The Goose

6-16-2014

X: Poems & Anti-Poems by Shane Rhodes

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Negotiating the Language-Scape

X: Poems & Anti-Poems by **SHANE RHODES**
Nightwood Editions, 2013 $18.95

Reviewed by **TOM MILLER**

Shane Rhodes' *X* is a collection comprised of found poetry culled from various land treaties, recollections, and online comments threads, and of original works that elucidate these pieces and the issues they raise. It is an ambitious work that seeks to offer commentary and criticism on the relations between Native Canadians and European colonists since the founding of the country.

It is with regard to the contextualisation of the found poems that I must offer some criticism: Much of the power of this collection comes from the use of government documents to describe a process of cultural elimination. However, the explanation of where each document came from is relegated to the ends of their respective sections. It is a testament to Rhodes' creativity that he crafts such affecting pieces from these documents, and this affect would be considerably heightened if a reader were to go into the work already in possession of this background knowledge. The assumption cannot be made that all readers will have full possession of the necessary historical contexts, and in a piece of protest literature, as we must consider *X*, context and content are intimately linked.

W.H. New notes that in the early days of colonization, "Canadian literature acquired ways...of responding...to wilderness" (32). Rhodes' collection takes a different tack, in examining not simply the effect of the landscape and country upon those who write it, but conversely the effect upon that landscape of the writing of those who both inhabited, and came to inhabit, it. He acknowledges this ongoing concern with land rights both subtly and explicitly throughout the book.

Rhodes' opening poem, "You Are Here," conjectures "This book I will continue to write until I get it right, and I will never get it right." *X* attests to the thought he has applied to the problems of the linguistic domination of the landscape and its inhabitants. He cannot, it seems, foresee a solution. If we join Rhodes in considering the book and language as landscape, and the landscape as constantly being negotiated (a term I use specifically), his is a pessimistic view of the potential for fixing the problems begun almost 150 years ago with the various Canadian Post-Confederation Treaties. Indeed, this is the through line of the whole work, the underlying question that Rhodes asks: How can we fix this? Or perhaps more fundamentally: Can we fix this?

A river runs through "Preoccupied Space," the second section of *X*, a river of North American immigrants' declarations of origin. This river calls our attention to the constitution of landscape through language, a premise central to the collection. On the banks of this section, Rhodes' poetry outlines the processes by which families, and by proxy nations, overrun those who "preoccupy" spaces marked for imperial occupation. The river of declarations of origin, much like a real river, wears away the landscape around it, and those whose language defines that landscape.

The connection of language to landscape is nowhere so explicit as in the opening section of "Found Land," wherein Rhodes uses "186 cardinal and ordinal directions" to create a coastline across the page. The majority of the text of the rest of

the "Found Land" section is pulled from "transcripts of the Canadian Post-Confederation Treaties." If the opening of this section conflates language with landscape, the rest of the poems make explicit the connection of the Native Canadians to that land, and to the language used to sever that connection. "Wite Out," an erasure poem constructed from various registration forms under the Indian Act, in the words "Illegitimate daughters of / Indian men and women   born / If you are / you were never / required" makes plain the fate of the peoples and cultures who preoccupied the land.

Rhodes' poems are reactions not only to the imperial actions of the British and French colonists and their governments, the various treaties and Indian Acts, but also to more contemporary moments such as Oka, Caledonia, and Idle No More. For Rhodes, both the historical and the contemporary are equally important, and like the river at the beginning of the collection, he sees these crises flow from one to another. The book further foregrounds the connection of the land and the language, and the effect these have upon an occupant of the two, by forcing the reader to close the book halfway through, and flip it over in order to read the final anti-poem, "White Noise" (though what constitutes an "anti-poem" is fodder for a longer piece than this review). This phenomenological response to the text draws yet another connection to the embodied experience of language, asking the reader to consider anew, after having undergone this experience, what the phenomenological response to the Indian Acts must have been to those upon whom they were forced.

"White Noise" draws material from the online comments responding to news

articles on the Idle No More movement and the hunger strike of Theresa Spence. It upholds the common wisdom that, if one wants to retain one's faith in humanity, one should never read online comments. However, interspersed with some truly diabolical and reprehensible phrases ("They are a disease that needs to be gotten rid of. / Its [*sic*] time to cull the herd."), there are some genuinely moving moments, and we see something of a response to Rhodes' opening lament of writing and rewriting his book *ad infinitum*. In lines like "Sorry, this really bothers me but / like most Canadians, / I don't know what to do" or the haunting final lines "can something be divided that was never... / united in the first place........?," a current of despair and helplessness is revealed. Saying and doing are not intrinsically joined, as the treaties and acts in the first section erroneously suggest, but nor are they mutually exclusive. If this is the case, it is incumbent not simply upon those whose culture has been systematically erased, but upon all Canadians, to use language to reshape the country, and redress the crimes of its founding.

Works Cited

New, W.H. *A History of Canadian Literature*. 2nd ed. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003. Print.

Rhodes, Shane. *X: Poems & Anti-Poems*. Gibsons: Nightwood Editions, 2013. Print.

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