

Burning a Discovery of Grace
History and Fiction as Abstracting, Introducing, Narrating, Multiplying, and Identifying
Postmodern Canada

submitted by

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HISTORY AND FICTION AS ABSTRACT

Canada has attempted recently to establish its own cultural identity in both literature and history independent of internationally influential nations like the United States and Great Britain. Yet, at a time when Canadians are trying to find and assert a uniquely *Canadian* identity, postmodernism ostensibly refutes any claim that a nation can have one unifying and stable identity, but insists instead that a nation is a kind of narration constructed by an accumulation of individual stories, histories, and points of view. In addition, postmodernism has emphasized that the dividing line between real and imaginary referents in writing is blurry and difficult to locate. Instead, referents are always potentially both fictionally- and historically-based. Since history-writing and fiction-writing are thus just overlapping spaces on a continuum, these two are no longer always entirely distinct from one another. However, postmodernism simultaneously provides for the existence of multiple versions of history and identity, which allows recognition of a multiplicity of sources, each with potentially equal validity. In English-speaking Canada, the postmodern framework has resulted in novels which both assert and refute models of Canadian identity and history, as evidenced in George Bowering's *Burning Water*, in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, and in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*. Bowering's novel is a deconstructive, historiographic meta-fiction; Wiebe's is a postcolonial re-focusing of the typical western novel; Atwood's is a gender-conscious re-vision of an infamous Canadian murderer's tale. Each novel takes historical documents and bases a (hi)story on them; the results are the problematizing of the traditional division between history and fiction, the inclusion of several points of view, and the postulation and re-writing of Canadian identity and Canadian history. Because of its "ex-centric" position, Canada proves to be a stimulating example of how deconstruction, post-colonialism, and gender studies work together in literature to develop identity in a postmodern country.

In any case, the only way a country ever comes into existence is by art, the art that fights for its peoples' memory and soul, that interprets and shapes its society, that cuts its society loose from its unshaped embarrassment, that captures and holds its history in the artifact of story or picture or song the way a potter captures and holds the essence of her vision in the clay she shapes between her hands.

Rudy Wiebe "Canada in the Making"

HISTORY AND FICTION AS AN INTRODUCTION

If, as Canadian writer and critic Robert Kroetsch says, "Canada is supremely a country of margins" (*The Lovely Treachery of Words* 22), then it is in these uncharted Canadian territories on the "margin, the periphery, the edge," at the "exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet" (*Lovely Treachery* 23) that the search for a Canadian genealogy finds a multitude of possibilities, but no grounded, definitive answers. In a genealogy, "Canadians seek the lost and everlasting moment when chaos and order were synonymous. They seek that timeless split-second in time when the one, in the process of becoming the other, was itself and the other" (Kroetsch "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue" viii). Kroetsch implies the existence of the Canadian search for the comfort of an absolute identity and of the simultaneous Canadian refusal to accept one overriding identity and the loss of freedom that comes with such an identity. It is an endless and paradoxical genealogical search, finding ancestors and a history, while refuting these as incomplete or insufficient.

One way in which Canadians both search for and hide from their identity is an archeological process of finding and using documents. Kroetsch claims that the "document opens up the site" ("Beyond Nationalism" ix), meaning that in a document, a link to a history can

be found. In that history, a link to *an* identity is formed: not necessarily *the* Canadian identity, but *one* Canadian identity of many. The possible combinations of documents, or, the possible links to an identity found in and through history (if indeed a nation's identity can be found in its history; if a nation is its narrative), form the only limit on identity. However, since an infinite number of documents is possible, the identity-forming combinations is equally infinite. Because the nation is, in Homi Bhabha's words, an "idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (*Nation and Narration* 1), people will continue vainly attempting to create national identity. In other words, despite a nation's resistance to being entirely summed up in and by one identity, the attempt to secure a definition of, for example, Canada, will continue to be made. But in a postmodern space (and indeed Kroetsch has called Canada a postmodern country in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*), the pretense that a nation can be positively characterized by some meta-narrative will no longer be ignored, but (ab)used in creating pluralized Canadian identities.

The act of collecting documents (accessing the Canadian archeological site), ordering them, and making identity claims based on them, is a narrativizing act. As Hayden White indicates through his discussion of annals and chronicles (as opposed to histories) in his article "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," without narrativizing the documents, that is, making a story out of them, with causal connections between them and a conclusion of sorts, they remain just documents unconnected to one another (1-23). The instant a conclusion is drawn, the documents have been ordered by their causality and eternally connected by and in that act of narrativization. Or, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "to write history (or historical fiction) is (equally) to narrate, to re-present by means of selection and interpretation" (*The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* 66). In the Canadian

predicament, this approach of narrativizing one set of infinite combinations of documents allows for the paradoxically concurrent search for and refusal of identity that Kroetsch posits as Canadian because just as an identity is claimed through positive assertion in a narrative, it is denied legitimacy by negatively avoiding all other narrative possibilities. "For in fact every narrative, however seemingly 'full'," White claims, "is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*" ("Value of Narrativity"10).

Based on this postmodern principle of identity-making and identity-breaking through narrativizing documents, the contemporary Canadian novelists George Bowering, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Atwood each creates and refutes Canadian identity in their respective novels *Burning Water*, *A Discovery of Strangers*, and *Alias Grace*. Bowering approaches the task by writing what Hutcheon terms historiographic meta-fiction; Wiebe writes what Sherrill Grace names the Canadian Northern, a Canadian form of postcolonial postmodernism; Atwood (re)creates a historical woman's story that is as much a study of gender identity as of national identity. All, however, use history as recorded in documents to open up a new site for creation, narrativization, and historical possibility, a narrative space which deconstructs concepts of history and fiction by forging the two into one strong, homogenous alloy. In accepting and undermining their roles as fiction writers, they enter the realm of historical possibility in the Canadian context by positing possible versions of Canadian history, and, in doing so, they parody the roles of historians. They create and occupy a postmodern space which is both historical fiction and fictive history; a structure founded on selected documents and covered by the remaining unlimited possibilities. Each writes a story and a history, that is, a (hi)story. It is writing which, as Kroetsch claims is true for all Canadian writing,

"takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments

found in the (open) field of the archaeological site. It is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story . . . comes compulsively to a genealogy that refuses origin, to a genealogy that speaks instead, and anxiously, and with a generous reticence, the nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel." ("Beyond Nationalism" xi)

It is the same for me. I have chosen the fragments: *Burning Water, A Discovery of Strangers, Alias Grace*. I have drawn a particular cosmology out of them: the discovery of Canadian identity through fiction and history. I am also floating in the middle and it is dangerous because the middle resists the solid security of being grounded to the beginning or the end: critics, ideas, books, experiences, histories, and you surround me, fluctuating in the powers of your presences. In writing about Canada, I am seeking my own story, trying to determine my own genealogy: I find no solitary beginning, and no end is in sight to the presence of the idea of Canada in me, although this may be the height of its presence. In that failure to locate the start or the finish, the nightmare and welcome dream of the multiple voices of the tower of Babel are located: I think, the critic says, the author writes, she responds, they feel, he wants, you read, I guess, you know, I mean, you guess, I know, you mean . . .

