

The Goose

Volume 14 | No. 1


Article 14

8-8-2015

Light Light by Julie Joosten

Mathieu Aubin

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Aubin, Mathieu. "Light Light by Julie Joosten." *The Goose*, vol. 14, no. 1, article 14, 2015,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol14/iss1/14>.

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Becoming in the Light: The Self and the Environment in Joosten's *Light Light*

Light Light by JULIE JOOSTEN

Book Thug, 2013 \$18

Reviewed by MATHIEU AUBIN

In her first book of collected poems entitled *Light Light* (2013), Julie Joosten's speaker challenges her reader's understanding of the self as well as the world that surrounds them by examining the ways in which people historically and continuously engage with it. By *moving* between discussions about botany, the climate, colonial history, scientific exploration, and love, the book invites its reader to interrogate how Westerners speak about the world, the ways in which they see themselves in relation to it, and how they tend to objectify the environment. *Light Light* employs a variety of poetic forms ranging from more traditional poetics (e.g., the epigram, the lyric, the narrative) to more experimental forms to confront the dominant discourses that determine how people speak about nature. It does so by deterritorializing knowledge and provoking the reader to *become aware* of their locus by indigenizing their ontology, so that they can recognize their responsibility and relationship to the environment.

Reading through the book's first poem entitled "Wind" I am immediately invited to consider my relationship to my ecological space, and to extend myself to the environment that surrounds me by recognizing myself within it. In *A People's Ecology: Explorations in Sustainable Living* Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete challenges Western ontology by discussing

the importance of indigenizing knowledge. He states, "'Indigenous' means being so completely identified with a place that you reflect its very entrails, its insides, its soul" (7). Joosten's book picks up on this idea, and intends to indigenize its reader's knowledge by inviting them to not only humanize the environment by recognizing that "The wind is a tongue to watch or touch" (1), but also to recognize their own part within it. For instance, much like "A violet trumpet vine [that] extends a tendril, gentles into a hole, / withdraws" (3-4), the reader—in this case, myself—must enact a similar behavior. Starting from a withdrawn position, I am expected to "extend to accompany the plant" (14) so that I can reach out to the environment. I must recognize that I am not *apart* from the environment, but instead am asked to reconsider my relationship with nature to recognize that I am *a part* of it.

Once incited to reconsider my relationship to the environment and the book, the speaker sheds light upon the history of environmental discourse, the way that nature has been catalogued, and how Indigenous voices have been erased from these studies. In poems such as "Ghost Species," the multiple "Wind Scene" poems, and "Touch / The radicle thus endowed," the speaker intersperses intertextual references to studies by Henry David Thoreau, Zhuangzi, Simone Weil, and Charles Darwin. In so doing, a lineage of discourse is traced to demonstrate the ways in which the environment has been discussed. However, in the poem "If light stabilizing / if to receive a bee," the speaker critiques scientific illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian's work by researching the roots of her archived research to reveal the Indigenous voices she has erased. For

instance, the poem critiques Merian's travels to places such as Suriname to study insects and plants and her problematic treatment of Indigenous peoples she called "myne slaven" (132). The speaker states:

Voyaging [as] a form of
hunting
hunting a form of
worship. (55-8)

The poem signals that Merian's purpose for travelling, although masked as a declaration of her worship, is unethical since it is done to hunt, consequently endangering the lives she targets. The speaker then provides insight into the lives of Indigenous peoples that helped her, and whose voices she erased. The poem voices the oppressive conditions experienced by these peoples by revealing that their stories "did / not travel / with the plant" (213-15). *Light Light* challenges the reader's prior knowledge and forces them to become skeptical of their understanding of the environment and the ways that this information has been accumulated.

The book's most poignant facet resides in its desire to continuously transform its reader by drawing attention to their spiritual locus. In the book's final poem, "Light Fragments," the reader must navigate liminal spaces between the fragments of light (the poem's subsections) to recognize that their understanding of the environment is still limited. However, the reader is encouraged to be attentive to their locus and to their localized visual experience. It states:

To become what is glimpsed from
the corner of an eye. However
briefly. Or a felt absence. In
lightning flashes to escape the laws

of the world, these flashes
lightening us. (122-5)

The reader, although limited by only "flashes" of knowledge, must continuously attempt to escape the power of discourse and *become* what they can observe. As a whole, Joosten's book is reflective, demanding, interrogative, and transformative. It is a must-read for anyone interested in seeing a glimpse of light into themselves and the world encompassing them.

Works Cited

Cajete, Gregory, Ed. *A People's Ecology: Explorations in Sustainable Living: Health, Environment, Agriculture, Native Traditions*. Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1999. Print.

MATHIEU AUBIN is a PhD student currently completing the course work portion of his Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies doctorate in the Faculty of Critical Studies at the University of British Columbia (Okanagan). His research focuses on contemporary Canadian poetry and experimental poetics.