's captivity is one of many occurring during the French and Indian wars in the North American colonies, involving French Canadians and English colonists and their respective Indian allies. There is no original version of Hannah's captivity tale in her own hand, but there is the version given by Puritan author Cotton Mather, who interprets her adventures and sufferings in terms of the Old Testament, and whose works made her into one of the most prominent female figures of colonial lore (Lutz, *Indianer* 139ff.). Hannah, her nurse and her baby were taken cap-

tive by French Catholic Indians in Haverhill, Mass., on March 15, 1697. Following a practice that became a literary convention of gothic horror the “Formidable *Salvages* . . . dash’d out the Brains of the *Infant* against a Tree” and took their captives into Canadian territory. While the Indians said their Catholic prayers three times a day, these “Idolators” prevented their English captives from saying their Puritan ones. Moreover, 150 miles before they reached the Indian town they were heading for, their captors told the women that on their arrival there they would be stripped, scourged and made to run the gauntlet. Regardless of whether this was meant as a crude joke on their captors’ side, or as an announcement of a common ritual preceding a captive’s adoption into an Indian tribe, the prospect frightened Hannah and “she took up a Resolution to imitate the Action of *Jael* upon *Sisera*” (described by Mather in [italicized] terms of the Bible). In the middle of the night Hannah, the nurse and an English boy

all furnishing themselves with *Hatchets* for the purpose, they stroke such home Blows upon the Heads of their *Sleeping Oppressors*, that e’er they could any of them struggle into any effectual resistance, *at the Feet* of those poor Prisoners, *they bow’d, they fell, they lay down; at their Feet they bowed, they fell; where they bowed, there they fell down Dead.* (91)

After their bloody deed, the three captives took the scalps of their Indian captors and fled back to the English colonies, where they received the scalp premium of fifty pounds, plus many private presents and a “very generous Token of his Favour” from the Governor of Maryland. In Mather’s version, then, Hannah, the captive Puritan mother, identifies with biblical Jaël and kills the “Oppressor” threatening her people, the Indian allies of the Catholic French. Her action is not only an early American success story, combining individual prowess, religious self-righteousness and material awards, but is also — in a modern reading — the story of a woman’s courage and determination not to be victimized.

Both Mather and Van Herk quote the same passages from the Book of Judges, and both biblical Jaël and Canadian J.L. are women reacting violently to male oppression. The captivity tale is in many ways typical of 17th- to 18th-century America, with such structural features as (1) the sudden attack by “Salvages,”

(2) the remove of the captive from "civilization," (3) the rescue and (4) the return to "civilization." Quite unlike other female captives of her time, however, Hannah is not a helpless victim who needs to be ransomed or rescued by male authority — be it divine or earthly. She takes the decisive step herself, or, as Van Herk put it in the interview, "takes her desire into her fists," and liberates herself. In Mather's male Puritan interpretation of Hannah's action, however, the historical person receives no moral credit for her deed. Rather, Mather stresses the exemplary character of the story calling the short episode in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* "A Notable Exploit; wherein *Dux Faemina Facti*." Thus, Hannah is seen as the mere instrument of Divine Providence because, as Louise K. Barnett puts it,

"the evil of the captive's situation proceeds from the Indian, the good from the Lord." (8)

In American cultural mythology the Dustan captivity is seen as an example of the stamina required of pioneer women in order to survive. Throughout, the fascination with Hannah's story is based on its unusual female violence. Hannah Dustan has been popularized within American culture by book illustrations, a statue in Haverhill, as well as various literary texts, juvenile and other. But, within an almost overwhelming roar of public applause for her action, there is also an undercurrent muttering of doubt and dissent (Fiedler 97 et passim).