But some things are clear. For instance, I spent my childhood in Montana, a state directly under the influence of three Canadian provinces. I spent two months of the summer of 1996 listening to (and not understanding) a French radio station from Vancouver. The first close-up of a black bear I had was from a campsite in Alberta's Banff National Park. I've always admired the deep, rounded-vowel aesthetics of Canadian-accented English. Of course, I like to think that I have a bit of such an accent myself, since I have been mistaken for Canadian several times. But I had heard little about Canada in my home country; all my knowledge of that place on the other

side of the 49th-parallel had been gleaned through personal experiences. Especially in mid-Missouri, there is a lack of Canadian presence (not to mention a similar lack of other foreign elements in general). So I decided to go to Germany for a year for a mind-expanding experience, and, utterly by default, I became more familiar with Canada and its literature. In Tübingen, the university's American Studies Department offered a course on contemporary Canadian short fiction; despite my hesitation to take an English-language course, I enrolled myself because I knew the opportunity to study solely Canadian Literature would never arise back home in Missouri, regardless of its geographical and cultural proximity to Canada. Just as George Vancouver, the main character in *Burning Water*, left home on a voyage of awaiting and unknown discoveries; just as Bowering's narrator feels the need to leave the scene of his story in order to see possibilities looking in from the outside; just as Robert Hood, in *A Discovery of Strangers*, finds himself to be most prolific outside of his home element, but inside an "other;" just as Grace Marks, in *Alias Grace*, leaves Ireland, then Toronto, in unrealized search of her infamous story; I, too, left my home in the geographic middle of one of the world's cultural centers, bound for an exterior place, ultimately to find that compelling Canadian presence.

The chosen Canadian novels and this discussion of them reflect Kroetsch's sought-after, "timeless split-second in time when the one, in the process of becoming the other, was itself and the other" ("Beyond Nationalism" viii), a moment available through narrativization's power to unite disparate elements. In Bowering's text, it is the author/narrator's feeling that "current history and self were bound together, from the beginning" (*BW* 8), which allows Vancouver, the Indians, the author, and the reader to blend together into a uniting text. For Wiebe, telling the story of the relationship between two communities brings the two together under one text, represented by the hybrid child of Greenstockings and Hood. To Atwood, a woman's story

attracts the attention of a patriarchal world; the one becomes part of the other, united, even in their different narrators and points of view, under one text. And to me, these three stories, my observations, and your ideas merge upon one another, in all their similarities and differences, through this narrative.

In the three novels, fiction and history serve as merging entities sought by Canadian writers in locating their identity, as indicated by Kroetsch's quote "the one, in the process of becoming the other" ("Beyond Nationalism" viii). Both history and fiction are available as versions of narrative, but they remain separate in the layperson's mind: fiction is made up, while history is true. It is this paradigm which Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood contradict, deconstruct, and reconstruct. Their novels can be considered works both of fiction and of history. These authors force history and fiction, two normally separate genres, to converge into postmodern texts, thus problematizing their relationship through the authors' attempts at locating an evasive Canadian identity.

What exactly I mean by "fiction" and "history" should perhaps be explicated at this point to set up a framework for my critical operation. As mentioned, fiction and history have traditionally existed independent of one another because each deals with its own kind of referent. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "what history refers to is the actual, real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe" ("History and/as Intertext" 169). *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* seems to agree with her. It defines history as "a continuous systematic narrative of past events as relating to a particular people, country, period, person, etc." and defines fiction as "the class of literature comprising works of imaginative narration, esp. in prose form;" or, in other words, history is made of past events while fiction's events are imaginative. Further,

Webster's defines historiography as "the narrative presentation of history based on a critical examination, evaluation, and selection of material from primary and secondary sources and subject to scholarly criteria."

It may seem frivolous to include dictionary definitions (since you, dearest reader, are no layperson), but they serve to illustrate the link that postmodernism finds between history and fiction. Striking selected parts from these definitions leaves us with history as "narrative," fiction as "narration," and historiography as "narrative presentation." In other words, history, fiction, and historiography are versions or results of narration. To get away from dictionary definitions now, Terry Eagleton defines narration as "the act and process of telling a story" (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* 106). It is indeed this act and process of telling which fiction, history, and historiography all share. Hutcheon elaborates on this common characteristic and posits that fiction and history "are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms . . . and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality" ("The Pastime of Past Time" 54). The only difference between history and fiction may be, as Hayden White formulates it, that "history, then, belongs to the category of what might be called the 'discourse of the real,' as against the 'discourse of the imaginary' or the 'discourse of desire'" ("Value of Narrativity" 19) involved in fiction.

Because postmoderns strive to unveil underlying structures and unacknowledged assumptions, postmodern fiction is conscious of its structure and assumptions. Hutcheon writes that postmodernism seems "to designate art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive—in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as

with the social present" (*Canadian Postmodern* 1). Fiction which is self-conscious of its status as a written text in a context and in front of a reader is termed "metafiction." When the story involved in metafiction is based in history, Hutcheon calls it "historiographic metafiction," which she defines as "fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (*Canadian Postmodern* 13). In other words, it is created in the author's imagination (fiction), based in history (historiographic), and openly aware of and acknowledging its status as text (meta).

In claiming that the writing of fiction and the writing of history are just versions of narrative, they are placed on the same continuum. Historiographic metafiction holds the middle ground of this narrative-continuum because it is a blurred combination of history and fiction. It occupies a space that concurrently fades, in one direction, into fiction and, in another direction, into history. Historiographic metafiction is ultimately a specifically historical and narcissistic form of narrativization, a process which White describes as the imposition upon reality "the form of a story" ("Value of Narrativity" 2). "The problem," then, as Rudy Wiebe has put it, "is to make the story" ("Where is the Voice Coming From?" 1), because historiographic metafiction "makes you want to have your historical referent and erase it, too" (Hutcheon "History" 172).

My search for two of the three chosen novels is a frustratingly appropriate example of Canada's continuing presence as an "ex-centric" (Hutcheon *Canadian Postmodern* 3) country. Neither the employees nor the computer data-bases at three major Wal-Mart-esque bookstore chains in Kansas City and St. Louis could find even the most obscure trace of anything by Rudy Wiebe. The only information they could find about George Bowering was that his novel *Burning Water* had been out of print for a decade. But, just across that 49th-parallel (which

apparently serves as a Berlin wall between US and Canadian literatures) at a small book store in Thunder Bay, Ontario, I found *A Discovery of Strangers* in stock and an employee eager to order and ship the reportedly out-of-print *Burning Water* within two weeks. The two are, after all, both winners of Canada's Governor General's Award. Margaret Atwood, on the other hand, has successfully broken into the US market. American book stores usually have a substantial section of a bookshelf reserved for her work. At the time of this writing, *Alias Grace* is her latest novel (written in 1996) and is quite possibly still unfamiliar even to the reader who knows something of Atwood (despite its cover's claim that it is already a "national bestseller"). So, for the reader unfamiliar with these three Canadian novels (which is most likely in this case, especially for the US audience), the following are brief synopses of them.

George Bowering's 1980 novel *Burning Water* is a retelling of the 1792 exploratory voyage of George Vancouver, an English sea captain in charge of an expedition to map the northwest coast of North America, to continue looking for the rumored northwest passage to the Atlantic, and to regain control of that coastline from the Spanish. It is not, however, simply a chronological narration of the traditional version of his journey. Instead, Vancouver's character is a human being with pet-peeves, virtues, vices, love affairs, and an ego. While Vancouver gets the spotlight, other significant characters include Menzies, the Scottish botanist and resident scientific researcher, who serves as Vancouver's equally pedantic and perfectionistic antagonist and competitor; Captain Quadra, the commander of the Spanish navy, with whom Vancouver has a long-standing love affair; the Indians, whose impressions of and thoughts on the white's inexplicable appearance form a humorous aside; and the author/narrator, a.k.a. *he*, who actively narrates his own journey of this particular novel-writing process. Throughout the entire novel, the differences between fact and imagination receive much attention, especially in light of the

liberties which Bowering takes in truly (re)creating the (hi)story. On the return trip to England across the length of the Atlantic in the midst of war against the French, Vancouver and Menzies have it out one final time, the result of which is the murder of Vancouver by Menzies.

