Seeing Through the Blueline
Reflections on the Poetry of Joseph Bruchac

By ROB RICH

On a class trip to the Adirondack Ecological Center in Newcomb, I went out on a walk with fellow graduate students and a naturalist from the center, eager to see the amphibians of spring. It was dark, raining and nearly ten at night. As we sloshed up the hillside away from the road, I had no idea where we were. Yet our guide cautiously stepped along, certain this was the best time and place to find some amphibians. Sure enough, we almost stepped on one—a spotted mole salamander. With its smooth, purplish-black skin and yellow spots, it was easily flushed out of the ground by these early spring rains, and it stepped along through the dark with more confidence than me. It was truly a beautiful creature whose pencil-length size and ability to survive in this Adirondack landscape caught me by surprise. I couldn’t believe it had been beneath the ground in cool, leafy burrows under the snow all winter, waiting for the right time to make this journey to a pool that would only form for a short time each year. Its slimy, delicate texture did not seem well suited to our mountains, but it marched along with more purposeful direction and seasonal awareness than I could comprehend.

When we got back to the cabins, I looked at the Adirondack Park Agency’s Land Use and Development Plan Map to orient myself to where we’d been. It was a futile task however, for although the map had partitioned the vast landscape into fixed units of human use, it could not show the passageways by which the salamander navigated on his pilgrimage to the ephemeral vernal pool. The landscape of experience can rarely be represented by divisions into uses, carved with sharp boundaries that detach human culture from the processes of the ecological world. In the Adirondack Park, we strive to define that harmony between culture and ecology, but when I looked at the APA map, I knew that my meeting with the salamander came closer to melding those goals than any boundary could define.

Joseph Bruchac, a poet and storyteller, offers that poetry may be another way to enter into a more experiential, story-map of the land. He asks in “The Body of the Land” (39):

How do we see, shape our reflections? How do we speak when we give directions?

These are necessary questions to ask if we truly seek a balance in our relation to the landscape, for how we survey the ground underfoot says a great deal about how we step on it. Bruchac was born and raised in Greenfield, New York, one of the thirty “border towns” that the Blueline slices its way through. Not only his town, but his ethnic inheritance is split, a mixing of Slovak and Abenaki ancestry. But to Bruchac, these political and ethnic “divisions” entail a legacy that is more important as connection. His poetry and his stories strive for a seamless survey of the personal territory that charts a life in direct relation to place. It builds linkages between the imagination and indigenous awareness for the land that go deeper than lines of politics or blood types. Poetry never will provide answers that answer the questions on where our political boundaries should lie, but it can help us envision new possibilities for wholesome correspondence and integration.

Bruchac’s words give a worldview that relates the ridgelines of home. They create a perspective which complements conventional geographies by charting the ecological and cultural interactions at a human spatial scale, but a geologic temporal scale. It is a map of change and fluidity, one that weaves together a glacial recession and the pulverized sands left from scraping, to a glass bottle industry and the general store his grandfather owned. In his memoir At the End of Ridge Road, Bruchac takes us back to that place where the store and his story are found (60):

The oldest people who lived on this hill before my feet stood here traced their lives in the shapes of stones.

Each rock held a pattern map of this land that, read right, might lead them home.

This excerpt made me think of that salamander on its way to the vernal pool. Each rock must have been a sensual sign pointing through texture, shape, or moisture. It would be simple enough to say that some evolutionary machinery was guiding it along, but there must have been something in it that could

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adapt and interact to the complexity of the landscape and the unforeseen challenges (like graduate students) in the spirit that had allowed generations to survive before him.

Our maps and the management they support must also be ground-truthed by rock-readings that embrace the specific experiences and the unforeseen interactions upon which our lives depend. In the Adirondacks there are so many special communities, each with their own story—but stories that have interacted with others through time, including those inside, outside, and upon the Blueline. Our shared evolution in the landscape depends upon more upon cooperative stewardship than private ownership, a concept our maps and our individualistic mentalities have been slow to accept.

Bruchac’s poem “Ndakinna” offers up a “map” that may help point us in that direction. Meaning “our land” in the Abenaki language, Ndakinna refers to a shared geography of the various smaller indigenous communities working together to sustain the land, similar to the vision the Adirondack Park is trying for today. Yet it also realizes the compulsion to control is our greatest obstacle, and that stewardship requires a new way of seeing. The poem offers (48):

You can not understand our land with maps lines as if earth were an animal’s carcass cut into pieces, skinned, divided, devoured—though always less eaten than is thrown away.

See this land instead with the wind eagle’s eyes, how the rivers and streams link like sinew through a leather garment sewed strong to hold our people, patterns of flowers close to the brown soil.

This new way of seeing is actually more ancient than we think when people knew their places through shared stories. Story was the basis for making experiential connections and endowing places that guided people towards more meaning and less management. We clearly live in the European legacy of private property rights and land ownership today, but by going above the borders like the wind eagle in this poem (and beneath them at salamander scale) we may more fully appriciate the meaning of the landscape. Hawks and eagles seeing this way find their way into much of Bruchac’s poetry, and are apt reminders when we lose our sense of sight. In “The Carmague,” based on Bruchac’s experience in the former war zone of southern France, he knows that human power must be reconciled with restraint and respect. The poem concludes with these lines (39):

Human invention in such profusion blinds the perceptions, closes the eyes of those who might be native to see that countenance which is not human, the lasting face of the holy earth.

It blocks their ears to the heartbeat in the sea.

It dulls their touch so they cannot feel with every breath the benediction on their own skin of the open, circling, un-owned wind.

As we try to construct respectful management in the Park, we might start by asking what each line is kept for, and what it might be keeping us from. If we break down the boundaries in search of the stories, we may remember something important about their origins. Some boundaries are as clearly defined as the greatest depths of Lake Champlain, which now provides the Blueline’s eastern border. Others are more arbitrary, such as where the Dix Mountain Wilderness terminates at the Northway. A great number of boundaries are from the sharp, squared creations reaching back to the large grabs of the late 1700s, where people like Alexander Macomb, John Brown, or William Gilliland bought thousands of acres without setting eye or foot on their purchase. The lines they drew are still represented on contemporary Adirondack maps, which have since been subdivided into townships and tracts, rehashed over and over to meet the needs of counties, paper companies, and private individuals.

There is a silenced meaning in every boundary, and to tracing their legacy may lend more guidance for redirecting them towards integration and connection in our Adirondack experience.

We need maps, but we also need the stories that support them. Without the story, the map has no meanings—which can only be made by direct connections, shared histories, and personal experiences on the land. We need the story to remember an original awareness of the landscape and remind us it continues to be created within us, around us, and among us. To incite us to action or conceptualize sustainable uses, the APA map may be appropriate. But to find the salamander and the appreciative insight it gave on that dark, rainy night, it may be more appropriate to affirm the terrain with a narrative. Our migratory Adirondack maps may be included within the Blueline, but they are also embodied in our home ridgelines, or the rocks in our paths.

References