In 1836 Nathaniel Hawthorne published his account of "The Dustan Family" in his short-lived literary venture *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, focusing the story on Mr. Dustan, who saved his seven children but deserted his wife and newborn infant. In Hawthorne's more secularized, anti-Puritan perspective, Hawthorne describes Hannah's deed as the merciless butchering of fellow Christians, and he calls her an "awful woman" and even a "bloody old hag" (397). Still, even in his reading the fascination lies in the bloody, gory aspects of the story. By contrast, Hawthorne's contemporary, Henry David Thoreau, 13 years later in his classic travelogue, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), takes a morally more lenient stance, romantically focusing on the psychological and the gothic

aspects of Hannah's and her companions' fears. He insists, however, that there is guilt on both sides, and, significantly, in his rendering, Hannah's baby's

brains were dashed out against the apple tree, and there have been many who in later time have lived to say that they have eaten of the fruit of that apple tree. (345)

Thoreau's reference to the forbidden tree of knowledge and original sin rests on introspection and directs the readers involvement towards self-analysis and self-awareness: in other words it strikes the reader's temples to make her or him think twice before drawing final conclusions.

Here is a parallel with Van Herk's book, where the tent peg of self-awareness shatters Mackenzie's presumptuousness. The captive situation is another parallel: biblical Jaël helps to lead her people out of captivity, Hannah frees herself, and even J.L. is in a captive's situation: she is far removed from her home civilization, she is surrounded by a group of individuals radically different from her not on account of race or religion but of gender, and within the camp she is an alien in a minority. Like her predecessors, she is quite capable of overcoming victimization, and this is where the parallels end.

Generally, in American renderings of the myth, the emphasis is on the violence, and happy solution based on bloodshed. A product of the historical frontier situation, the Hannah Dustan story provides an example of the real or imagined struggle between what critics like Roy Harvey Pearce have called "Savagery and Civilization" (1953). It must be seen in the light of Turner's frontier hypothesis (1893) as well as Slotkin's analysis of "Regeneration Through Violence" (1973). As such, it has become part of an American dream, of purgation, rejuvenation and fulfilment through violence, that has directed and haunted the American experience from Puritan ordeal and early frontier conflicts through mid-nineteenth century manifest destiny to the grim realities of Vietnam and the frightening dystopia of the Star Wars program.

Van Herk's rendering is radically different. The tiny insular camp up in the vastness of the Yukon is only temporary, existing

for a few months only in preparation for a mining camp next summer. Its mode of existence is very different from the linear frontier process that characterized the American experience. Rather, it fits within the pattern of what Northrop Frye (1971) described as the Canadian "garrison mentality." Moreover, the way in which the social conflict is resolved is un-American. Admittedly, J.L. does try to fire the gun at first impulse, but the Magnum is locked, and the plot allows for a moment's hesitation. After having clicked off the safety, J.L. points the gun at Jerome's crotch, but then fires into the air, awakening the camp and leaving Jerome to public exposure. This is a non-violent solution, based on a more socialized, civilized mode of problem solving, which, according to Dick Harrison, is characteristic of what he calls the Canadian "Metropolitan" mode (55 ff.). The refutation of the patriarchal myth of the violent woman outdoing male violence, rests on this solution. Van Herk's protagonist acts in a way that is decidedly rational, decidedly feminine and traditionally Canadian, and, as in other cases of Canadian women writers vis-à-vis U.S. culture, feminism and Canadian nationalism coincide (Howells, *Private* 186).

3.3. *The Canadian Scene: Mother Earth and Male Explorers*

While biblical Jaël meets Sisera in her own tent, on her own turf, where she overpowers him quite easily, Hannah Dustan is an alien in the "wilderness." Mather speaks of the "Hardships of their *Travel*, their *Lodging*, their *Diet*, and their many other *Difficulties*" (90), and we must remember that the Dustan captivity took place in March and April in Massachusetts and adjoining Canada. Again, it is the perceptive Thoreau who elaborates on this. He shows how alien the fleeing women are in their canoe down the Merrimack River, how remnants of Indian graves, wigwams as well as fields show them that this is not their territory: "to the white man [*sic*] a drear and howling wilderness, but to the Indian a home, adapted to his nature, and cheerful as the smile of the Great Spirit" (344). It has often struck critics how Canadian authors in particular show heroines experiencing a closeness to the landscape which seems unparalleled elsewhere, and this is

true in Van Herk's novel. During a crucial event foreshadowed several times (65, 84) J.L. is the only one who wakes up when the mountain slides down on the camp, almost destroying it while all the men sleep. J.L. feels the earth move before the actual slide. Hearne, the photographer, notices the "unearthly knowledge in her eyes" (102) and in the crucial landslide scene, she acquires the powers of a witch in close affinity with the mountain and mother earth.