A similar voyage of imperial exploration can be found in Rudy Wiebe's 1994 novel *A Discovery of Strangers*. It tells the tale of the experiences between the Yellowknife Indians and the Franklin overland expedition of 1819-1820, a British-led group, with Canadian voyager support, intending to map the Arctic coast and what is today northern mainland Canada. Although the main focus of the book is the relationship between the two communities, one major point of conflict stems from the inter-racial love relationship between the Englishman Robert Hood and the Indian Greenstockings, which ultimately results in a child. Another Englishman, George Back, and the Mohawk interpreter, Michel (also known as Two-speaker), are each jealous of Hood and desirous of Greenstockings. The Indians' response to and cultural differences compared to the English are manifested in the comments and dreams of Greenstockings' father (Keskarrah), mother (Birdseye), sister (Greywing), and husband (Broadface). The English tell the Indians that they and their land have basically been consumed by the British Empire, and that they should thus help the English with food, supplies, and directions; the Indians, not knowing inhospitality, comply, despite the increased hardship. Hood, Michel, and two other Englishmen travel to the Arctic coast the following summer, but do not return to the fort before the end of the food and the good weather; a long-standing dispute over Greenstockings results in Michel killing Hood as he is about to starve to death anyhow. That summer, Greenstockings has Hood's child, whom he never sees, a tangible result of the two cultures meeting and commingling. In the end, all of the voyagers and most of the Englishmen die from starvation and cold, while the Indians fear the inevitable return of the whites' presence.

Alias Grace is Margaret Atwood's retelling of the story of housekeeper Grace Marks, an Irish immigrant to Canada who, at the age of sixteen in 1843, was accused of taking part in the double murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper/mistress Nancy Montgomery. Supposedly in cahoots with Kinnear's stableman, James McDermott, the two fled to the United States, where they were apprehended and extradited to Canada. Both were found guilty and McDermott was hanged; Grace, despite her amnesia about the day in question, got life in prison. The story tells of the attempt by the fictitious American psychologist Simon Jordan to revive the blank spots in Grace's memory, ultimately hoping to prove her innocence and get her pardoned. Grace's story recounts her life beginning with her childhood in Ireland, on to the trip to Canada, and her jobs leading to and including employment at Kinnear's home. Her best friend during one of her first jobs as housekeeper, Mary Whitney, died in Grace's presence of complications from an abortion. Grace tells her story to Simon, but they make no progress concerning the lost time during the murders. Eventually a hypnotist persuades Simon to allow Grace to be hypnotized with the hope of recovering her lost memory. But the personality and voice of Mary Whitney come out of Grace under hypnosis and claim responsibility for the murders, which simultaneously incriminates Grace and frees her from responsibility. Simon, afraid that his professional reputation will be tainted by his involvement with hypnotism and eager to stop the extra-marital affair with his landlady, suddenly departs from Canada, leaving Grace's case incomplete and his landlady/mistress alone, and eventually is severely injured in the American Civil War, never to be seen in Canada again. In 1872 Grace finally receives a pardon, at which point she moves to New York state, marries, and lives happily. Grace's first-person narrative of her story, addressed mostly to Simon, is intertwined with a third-person narrative explicating Simon's part and other minor characters' parts. In addition, excerpts from primary

documents at each section's beginning and fictitious correspondence between characters are periodically included to impart Grace's story from several different points of view.

HISTORY AND FICTION AS NARRATION

If we accept Robert Scholes' simple explanation that a "narration involves a selection of events for the telling" ("Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative" 206), then it is easy to conclude that history and fiction are both of the narrative ilk. In writing both history and fiction, a selection of events for the telling is made and this telling results in a narration. Despite the claim that historical-writing differs from fiction-writing because the former is based on "real" events while the latter is composed of imagined events, the fact remains that both kinds of writing are nonetheless narrations, or narrative constructions. Moreover, fiction is often based on real events while historical texts are based on other texts that, if not fictional, are nevertheless textual, motivated narrations.

The three Canadian works I have chosen are based on historical figures and events, that is, on "real" people and events. George Vancouver, the members of the Franklin expedition, the Yellowknife Indians, and Grace Marks are all historical figures; their general characters are historically founded. But these books are considered novels, and their respective copyright pages show them therefore as classified under "fiction" by either the Library of Congress or by Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data. By official definition, they are composed of imagined events. But what are they, real or imagined works, historical or fiction? If nothing else, one thing is certain: these books are narrations, and as such, involved "a selection of events for the telling." Whence the events come is not significant in connecting the events together and calling the result a narrative. Thus, their origins can individually be both "real" and imaginary,

both historical and fictive.

If, however, it is the case that these novels as narratives can be concurrently historical and fiction, then any distinct boundary dividing history-writing from fiction-writing is smeared into a fading blur. History- and fiction-writing are placed on the two ends of a continuum of narrations; they blend together in the middle, where works such as these Canadian books are located. Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood challenge the traditional differences between history and fiction by producing works which replicate this deconstruction of the history/fiction binary by locating themselves in the middle of a history/fiction writing continuum. This is accomplished in several ways: they cite primary and secondary documents to add authenticity to fiction; they meta-fictionally mimic their characters' explorations of land, people, or the mind in (re)searching for a story; they use and abuse history in writing new, differing versions of it; they incorporate multiple points of view for each story; and they tell the story of and through an "other," non-traditional figure.

When a historian writes, he or she includes primary sources and documents to substantiate any claims because primary sources give "the words of the witnesses or the first recorders of an event" (Barzun and Graff *The Modern Researcher* 114n.) and thus are considered to have a more accurate reflection of the actuality of that event. The person supplying a primary account of a historical event was supposedly present at the event and can thus give an accurate and dependable testimony of the occurrences. Journals, letters, and interviews are examples of primary sources because they are essentially the recorded words of a witness' observations. Secondary sources and documents are also useful to the historian in supporting his or her case. While they are not directly tied to the actuality of the historical event but are considered second-

hand information, they supply more opinions and ideas about the event and "prove" that the historian is not alone in his or her claim. Periodically, Wiebe incorporates primary sources into his book and Atwood uses both primary and secondary sources in hers, both in order to give the semblance of historical accuracy and to supply historical grounds on which the possibility of the respective novel's story could be based. At the same time, pseudo-historical documents, especially in *Burning Water*, challenge the authority of primary and secondary historical documents.

Between each chapter, Wiebe includes "dated selections . . . quoted from the journals kept by Robert Hood (1797-1821) and John Richardson (1787-1865) during the first Franklin overland expedition (1819-1822) to the Arctic coast of what is today Canada" (*DS* n.pag.). This statement appears opposite the table of contents so the reader will realize from the very start that these journal entries are not creations of the author, but historical documents. They function as prefatory sources on which the respective following chapter's narration is based. Atwood's approach is similar. Before each of the book's sections, she includes passages from various sources, both primary and secondary, dealing with Grace Marks, with the murders she is accused of, and with related social practices and beliefs. As with Wiebe, Atwood includes these sources as prefatory commentary and historical substantiation for whatever story follows.

In addition to these actual historical documents, both authors include chapters which consist of nothing but written correspondence by characters. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, Chapter Five is a first-person testimony of the duel between Hood and Back; it begins with the statement that "I, John Hepburn . . . speak as truthfully as I do recall of events that took place October, 1820, at Fort Enterprise" (*DS* 95) and concludes saying "My Lords, this is the deposition you required. God save the King!" (*DS* 111). The first half of Chapter Twelve

consists of three letters from John Richardson to Robert Hood's father relating Hood's death. In *Alias Grace*, several chapters (for example, Chapters Six and Fifty) are simply correspondence between several of the characters, such as Simon and his mother or Simon and his medical colleagues. Because these collections of seemingly "authentic" primary documents (they even include a date and location of writing) concerning the novels' stories are included in the novels, they lend credibility to the respective novel's story. But, these documents are nonetheless fictitious, not historical; they are documents created by the respective novel's author.

Bowering is also no stranger to the idea of including primary documents in a novel to substantiate its story, although the authenticity of these documents in *Burning Water* is very questionable. For instance, Chapter Fifty-seven concludes with Vancouver sitting "by his writing desk and inscrib[ing] his deep feelings" (*BW* 248) in a journal entry which is then quoted. Bowering's narrator also quotes "what Vancouver had to say about the former Cook's River" (*BW* 64) and summarizes "an untowardly ribald passage that does not warrant quoting at its length" (*BW* 52) in which Vancouver describes three historical explorers making false geographic claims to one another "with their pants down, noses in one another's apertures" (*BW* 52). He presents these quotes as if they were normal, historically-sound documents that evidence his characterization of Vancouver, yet he never cites a source for any of the quotes, so they could each be simply his own invention. In addition, the possibility that the historical Vancouver, a high-ranking British naval captain, would risk his reputation and job by including that imagined and "untowardly ribald" scene in his log which he would eventually have to turn over to British officials as a record of the voyage, is rather incredible. Regardless of authenticity, the inclusion of primary documents, real or falsified, appears to support the historical possibility of Bowering's Vancouver.

Despite the fictitiousness of the stories of Wiebe and Atwood, their inclusion of primary and secondary documents and of both "real" and pseudo-historical documents, bases their stories in the realm of historical possibility. However, in addition to being substantiation for their stories, this inclusion revolts against the dictatorial authority that historiography claims and justifies through the incorruptible relationship of such documents, especially of primary documents, to the actuality of a historical situation, just as the doubtful authenticity of Bowering's documents questions historiography. In other words, Wiebe, Atwood, and Bowering point out how the writer of a narration can or could create his or her own documents to support a story and pass them off as "real" documents, whether the narration is historical, fiction, or both. Commingling extra-textual documents, questionable- and pseudo-historical documents, and fictional writing in the space of one text contaminates the authority held by historical documents over the narration of historical situations.

There is a meta-fictional relationship involved in history-writing, fiction-writing, creating a primary document, and reading. The act of narrating is epistemologically analogous to the act of recording observations as a primary document, essentially because a primary document is a specific kind of narrativizing act. Both acts select events, then order them to tell them, or, in other words, both narrativize events. A primary document selects events which are located in an actual, external situation, while a history-writer or a fiction-writer also selects events which are located in an actual situation, but this situation is constituted by the primary and secondary documents in connection with the writer's ideas. Thus, Atwood's novel is in a way her primary document based on the documents and her ideas related to Grace Marks. In this sense, all writing can be considered a primary document, or a journal of the author's ideas about those ideas' referents. If a novel is thus a type of journal, then a novel based on journals and other

primary documents is metafiction because the novel's relationship to its sources mimics the reader's relationship to the novel. That is, the reader is consulting a primary source/journal in reading the novel and walks away with connected ideas based on the novel, just as the writer has done with his or her primary sources, and just as a journal writer has done with that actual, external situation. If the novel, an example of fiction-writing, can be considered a journal, which is a kind of history-writing, then the novel functions also as history-writing. The implication that a novel is thus both history- *and* fiction-writing deconstructs the traditional division between the two. While there are useful distinctions between primary documents, secondary documents, novels, and a reader's impressions, the point remains that "reality" is always mediated through narrativization. Or, in White's words, "reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience" ("Value of Narrativity" 20).

In *Burning Water*, the author/narrator feels that he needs to move his "body a long way from the putative setting of the story, from the western edge of European America to the eastern tail of western Europe" (*BW* 9). He goes on his own physical journey in order to search for and uncover the story he wants to write. In this search, he imitates the figurative exploration of ideas and documents that the author goes on in writing a story or that the historian goes on in writing history. It is an exploration into uncharted, unfamiliar territory, with potentially unforeseen results. Canada's postmodern paradoxical search for and denial of identity provides such an open space of possibilities into which the writer can journey. It is thus no surprise that all three novels present an exploration into a particular Canadian space which was unknown at the time of the initial search. After all, the land has a significant effect on Canadian identity. In his article "Canada in the Making," Wiebe says that "it was not a political or colonialist or any racial entity

which eventually gave Canada the nation its visibility: it was Canada the land" (123). The content and form of the novels thus resemble the paradoxical Canadian search for identity which Kroetsch claims contains a "willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives" (*Lovely Treachery* 23) by desiring to enter the unknown in search of new and different definitions of identity. If, to repeat my very first sentence, "Canada is supremely a country of margins" (*Lovely Treachery* 22), then it is in uncharted territories on the "margin, the periphery, the edge," at the "exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet" (*Lovely Treachery* 23) that the search for Canadian genealogy finds a multitude of possibilities, but no grounded, definitive answers. Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood place their stories in history and on the boundaries of the known world in exploring for possible Canadian identities.

Thomas Richards claims that empires, including of course the British empire, are fictions based on archives, that is, they are a construction "united not by force but by information" (*The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* 1). In *Burning Water*, Vancouver is a cartographer "conjoined to explore the coast from 30° north to 60° north" (*BW* 76) on the western edge of North America. In making such a map for England, he is broadening English knowledge, and thus expanding the British empire and implanting an already-established English identity on new areas of the globe. Vancouver draws the perimeter, which functions as a new line of demarcation and a border in-development for the British Empire. However, "the twisty edge of the North Pacific" (*BW* 59) where the ocean meets the land (and vice versa) is not a concise, distinct line, but instead a blurry zone of off-shore islands and salt-water inlets. Instead of offering a definitive edge, the land actually fades slowly into the open sea, just as the sea blends into the land. Menzies transportation of plants from the land onto the ship at sea further blurs this border and further implies that the pursuit of scientific fact defies boundaries. It is

therefore a transitional space and a place open to possibility. This resulting map of complex, intricate, jagged, misleading boundaries between earth and water is a physical analogue of how the borders drawn by the British Empire are imprecise and indistinct from a postmodern perspective. Moreover, Bowering deconstructs the British imposition of identity on Canadian land by amending this border with an Indian presence and perspective, thus making the border an illegitimate and British construction, overlaid on a naturally rocky, wavy, and fluctuating Canadian boundary between land and sea.

In his 1977 novel *The Scorched-Wood People*, Rudy Wiebe has the character Louis Riel declare that "this is a principle: God cannot create a tribe without locating it" (Qtd. in Wiebe's "Canada in the Making" 121). In writing a story in search of Canadian identity, Wiebe is subject to the same restriction as God is: Wiebe cannot create Canadians without locating them. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, he finds his story of a possible beginning of a new, postcolonial tribe of Canadians in the wide-open, northern land of pre-Canada. First, the animals occupy the landscape of his novel. Appropriately called "The Animals of this Country," Chapter One sketches an example of several animals' attempts at survival in the immense, desolate, wintry scene. The second chapter's title "Into a Northern Blindness of Names" implies not only the unfamiliarity certainly felt by the English and Canadian explorers headed into the "inexorable" (*DS* 1) and "unrelentless land" (*DS* 11) of the uncharted north country, but also the introduction into an unknown yet ancient community of Indians. The Indians certainly felt similarly with respect to the unimagined whites, with their "bandy legs and ridiculous clothes" (*DS* 16), and their unthinkably insistent demands for food and assistance. (The title also meta-fictionally implies the position of the virgin reader just delving into the book and having to acquaint him- or herself with the slew of characters about to be presented.) Going into a land "so cruel no human

being should ever live there" (*DS* 109), the whites leave behind the cultural center of the world they knew and head off towards "a northern blindness," voyaging into what they might consider the *nothingness* which lies past the edge of their culture. Yet they find themselves surrounded by an unfathomable, ominous, cold, snowy, Indian-occupied *something*. It is here, in a land unknown, and thus a land full of possibilities, where the whites converge on the Indians, then merge together with them. It is here, in the same space of unlimited possibilities, where Wiebe locates and creates his story.