And I put back my head and look up to that jagged stone crown waiting all these thousands of years. I move to balance myself so that my feet are planted firmly, take a deep breath. Silently I call, the invocation blossoming from my skin, my sorrow, the very spaces in my bones. (120)

During the slide she stands there, "rooted to the sound of the cataract," and after the slide her

feet are still planted steady in the moss, and the moon is still brilliant and unclouded. But the mountain. The east side has let go and slid down into our valley. . . . I kneel then, press myself down and whisper, rock myself and whisper softly until the earth and I grow still, calm ourselves. (121)

This scene with its "mother earth," moon and soil mystique may seem weird, unbelievable or even objectionable (Lutz, "Anglo-canadian," 524ff., 528ff.) but it is no isolated phenomenon in Canadian literature by women: there are similar passages in works like Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese* (1925) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and others.

The mountain slide has a prominent historical parallel in recent Canadian history, the "Frank Slide" of April 29, 1903, when Turtle Mountain in southwestern Alberta, near Crownsnest Pass, covered the mining town of Frank with 74 million tons of rock, killing 70, while 17 men in a mine shaft dug themselves out and another 23 men, women and children "miraculously escaped death" in the rubble (*Canadian Encyclopedia* II, 690). Significantly it was "Turtle Mountain" that reacted to mine shafts by burying a whole village under its rubble. In one reading "Turtle Mountain" could refer to the whole of the North American continent, for in pan-Indian usage, based on Iroquois and Abenaki traditions, "turtle island" stands for North America (Bruchac xv)

as a whole. Mythologically the Frank Slide can be seen as the revenge of mother earth on those who penetrate her, and therein lies a parallel with *The Tent Peg*. The geologists in the Yukon are invaders; their helicopter rides, their claim stakes and the noise that they bring to the mountains and valleys disturb the landscape surrounding them, and only J.L. fits in quietly without upsetting nature. (There is a further parallel here with the "Americans" and heroine of Atwood's *Surfacing*.)

The parallel with the Frank Slide establishes firmly that the male party of geologists are aliens in the territory they are surveying (in direct contrast to the Indian captors of Hannah Dustan). The names of the men in the novel strengthen our sense of this alienation: seven bear the names of famous explorers and travellers who were involved in mapping Canada and the North. Mackenzie, the camp chief and leader of the geological team, is named after Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1764-1820), a fur trader and explorer who was co-founder of Ft. Chipewyan on Lake Athabasca, and who in 1789 established that the Mackenzie River, named after him, empties into the Beaufort Sea. Thompson, Mackenzie's assistant and friend in the novel, is named after Canadian fur trader, explorer and map maker David Thompson (1770-1857), who travelled widely throughout the North and provided the first comprehensive view of the Northwestern territories. Most of the men in the novel are referred to by their last names, but the communications officer, Cap, once introduces himself to J.L. as "Capital Kane," and thus establishes his kinship with artist/explorer Paul Kane (1810-1871), who, inspired by George Catlin's paintings of Indians, set out in the 1840s to do the same, travelling throughout the Canadian West sketching scenes of Indian and Métis life which he transferred to canvas after his return to Toronto. Other characters have similar historical Canadian ancestors: photographer Hearne is named after Samuel Hearne (1745-1792) who searched for a western passage by land; the poet and yoga-dreamer Franklin is fittingly named after a particularly mysterious figure in Northern exploration, Sir John Franklin (1786-1847), who was lost in the ice searching for the Northwest passage by sea. Similarly, Hudson, the English assistant of Jerome, who surprises the whole team when one day he punches his tyrannical boss and wins the others' esteem,