The physical location of Atwood's *Alias Grace* is not nearly the wild, uncharted territory of the other two novels, but it is nonetheless situated on a frontier, an increasingly modern and urban, northern, Canadian frontier, and is thus also a space of opening possibilities. It is the area where the United States, the future world centerpiece, blurs into Canada, which then fades into the unfamiliar and endless openness of the Canadian heartland, then on into the desolate subarctic. Toronto is the local city, Richmond Hill "more like a village" (*AG* 206) to the north, and Kinnear's land a smaller space "past the edge of the village" (*AG* 208), even farther out into the frontier. Atwood finds her (hi)story of disputed murders here, on the edge of this Canadian frontier. But the more significant unknown territory which is explored in *Alias Grace* is not a physical place, but the mental space inside of Grace. Simon Jordan, a young doctor involved in the rudimentary science of psychology, acts in a role analogous to those of Vancouver and of the Franklin party because he too is a researcher, a scientist, an inquiring mind, attempting to delve into the uncharted, perhaps dangerous territory of Grace's mind, memory, and amnesiac blanks. It is an opportunity which he hopes "to be able to exploit in the interests of the advancement of knowledge, the mind and its workings being still . . . a *terra incognita*" (*AG* 53). He hopes to travel there by means of her narrative and with the aid of associative ideas; he is after all "an

investigative scientist" (AG 83). Grace occupies an unfamiliar but intriguing frontier space to Simon and the developing field of psychology, and is thus herself open to the exploration of not only Simon, but Atwood as well.

The reader of these novels (and most likely also of this thesis about relatively unknown contemporary Canadian literature) acts as an explorer into uncharted territory like the authors and their explorer characters. A novel is a space occupied by the open and infinite possibilities of language, but it waits for the reader to enter in, take the words, and with them form a particular story. Thus, three versions of exploration occur in these novels: the exploration involved in the story itself; that of the author in search of a Canadian story; and that of the reader voyaging through. The inclusion of exploration is therefore a meta-fictional comment on the part of the novels referring to the writing and the reading processes.

If the search for a novel is an exploration into open-ended, uncharted territory filled with unlimited options, then the resulting story is not the only story possible. Instead, many versions may come out of the same territory, none of which holds an absolute position of authority over all others because each is a possibility. Again, this is true for fiction-writing as well as history-writing. In these Canadian novels (which blend those two aspects of writing a narrative), history and its documents are both used and abused in the writing process. The traditional history, as recorded in and derived from its appropriate historical documents, is destabilized in its position of power as *the* story. This happens because other realms of possibility are opened up, realms which supply other versions, making the traditional history simply *a* version. Bowering sums up the volatile situation of history-writing in an interview with Ken Norris by giving the example that "people in Vancouver have been living with a version of Vancouver for years—a statue of

him on the City Hall lawn. It was copied from a famous painting. It turns out that the painting is probably a portrait of Vancouver's brother John" ("The Efficacy of the Sentence as the Basis of Reality: An Interview with George Bowering" 22). Because history-writing is a human narrative construction, the connections made between the selected events may not reflect the actuality of the historical situation. Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood take advantage of this fallible side of history-writing by making those connections between the selected historical events without necessarily respecting historical accuracy, then adding in and connecting fictional events to the historical events. In doing this, they use history-writing's innate inclination toward the narrativization of individual events to abuse history's fallible transition of events into narrative, creating stories which deconstruct the authority of history-writing.

As mentioned above, Wiebe and Atwood especially use historical documents to lend their stories authority and plausibility. These documents are both actual and fictional. Wiebe claims that the journal entries between chapters are "dated selections . . . quoted from the journals" (*DS* n.pag.) of Hood and Richardson, and are therefore real historical documents, with citations, much as Atwood cites the sources of her quotes at the beginning of each section, but neither cites sources for the letters between characters or the deposition included. Moreover, Bowering never cites his sources. This results in an ambiguity as to the historical reality of these documents. By not indicating which documents are in fact fictional and instead making the reader guess what the historical/fictional state of these documents is, the usage of historical documents to support historical-writing is undermined because it is no longer clear which documents are real and which are fakes. Further, even if these documents were historically valid, they nevertheless would be mediated versions of "reality."

Disregarding Bowering's documents if they are fake and the other novels' presumably

pseudo-historical documents, the remaining documents in *A Discovery of Strangers* and in *Alias Grace*, which can be assumed to be legitimately historical documents, form only the skeleton of their respective novel. The muscle and organs which breathe life into this skeleton are created by the author on that frame. One frame, however, can support many different bodies. Or, in the case of Grace Marks, one body can support two minds. Simon attempts, "with a method based on suggestion, and the association of ideas . . . to reestablish the chain of thought, which was broken, perhaps, by the shock of the violent events in which she was involved" (*AG* 84-85). He expects to find the truth about Grace's involvement in the murders. He is unsuccessful until, contrary to expectations, Mary Whitney's personality and voice is revealed as somehow channelling through Grace during the hypnotism. Mary Whitney's personality is opposed to Grace's in quality and knowledge, leaving Simon faced with several conclusions. Mary Whitney is conscious of Grace's actions and ideas when Grace is the dominant personality, but Grace seems to be utterly unaware of Mary Whitney's continuous presence in her. In exploring Grace's psyche in search of a story, Simon is ultimately faced with the problem of "two distinct personalities, which may coexist in the same body" (*AG* 406). Grace's body is essentially a physical manifestation of the problem with attempting to recreate the past based on primary documentation: once source, two versions of the truth, and a multitude of possibilities. Instead of finding a solution in Grace's version of the story, Simon finds the problem of two versions of Grace's story.

In *Burning Water*, Bowering seems intentionally to be attempting to make just the problem that Grace unconsciously manifests. In response to historians' criticism that *Burning Water* is historically inaccurate, Bowering says "I always simplified my defense by saying that the version of Vancouver's life we had before my book is just a version, and that I decided to

make things better for him in my version" (Norris "Efficacy" 22). Whether or not things are actually better for Vancouver in Bowering's version is debatable, but Bowering does indeed make his own version of Vancouver's story. He justifies the liberties he takes with history in the prologue by declaring that his novel is "about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken. Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor" (*BW* 8). Therefore, the storyteller does just that: he makes history by taking it from the "facts," facts such as Vancouver being just another dead sailor, and turning it into a narration. These facts and Bowering's fictitious events combine to make a version of Vancouver's (hi)story.

Bowering's version does not agree with the traditional history, which is perhaps made most blatant in Menzies' murder of Vancouver before they return to England. In the "real" story, Vancouver returns safely to England after his voyage. In addition, Bowering adds many details which do not appear in the official British version of the expedition's accomplishments. For example, he focuses the story on the development of Vancouver's character as a pedantic perfectionist with a "reputation for discipline that preceded him" (*BW* 53), and as a man striving narcissistically for historical immortality, who "wanted his name and exploits to be a part of the world any Englishman would walk through" (*BW* 63). The bitter and competitive relationship between Vancouver and Menzies, the expedition's scientist, as well as the homosexual relationship between Vancouver and Quadra, the captain of the Spanish navy, are also developed in detail. Through telling Vancouver's personal story, his historic expedition takes a background role on which personal and interpersonal developments exist in the spotlight, thereby resuscitating Vancouver from the state of being just another dead sailor. *Burning Water* is thus an exaggeration of and embellishment on that traditional history meant to point out through these very exaggerations and embellishments how susceptible history is to a human's perspective. As

Linda Hutcheon claims, "in postmodern fiction, facts are made to seem fictional and fictions are made to seem factual" ("History" 182).

HISTORY AND FICTION AS MULTIPLICITY

Another way the problem of multiple versions of history can be emphasized is by calling attention to the multiple points of view that one event can have. Historical events are especially prone to conflicting opinions and points of view because each point of view has its own unique perspective. When a historian writes, however, it is virtually impossible to include each and every perspective in recreating the event. Even if such all-encompassing inclusion were possible, the actuality of the historical event remains separated by narrativization from any combined telling of it. Traditionally, the dominant culture in which the story is told receives the privilege of determining the "true" history. Since postmodernism began revealing the inherent unfairness in this privilege, history has been forced to face the instability caused by the problem of multiple perspectives, an instability that had always been there, but had usually been ignored. Neither Bowering, nor Wiebe, nor Atwood restricts the narrative to one point of view, and by not doing so, they further emphasize the fact that there are multiple versions of historical events, even fictionalized historical events.

Two Indians' reactions to the appearance of the English begin *Burning Water* and serve as an introduction of the English presence as a "vision" (*BW* 13) to the Indians as well as to the reader. By beginning the book with this outside perspective on Vancouver's story, Bowering highlights the presence in and influence on Vancouver's story of people outside of Vancouver's immediate social group. This is not too unusual because the unlimited omniscient narrator can voice the opinions and thoughts of minor characters in addition to those of the main character's

thoughts, as is the case with any such story. Therefore, Menzies and Quadra also receive points of view periodically. However, what is unusual is the additional presence of the author/narrator as a character in the novel. This meta-fictional move emphasizes the writer's presence, and thus his biases, prejudices, and predilections, in creating the story. In the preface, Bowering sets forth his own role along with the role of the reader in creating the story together with the characters by insisting that "we [himself and Vancouver] cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you" (*BW* 10), the reader. *Burning Water* has three levels of points of view: the characters', the author/narrator's, and the reader's. By including all of these, Bowering insinuates that such is the case with any telling of a history or a story.

Alias Grace, on the other hand, consists of two main points of view. One is an omniscient third-person narrator which allows the appearance of the thoughts and actions mainly of Simon, but also of other characters. The other is Grace acting as her own narrator in the first-person. She therefore gets to voice her own version of her story, while Atwood additionally includes external versions of Grace's story. There are also the letters, which are by nature written in a conversational first-person, and the primary source citations at section beginnings, which provide historical characters' points of view, but the majority of the novel falls under one of the two main aforementioned narrative voices.

Rather than focusing on one central character's journey and experiences, Wiebe's story has no consistent narrator; he instead breaks up his narration into chapters which are each told from one of several unique narrative perspectives. For instance, the first chapter contains an omniscient third-person point of view which essentially ignores the characters who are yet to come into the story and focuses instead on the animals' lives in the subarctic. The second chapter is also told from an omniscient third-person point of view, but the focus is on the Indians'

thoughts, actions, and response to the arrival of the whites. Chapter Three switches the narrator to the first-person voice of midshipman George Back, the only time Back receives his own narrative voice. The third-person narrator returns in the fourth chapter, but this time with omniscience initially limited to the English. However, about halfway into the chapter, the narrator shifts back to the Indian's side, as in Chapter Two. The fifth chapter brings but another change in narrative strategy. Similar to the third chapter's narrator, it is written in the first-person from the perspective of seaman John Hepburn. However, it reads like a written oath or transcription of a retrospective testimony given by Hepburn, rather than a traditional first-person telling. From the Chapter Six on, the novel consistently stays with the third-person omniscient narrator in the present tense, with one exception: Chapter Twelve is basically split into two parts, the first being a collection of letters by John Richardson explaining the death of Robert Hood to his father in England; and the second part being a vernacular first-person explication of the deaths of Hood and Two-Speaker by, presumably, John Hepburn. By continually switching narrative points of view, especially in the first half of the novel, Wiebe reiterates the fact that narration always comes from one of many specific points of view. History-writing is no exception.

It is not just the realization that multiple points of view exist within each story that is important. An essential corollary to this realization is knowledge of the source of the acting point of view. Along with postmodernism's deconstruction of history's tendency to insist on the existence of one and only one version of the truth of a story, a deconstruction reflected by multiple points of view, postcolonialism and gender studies have begun emphasizing the inclusion of non-traditional points of view as equally, if not more valid versions of a story than

the traditional, top-of-the-hierarchy perspective's version. As with all British colonies, Great Britain supplied Canada with its history as a colony, a history written from an English point of view. Because of Canada's growing self-dependance and the decreasing connection between Canada and the crown, Canadians are more sensitive to including an "other" voice in their writing since they once felt like outsiders to the world and can thus empathize with minority points of view. Canada was, after all, a colonial possession of Britain, and is therefore now a postcolonial country. Just as, to the Indians, it seemed the whites "had heard only their own telling, as told to themselves" (*DS* 15), it seems to Canadians that the British have only considered British versions of history. With this in mind, our authorial Trinity of Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood has written non-traditional voices in an attempt to locate the existence of these previously neglected, but equally legitimate perspectives.

Atwood's novel is partially defined by its emphasis on telling a woman's story from a woman's point of view. As mentioned, Grace is the only character to hold a first-person narrator, and with this she receives the authority to tell the story from her point of view, rather than from the perspective of media-driven public opinion, of Susanna Moodie (the nineteenth century author of a version of Grace's story that Atwood calls "literary melodrama" (*AG* 462)), or of males in powerful community positions (such as "her lawyer . . . and a group of respectable gentlemen petitioners—who pleaded her youth, the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness" (*AG* 461)). Wiebe gives the Yellowknife Indians' perspective as much priority as, if not more priority than the whites' perspective in telling the story. After all, it is not just the whites who discover strangers; the Indians are also confronted with entirely strange (and ghostly pale) faces; the story is also the Indians' story. The Indians are also the significant "other" in *Burning Water*, but Bowering is not as focused on them as Wiebe is. In fact, although the

Indians have strong characters, they are almost sidelined by the fact that they do not receive names, but are known instead as "first" and "second" Indian—which is perhaps an accurate depiction of the whites' perception of the Indians as random individual versions of a universal noble savage.

In these three novels, history-writing and fiction-writing blur together under the auspices of narration. These authors deconstruct the wall between these two kinds of writing by locating their writing in between the two extremes. They deconstruct the authority over truth formerly held by history-writing by using primary documents, by meta-fictionally exploring uncharted spaces in creating a story, and by supplying different versions of a story from multiple and "other" points of view in their fiction-writing.

But why are these practices especially apparent in contemporary *Canadian* novels? What is it about the *Canadian* situation in the latter half of the twentieth century that would spawn writing that spans both fiction and history?