bears the name of famous Henry Hudson, who explored the Hudson River in 1609 and in 1611 lost his life in the vicinity of James Bay after having been set adrift in a shallop by his mutinous crew. Fittingly, again, the young and pious Mennonite Milton bears the name not only of the famous Puritan poet but also that of Viscount Milton, who, together with W. B. Cheadle, searched for a Northwest Passage by land (1865). Jerome, the arch-villain in the novel, has not been honoured by receiving the name of a famous explorer, nor Ivan, the helicopter pilot who is not a geologist like the others but a trained pilot and mechanic (however, there may be a de-toured connection, as in the case of Cap, which I haven't been able to discover yet).

Besides using Old and New World mythology, then, Van Herk firmly roots her novel in the history of Canada. This is also true on a literary level. One evening, the men talk about missing women, and the time "when," as Franklin puts it, "the bears start to look good" (153), and Cap then tells a story about a farmer's sodomy with an ugly sheep. After this J.L. explains quite calmly that it has all been done before, and she tells them about Zeus' turning Io into a heifer to appease Hera, and to be able to continue making love to her, and a story about a man who loved a cow. Finally she tells them about

"a writer who wrote a very strange and beautiful story about a woman who loved a bear" (155)

and goes on to give them a summary interpretation of Marian Engel's novel *Bear* (1976), a book for which the author has great admiration and sympathy (Lutz/Van Herk 6). This overt reference to Engel's book roots Van Herk's novel firmly in Canadian grounds, not only geographically and historically, but deliberately in the context of Canadian feminist literature.

3.4. *The Native Source: Woman and Bear*

The bear-motif goes deeper than Marian Engel's book, for it links *The Tent Peg* to native mythology. The only native in the novel proper is Zeke, a Dene from Yellowknife. He appears only once, and only for a short period, but significantly he is more perceptive

than the other men in the novel, realizing at once that J.L. is not a boy but a female.

For the other men it's just the physical shape, but for him it's a female entity, and he knows that. . . . He has not limited himself to seeing only the surface, the plasticity of things. He sees beyond the surface. (Lutz/Van Herk 9)

Zeke not only stands for the Dene spiritual presence, which is part of the Northwest Territories "even if you go out there and you ignore it," but also of course for Dene social and physical presence. In a "kind of poetic justice" he works as a bouncer at a bar, not one of the many Indians who are "always getting bounced out," but doing the bouncing out himself (9). It is Zeke who first establishes a foreshadowing connection between J.L. and a bear, another spiritual and physical presence in the North. Watching J.L. stomp out of the men's lavatory, he muses: "MacKenzie got himself a bear trap" (22). Again, this statement is ironic, working on several levels. On the one hand, it reflects folklore about the scent of menstruating women attracting male bears. But Zeke's remark also points to the mounting sexual desire of the men in the camp for J.L.

Besides being carefully prepared, J.L.'s scenes with the bear follow parallel patterns. The first and the last sightings of the grizzly are from the helicopter. After having dropped off Thompson and Mackenzie on a "bare" spot (94), the pilot Ivan and J.L. continue their flight and sight the grizzly mother on a ridge where she

raises herself on her hind legs and stands there, immense, reaching for the helicopter as if she will pull us out of the sky with her raking claws. The two cubs . . . small cinnamon bundles. . . . (95)

In recognition, J.L. murmurs to herself "That's her. She's incredible" (95), realizing that the bear is the spiritual messenger from her lover friend, Deborah, the singer and song writer, whom Van Herk has given the name of the biblical prophetess who sings Jaël's victory song.

Immediately after this first encounter, Jerome in his mad and angry rambling thoughts foreshadows two other decisive events in the novel, which he himself however does not understand: first his

own attempt at raping J.L. (“Well, one of these days one of those guys is going to get mad and give it to her” [97]) and secondly Mackenzie’s success in finding gold (“He’s killing himself, combing these claims like he expects to find gold or something” [97]). There are also references to sex with bears, as when J.L. tells Cap, “. . . if you’re so horny, go find yourself a grizzly bear” (108), not knowing that a few minutes later Cap and Ivan will be witnessing her first close encounter with the grizzly.