HISTORY AND FICTION AS IDENTITY

The case could be made that Canada is a nation which is just now beginning on its own to create its history. After years of being under British and/or American influence, Canadians now have gathered the audacity and the maturity to start defining themselves for themselves. And, there finally exists a small but substantial past of an independent Canadian nation from which to draw their own history. One can attempt to work backwards through time in search of some temporal place of origin, looking for that spot on the historical time line from which one could posit that "in the beginning, when God created Canada, the earth was formless and desolate," (as

indeed it seems to the Franklin expedition). But such an attempt will come up dry, for "we [Canadians] cannot find our beginning. There is no Declaration of Independence, no Magna Carta, no Bastille Day. We live with a terrible unease at not having begun" (Kroetsch "Canada is a Poem" Qtd. in Wiebe's "Canada in the Making" 124). Instead, Canada seems to have faded into existence from no single, distinct point, but from a multiplicity of people, places, things, and ideas. The result is, in Wiebe's words, a "unique pluralistic culture" which "has been shaped by the ethnic variety of its people, who have come from every area of the world, and by its creative artists, primarily written and painted into existence so that the state of Canada is no longer in doubt" ("Canada" 112). This "polyglot, pluralistic state" ("Canada" 113) may not be in doubt, but that very characterization suggests a fractured, unspecific, and multiple past; it implies Canada has origins in many places, thus explaining Canada's lack of a specific beginning. Kroetsch seems to agree with Wiebe's finding that Canada's creative artists are partly responsible for bringing Canada into existence, when he claims that, "in novel after novel, the quest is, implicitly or even explicitly, genealogical" ("Beyond Nationalism" v). A genealogical search aims at a definition of identity; where you've been and where you're from defines who you are. Canadian writers, through writing genealogical quests, have helped bring Canada and Canadian identity into their present existence.

Bowering, Wiebe, and Atwood are no exception to Kroetsch's claim: their novels are also genealogical quests into Canada's past. By digging into historical events on Canadian soil, each author uncovers the immature roots of one species of Canadian identity. In elaborating upon his or her chosen historical events, each takes those roots and feeds them with creativity and possibility, encouraging them to grow upward into the boundless sky as an individual Canadian identity. I have hopefully shown that each novel smears, in one smooth postmodern movement,

history-writing and fiction-writing together into one messy narrative mass. Therefore, each of the novels is both founded in a Canadian past (as history-writing) and created in a Canadian present (as fiction-writing). The outcome of this dialogue between the history, fiction, the author, and the reader is the positing of an instance of Canadian identity. If, as Kroetsch claims, the identity of Canada, and thus of Canadian literature, is manifest in its very disunity, then these novels should each be unique and therefore only definable as *Canadian* literature in their being different from one another. This is in fact the case. *Burning Water* is a postmodern deconstruction of history through the narrator's self-conscious emphasis that he is freely retelling (and perhaps inventing) the story of a historical individual to you, the reader. It is a prime example of what Linda Hutcheon terms historiographic meta-fiction. *A Discovery of Strangers* focuses more on telling the story of two communities (a western and an "other") from both of their perspectives, rather than the adventures of one masculine individual. Sherrill Grace characterizes such a story as a Canadian Northern. *Alias Grace* is the story of an "other" female figure and how gender identity is a construction of the community. It could be considered a feminist revision of history-writing and fiction-writing.

The prologue of *Burning Water* makes it apparent that this is not just the story of George Vancouver's 1790s exploration of the northwest coast of North America, but equally a self-conscious expedition into the epistemological realm of *énonciation* by the narrator/author, George Bowering, an expedition on which the reader is invited along. Linda Hutcheon explains the French linguistic idea of *énonciation* as "the discursive context of the writing and reading of the text" (*Canadian Postmodern* 61). So, when Bowering, as the narrator, claims that he and Vancouver "cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you" (*BW* 10),

he is referring to *énonciation*. In other words, he slaps you, the reader, to wake you up from your sleepy suspended disbelief and to remind you of your presence as a reader with him and the text. He purposefully acknowledges the presence of three significant factors (characters, narrator, and reader) that participate in the production of a text. While postmodernism has made it a point to highlight the presence of these factors, they have always been there. "We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction," (*BW* 10) the narrator/author says. It is a sort of Bakhtinian dialogism, but in this case, the "other" suddenly included in the conversation with the traditional participants is the reader.

But who exactly is the Vancouver in *Burning Water*, if his story is created not just by him or his contemporaries, but also by the narrator/author and the reader? Can the Vancouver of history and the Vancouver of *Burning Water* be one and the same if, for instance, the historical figure Vancouver is *not* shot and killed by Menzies, but returns to London? As the narrator/author points out, there are significant temporal and spatial distances between the historical Vancouver and the narrator/author, since "in 1792, for instance, some English ships appeared out of the probable fog off the west coast of North America, where Burrard Inlet is now, but in the late sixties of the twentieth century I was staring at the sea from Trieste" (*BW* 9), not to mention when and where on the planet the reader might be. Without actually being there at Vancouver's side, the narrator/author of Vancouver's story is at best *accurately speculative*. Yet, even if he had been there at Vancouver's side, history remains always outside of history-writing because narrativization sits stubbornly between the two. As Hayden White would find, the narrative of Vancouver's story "becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give to *real* events the *form* of story" ("Value of Narrativity" 4); if instead we realize that history-writing, like

fiction-writing, is a creative act (and *not* a perfectly accurate reflection of the reality of a historical situation), then the discrepancies between the two Vancouvers are explained. However, the authority of history-writing disappears in this explanation. Bowering emphasizes history-making's dependence on the narrator and on the reader. His narrator even claims that the novel is partially "about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken" (*BW* 8).

The author presents the reader with the text, which is essentially a collection of written language. Vancouver is then only present to the reader's perception through the language which the author has chosen for the text. To the reader then, Vancouver is a construction of the author's selected language. In addition, the reader holds his or her own understanding of the author's language, an understanding which reflects the reader's language. Thus, Vancouver is a construction of the combination of the reader's language with the author's language as reflected in the text. By implying that Vancouver is a language construction, metafiction employs *énonciation* to link the reader to the historical figure. Or, in Hutcheon's words, if "language in a sense constitutes reality, rather than merely reflecting it, readers become the actual and actualizing links between history and fiction, as well as between the past and the present" (*Canadian Postmodern* 65). Therefore, the reader participates with George Bowering and the traces of history in creating a version of the historical figure George Vancouver. Through historiographic metafiction, Bowering's novel insists that locating a source or definition for Canadian identity is an on-going process on both the part of the writer and of the reader.

Sherrill Grace makes a distinction between traditional stories of the American west and contemporary stories of the Canadian north. Appropriately enough, she differentiates her new

Canadian sub-genre from the traditional American Western by calling it the "Canadian Northern" ("Western Myth and Northern History: The Plains Indians of Berger and Wiebe" 154). She cites Wiebe's 1973 novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* as an example of a Canadian Northern. As such, it focuses on a "group of people, different, separate, yet all together attempting to communicate" ("Western Myth" 150), and is "an orchestration of voices and perspectives with striking variations in rhetorical style" ("Western Myth" 149). The Wiebe novel I have chosen for this thesis could also be considered a Canadian Northern. As such, it is a member of a sub-genre of fiction which postmodernly rewrites the American Western by contradicting its stereotypical features, and in doing so, subverts a dominant paradigm.