J.L.’s face is tilted up and the she-bear’s face is tilted down and they’re looking at each other like they’ve met before. And then J.L. sweeps off her hat and bows at the same instant that the bear seems to shrug, and drops to her feet. For a moment more they stand there as if in conversation, then they both turn. (108)

Ivan, the more perceptive of the two, exclaims afterwards: “She’s a witch” (109), and he asks “What did the she-bear tell you, J.L.?” (110), whereas Cap, the horny communications man, is told by J.L. “And by the way, Cap, she [the grizzly] said to tell you she was available if you thought you were up to it” (109). And, again, when J.L. confronts the bear outside the cooktent she immediately recognizes her as Deborah.

I knew her. She came to me in the she-bear. She came to me and she reared herself up big and beautiful and wild and strong and she said, “Wait. Don’t let them drive you away.” (111)

After giving her dialogue with the grizzly, in what R. Nischik has called Aritha Van Herk’s “resonance technique” (30), J.L. remembers Deborah.

The first time I saw her she was singing. She had on an orange shirt, I remember that flagrant color. She held a tribal drum between her knees and was singing with only her fingers on the drum to accompany her. . . . At that moment I wanted to abandon men forever. Of course I didn’t. One doesn’t easily give up a centuries-old habit. (111)

J.L.’s bear encounters — twice from the helicopter, once outside her cooktent — and her first encounter with Deborah the singer, are revelations, total experiences in which she is absolutely absorbed.

In Jerome’s perception, however, the encounter with the bear is determined by his dehumanized, sexist and violent thoughts.

This camp gets worse all the time. Now everybody's telling bear stories. According to Ivan and Cap, the cook practically kissed a grizzly sow. I don't believe it, they say that bear was only twenty feet away from her, but they've got to be crazy. There's no fucking way you could meet a grizzly with two cubs and not be mauled to death. It was probably miles away and turned around when it smelled the camp. Bears aren't interested in messing with humans. And if the old sow is, we'll see how she feels about my Magnum. I hope I run into her out on the slopes, I'll finish her off quick.
(115)

This condensed example of "male rationality," of reasoning that rationalizes away all experiences of the unknown, the emotional or the spiritual, is typical of Jerome.

The central encounter with the bear, then, provides paradigms for an understanding of the perceptual frames of mind of the characters: Cap, the immature and permanently randy lecher, is overawed and loses all adolescent ambitions; Ivan understands the meeting between the bear and J.L. as a magical one; J.L. recognizes in the grizzly a messenger from Deborah, urging her to "survive" (136) against all adversities; Jerome, who only knows about the incident from hearsay, makes his own dull but strongly convinced value judgements expressed in crude phantasies of sex, power and violence. The final encounter with the bear is once again from far off, culminating in another helicopter view. After Mackenzie's discovery of gold, all camp members are frantically staking claims, and even J.L. takes part in order to increase the number of claims. She is "hammering the last post" (the final peg!) when Thompson observes "a distant movement along the flank of the mountain" (208), the bear, adding her presence to the scene of success. This is also the moment when Hearne, the photographer, achieves his goal of capturing an image of J.L. that is overdetermined with multiple symbolism.

I have it. I've taken the perfect photograph. . . . focus on her standing over that stake, leaning herself and the hammer into the ground until she becomes a movement of striking, driving that post deep into the temple of the earth. (210)

After the staking the grizzly sends J.L. a final salute up to the helicopter, rising on her hind legs and raking for the aircraft with her front paws (209) as in the first scene. Obviously, the bear is

more than just a symbol of female solidarity, of Deborah's spiritual presence in the Yukon. It is also part of the land itself, the archaic immovable power of nature, both loving and destructive. In one reading of the novel, this final staking scene is the climax of the whole book where several strands of the plot are tied up: Mackenzie has come to understand why his wife has left him; the last stake of the Midas claim has been driven in by the witch woman who has enchanted the whole camp; the photographer takes his only picture of her; in the distance, the she-bear/Deborah shaman is present. After this, there are three more scenes that resolve the remaining loose ends of the plot structure: the love scene with Mackenzie who loves J.L. without direct genital contact, J.L.'s triumph over Jerome in the rape showdown, and her dance on the table over the fire, a symbolic, nonviolent witch-burning or purgatory combined ("I will not play Joan of Arc and be encidered for what I have been forced to hear . . ." [225]).

Bear stories abound in native American mythology, particularly in Canada, and bear shamanism is also recorded from Siberia and other parts of the world, not least from Europe, where bears as humans, as playmates or as bewitched lovers and enchanted princes appear in fairy tales. In a well-documented paper for the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, "The Girl and the Bear Facts: A Cross-Cultural Comparison," Georgina Loucks has made a careful study of girl-bear mythology among native cultures in Canada and the U.S., focusing on West Coast (Kwakiutl) stories of the girl who married a bear, followed him into the mountain (or his cave) and had cubs/children with him. Louck shows that the myth, originally related to the circumpolar bear cult, has spread South, and she concludes

[t]hus one learns that many cultures may share one particular narrative, using it as a teaching tool, a vehicle for passing down ritual and ceremonial practices, or as a story to be told on a winter's evening that could guide succeeding generations in the way of their particular people. (226)

Van Herk's use of bear mythology in this novel serves the didactic function of all storytelling in native cultures: teaching people who they are, how to behave, and how to continue. Obviously these stories have informed her work, as has Engel's book:

In many ways Marian Engel's *Bear* was a guiding force for me, you know? Because there the bear truly transforms the woman, he literally licks her into shape. . . . And this bear does it too, without literally talking to J.L. (Lutz/Van Herk 6)

In Engel's novel, the male black bear is finally taken away from the island he and the woman have shared. Sitting in the canoe that is run by Joe, the Indian, he *looks* like "a fat dignified old woman" (Engel 138), and in Van Herk's novel the bear actually *is* a female grizzly.

In a perceptive analysis of Engel's novel (Engel's *Bear*), Coral Ann Howells contrasts the "unhappy" separation of woman and bear in the novel with the happy ending of a woman and she-bear in a tale from the Nootka, as rendered by Anne Cameron in her selection of Nootka tales, *Daughters of Copper Woman* (1981). While Cameron's book may raise severe doubts about the ethnographic authenticity of the stories, it is an excellent example of contemporary feminist mythmaking in North America.¹ In "Song of Bear" Cameron (re)tells the moving story of a love between a woman and a she-bear, who admires and follows the woman around, never daring to even approach her because of being a bear, until encouraged one day by the young woman, who has sensed her presence all the time. When the bear confesses that she is but a she-bear, the young woman ponders for a while, but finally concludes:

"I love you, bear. I wouldn't not love you if you were skinny, or if you were fat, or if you were shorter, or if you were taller, because it's the love in you that I love, and the beauty in you that I love. Anyway," the young woman laughed, "meat and bones don't matter, it's what's inside them, the love spirit." (Cameron 97)

As in other Indian tales of the West Coast, the girl follows her lover bear into the mountains, but in this female mode of the story, there is no unhappy ending as in the others, where the bear, the cubs and/or the woman get killed by humans. In many ways, the whole book, *The Tent Peg*, is a book about this "love spirit" in the non-physical, non-gender specific sense envisioned by the young woman in the Nootka tale, and there is an additional thematic parallel:

And the bear wrote a song for the young woman, and would sing to her, and the young woman was happy. And if people talked about it, they talked about the wonder of a woman and a bear livin' together and bein' happy, because the arrangement of meat and bones doesn't mean anythin'. (98)

Here, the bear of the Nootka-tale does what Deborah achieves in the novel, writing a song to make her lover happy, an action that Van Herk's Deborah singer shares with the biblical prophetess and the Indian/Canadian/feminist bear Shaman in Cameron's adaptation of the Nootka tale.²

4. *Conclusions*

In *The Tent Peg* mythology is layered into five historically, culturally and geographically distinguishable levels, which, however, are interlocked and tend to overdetermine certain scenes and metaphors within the text. 1. First of all, there is the ancient, almost timeless mythology of the Old World including the Jaël and Sisera story from the Old Testament as well as at least two topics from Greek mythology, Zeus' attraction to Io who is turned into a heifer, as well as the story of uninformed foolish King Midas (Mackenzie) whose touch turns objects into gold. There is also a reference to "Phoedima's God" (120) and there is an obvious connection with Eurasian stories and fairy tales of enchanted bears helping humans, as, for example, in "Schneeweisschen und Rosenrot" (Snow White and Rose Red). Finally, there is also a reference to a historical personage who has become a national (French) as well as feminist myth: Joan of Arc. 2. With regard to New World mythology, the parallels with the first North American literary genre, the Indian captivity story, are the most obvious, not only in J.L.'s outward position, in an unknown wilderness, but more directly in the reference to one of the most important captivity stories, that of Hannah Dustan. 3. References to Canadian "mythology" abound, but they, like the American, are rooted in historical time. There are allusions to famous explorers of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century in the North, and there seems to be a reference to the Frank slide of 1903. Again, as in *Judith*, there are also literary references, not only to the Dustan captivity and its subsequent adaptations, but more directly to Marian Engel's novel

Bear (1976) and through that book to other feminist texts in Canada. 4. References to timeless indigenous mythology centre on bear shamanism, especially stories of women taken into the mountains or wilderness by bears. A more concrete reference to the Indian presence in the Canadian northwest is the appearance of Zeke, the bouncer, who is the most perceptive of all males in the story. 5. Finally on a timeless level there are references to seemingly universal feminine myths, such as that women have readier access to the supernatural, that they have a closer affinity to Earth as well as to recurrent topics in feminist writing centring upon the vulnerability of women in a male world and the mothering roles into which immature men coerce women. Several of these five levels share common symbols and metaphorical figures, particularly through the tent peg, central symbol of female penetration of a man's mind and consciousness as well as symbol of her power over men, and through the grizzly bear with her two cubs, linked with the shaman-singer Deborah.

A synopsis of the various uses of mythology and traditional "Old" World and "New" World tales, of U.S. as well as Canadian literary motifs in Van Herk's *The Tent Peg* shows recurrent patterns of deviation from the older tales and texts that are part of mainstream male culture. First, there is a very different approach towards violence. The action of Van Herk's heroine is decidedly different from that of biblical Jaël and American Hannah Dustan. All U.S. American male readings of the Dustan-motif are fascinated with Hannah's violence, with Mather rejoicing in it and Hawthorne repelled by it. Thoreau raised the question of universal guilt — the apple tree — but the new Canadian and feminist version shows where the aggression really lies: not in an external "heathen" Sisera nor in equally external "Salvage" Indian captors, nor in the avarice of a female "bloody old hag," but right within modern patriarchal society, in male chauvinist assumptions, like Mackenzie's about his wife, that men have certain privileges over females, privileges that they believe they have the power and licence to also "grant" to women. This form of violence in the Galtungian sense cannot be abolished by using its own physical terms. Rather than using physical force, J.L., the emblematic heroine, uses her wits.³

Just as there is no violent revenge, there is no physical hierarchical love-making in the narrow sense of the word. Rather than giving in to Cap's advances, J.L. first refers him to the bear — to show him the limits of his "animal desire" — but later, quite unexpectedly, she takes him into the shower with her and caresses and mothers him like the small boy he really is, so that he breaks down and cries, losing all inclination to go further. Similarly, Mackenzie does not make love to her, does not "penetrate" her body, but rather caresses and shapes her in his hands until her body seems to give off radiance, and then lets go. Again, there seems to be no need for any further physicality because "meats and bones don't matter, it's what's inside them, the love spirit" (Cameron 97). It is therefore fitting that even between J.L. and the bear and J.L. and Deborah communion is not physical but spiritual. Unlike the mythological models from which Van Herk drew, the message of *The Tent Peg* is not a linear extension of what millennia of patriarchal experience seem to indicate. Rather, it is a utopian, feminist dream in which J.L. rejects revenge, in which the captive turns into a non-violent and fascinating captivator who keeps her captors spellbound by her magic, and in which, as in other Canadian feminist novels, women are spiritually more fully aware of their surroundings than men. As an emblematic figure in a modern feminist myth J.L. together with the shaman spirits of place acquires a strength which she tries to transmit to her male companions so that all people can be

"livin' together and bein' happy, because the arrangement of meat and bones doesn't mean anythin'." (Cameron 98)

Unfortunately, even today, there are still some men who feel upset by Van Herk's non-violent revision of the myth. A case in point is Canadian critic William French who in a review entitled "Aritha Van Herk becomes more radicalized: But what of the power of hormones?" criticized the book and referred back to her first novel, *Judith*, where he recalls the castration of the piglets as "one of the most graphic scenes." In *The Tent Peg* French saw an "even more radicalized" book. Fortunately, at the same time, there are also some more enlightened men who enjoy the liberating irony of such a "graphic scene," like novelist Rudy Wiebe, Van Herk's literary

mentor, who in his reply to William French wrote: "Mr. French has obviously fallen into the trap the novel sets for obtuse males." With this paper, I would like to second that.⁴

NOTES

¹ Native American writers have grown increasingly weary of non-native authors claiming "initiation" into Indian spirituality and assuming the roles of a "shaman." There is an extended native debate about "whiteshamanism," including attempts by non-native feminists to claim native matriarchal patterns as "theirs," and I feel very strongly that Cameron's book would come under such criticism as well (cf. Hobson, Silko, Rose). Unfortunately, Cameron's collection does not meet any of the standards described for the recording of native oral literature by non-native collectors and editors (Bataille/Sands). The uses and misuses of native materials in Canadian literature deserve more attention in the future, and after Monkman's survey and Williams's seminal article, I am looking forward to seeing the anthology *The Native in Literature*, edited by T. King, C. Calver and H. Hoy, which I have ordered from Canada but have not yet seen. For my own evaluation of "Indians" in American literature see Lutz, *Indianer*.

After having sent off the finished manuscript to the publishers I received from the editor a copy of Barbara Godard's excellent article "Voicing difference . . ." in which I find a confirmation of my critique of (even female) "whiteshamanism," including my reservations about the book by Anne Cameron.

² Van Herk herself cannot have been familiar with the Nootka tale in Cameron's rendering, because, according to Anne Cameron, first publication of "her" tales was in the book form of 1981, the same year *The Tent Peg* was released. However, Van Herk's manuscript was in the hands of her publisher by July 1980. In a letter of July 10, her editor Lily Miller remarked: "The grizzly bear incident is good. It adds to J.L.'s mysterious powers" (University of Calgary Manuscript Collection 53.1.14.71b), and by November 3, 1980, the printing process was under way (U of Calgary MsC 53.1.14.75). So, *The Tent Peg* was out of the author's hands before *Daughters of Copper Woman* was available for reading. This makes the parallel even more striking.

³ J.L. is doubtlessly capable of using violence. A target practice prior to her fight with Jerome has established her as an unbelievably steady shooter of guns (72f.).

In my classroom discussions in Germany J.L.'s non-violence provided a controversial issue among feminist students. While some admired Van Herk's protagonist precisely because she does not condescend to use male violence, others criticized the book precisely because of this, because it presents the heroine in the traditional female role of the one who will endure and not retaliate. Personally, I see it as even more complex (and brilliant) than that: J.L. exposes Jerome's sickness to the whole camp, thus letting him inflict his own punishment: public ridicule.

⁴ Thoughts and materials for this paper, as well as the interview with Aritha Van Herk, were made possible by a Faculty Enrichment Award from the Canadian Government which enabled me to visit Canada in the Fall of 1987, for which I would like to express my gratitude. Special thanks to Aritha Van Herk, Dave and Sheila Latham, Martin Heavyhead, Leroy Littlebear, George Melnyk, Hugh Dempsey, Ian Adam, and the staff at

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