The narrator changes repeatedly throughout the novel, giving a voice not only to several of the whites, but also to several of the Indians. In between chapters, selections from the expedition's journals appear, lending a form of historical evidence for the reader to consider as substantiation for the plausibility of the elaborated story. The story is not based around the adventures of one central figure, nor does it create a Western-centered hierarchy of characters. Instead, it tells of the encounter between two drastically different communities, the Indians and the whites. This encounter and its inherent misunderstandings are related fairly equally by both communities. For instance, just as the Englishmen mistake an Indian grief ceremony for "a witches' or (more likely) a devils' sabbath, performed with typical native perversity in the glare of high noon rather than midnight" (*DS* 63), Keskarrah questions how the Indians will "be able to live in [their] world with These English" (*DS* 75). The different narrative voices held by the whites and by the Indians reflect the differences between Western and Indian ideas of community organization. The only first-person narrators are white, which reflects the Western celebration of the individual and his or her perspective. The Indians, on the other hand, are narrated by an

omniscient communal voice which knows them all. Even as the Indians "have no word for 'chief'" (*DS* 34), they have no chief, so, when they are presented, they are presented as a non-hierarchical group. Greenstockings could perhaps be considered the main Indian character, but she never receives her own first-person narrator, nor is she ever involved in a scene without the presence of her mother, father, sister, and/or husband. The Indians not only appear as a community, but are given a communal voice, while the whites often appear as individuals representing their community, although none receives an enduring leading role.

By giving the Indians a voice equal in significance to the voice of the whites, *A Discovery of Strangers* is a postcolonial writing as well as postmodern. Although Wiebe himself is not Indian, but white, he feels justified in writing the Indians' perspective. As a child in a Mennonite community, he spoke Low-German at home, and was thus in an alienated minority, as the Indians were. Growing up in a colonized nation, he says that "Dickens' world was never my world. So I could distance myself from the imperial concept of history as it expressed itself in Canada because I myself had nothing to do with that imperial world. Never had had. It was always as foreign to me as it was for any Indian" (Juneja, Salat, and Mohan "'Looking at Out Particular World': An Interview with Rudy Wiebe" 9). Allocating the points of view to both racial sides of the story is not just Wiebe being fair and giving the Indians the very least of what is due them. It is also the deconstruction of differentiating between peoples based on race. In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes: "Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' . . . the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident" (xxv). It is this us/them binary which Wiebe and Canadian Northerners erase, leaving one *hybrid* culture. The purest form of this cultural hybridity is evident when Hood, an Englishman, and Greenstockings, and Indian,

have a child together.

According to Grace, a Canadian Northern text "resembles the narrative or journal of the explorer and chronicler who passes through a landscape, experiencing it" and makes the reader feel as well like this explorer because he or she "explores the text, listens to the voices, experiences the fear and wonder of the land and, most important, contemplates the mystery of otherness" ("Western Myth" 154). Even though the reader is not overtly acknowledged in *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe insinuates that the reader is such an explorer and should participate in creating the story by assessing the story's evidence. He does this by undermining traditional history's usage of a single, authorized, omniscient, third-person narrator's presentation of history, and by deconstructing fiction's traditional focus on one masculine individual as the central character of the story. The novel's deconstruction of history-writing's traditional voice supplies the reader with multiple points of view as replacements for that authoritarian voice. The reader must determine the truth of the story based on a plurality of sources. The unfamiliar community format shocks the reader into reevaluating his or her role as a western reader because the reader is now asked to be involved in the story's creation on both sides of the strenuous communication between two different and separate communities, rather than just sitting back and enjoying an adventure tale. The novel is itself a metafictional and postcolonial exploration of a possible source for a hybrid Canadian identity.

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood does not supply any geographical exploration of unknown places, as is true of the other two novelists. Instead, she gives the reader the uncharted mind of the accused murderer Grace Marks as well as the contemporary social standards to which she was bound, as subjects of exploration. To Simon Jordan, Grace's mind occupies an unfamiliar

but intriguing space which he can probe with the ideas of the rudimentary field of psychology while seeking the identity she has indirectly lost to the community because of her amnesia about the murders. Therefore, she is herself a studied text, as the land and the Indians are in the other two novels. To the community, Grace is a woman who had stepped outside of the prescribed female role by supposedly murdering Kinnear and Nancy. Therefore, Grace is also as much an "other" as Wiebe's Indians are. *Alias Grace* is an exploration of the mind as an unfamiliar space and of an "other" within the dominant, imperial, and male culture.

The community shows significant interest in Grace's story, or at least in its popular reconstruction of her story. The idea of a murderer potentially inspired by jealous love for her master captivates the community around Grace, as evidenced by the widespread attention the case received "not only in Canadian newspapers, but in those of the United States and England . . . over the course of the century" (*AG* 461). By initially sentencing Grace to death, the community acted under the voice of the judge to remove Grace's personality, to efface her identity, essentially to remove a self which they did not condone. In commuting her sentence to life in prison, the community moved to contain her identity and keep it from escaping or evolving naturally and on its own. Both were acts of social cleansing. Because the community acted as a unit in judging Grace, her identity was communally determined. Her actions have been entirely under outside control; she has had effectively little to no self-determination and is thus resigned to hopes that her monotonous future will coincidentally improve, that she will have "a better breakfast tomorrow than [she] had today." Through being incarcerated, Simon says that "her story is over. The main story, that is; the thing that [had] defined her" (*AG* 91). She no longer held even a simple majority's control in determining her identity, but was instead a figure which was to a great extent defined by a community which insisted that she "must be lying" (*AG*

307). Grace Marks identity is as much, if not more so, a social construction external to her person as a reflection of her own self—until, that is, Atwood came along and brought with her an audience.

Simon works in opposition to the community and in defense of Grace's self. To Simon, Grace is not solely an incarcerated suspected murderer, but a human with a story to tell and memories to recover. He tells her, "It is not the question of your guilt or innocence that concerns me. . . . I am a doctor, not a judge. I simply wish to know what you yourself can actually remember" (*AG* 307). Through her memories, he attempts to find her identity which was lost to the community through its punishment of her because of her amnesia about the murders. By acting out his role as investigating scientist, he listens to Grace's story in an attempt to explore her mind and trace her psyche, things "nobody has cared about . . . before" (*AG* 307). She is, however, a strange and unknown text to him and to his science, as she is a strange and misunderstood "other" to society. Therefore, Grace could be considered by the dominant culture a sort of savage, just as Indians and other colonized peoples were. Because of situations like Grace's, in which females had no credibility, Western females of the nineteenth century were in a similar predicament as colonized or exploited minorities. With postmodernist deconstructions of centers, imperial and phallo-logo-centric tradition are also subject to fall. *Alias Grace* is a postmodern feminist text.

Despite Simon's role as a proponent of the male tradition, Atwood gives Grace a second chance through his character. In him, Grace has a fairly unbiased audience in the novel in front of whom she regains her identity and to whom she can re-tell her story. As Grace puts it, she "has no reason not to be frank" with Simon since "a lady might conceal things, as she has her reputation to lose; but [Grace] is beyond that" (*AG* 90). Plus, she thinks that he "appears to be a

trusting man" (*AG* 62). When she and Simon converse, they are essentially outside of the communal setting because he does not base her identity on the community's version, but instead is interested in finding it himself. Outside of the penitentiary walls and in the governor's wife's sewing room with Simon, she is thus freed to not only hold her own identity again in his presence, but to re-create her own identity through the story she tells him. Simon acts almost as the jury Grace never had, waiting to weigh the evidence and determine Grace's "true" self in order to decide if the community's version of Grace Marks, the infamous murderer, is in fact accurate. In this way, she is "beyond" lady, a meta-lady: within the situation with Simon, she does not have a reputation at risk (which would otherwise influence if not determine her actions), and can act as she will, without the stigma, the requirements, and the expectations of being a lady.

Because of Simon's attentive presence, she has the advantage of indirectly telling her story in the first-person to the reader. A first-person narrator has complete control of what is presented to the reader when that voice is engaged. Grace is the only character that Atwood gives such a voice. The only other narrator is an asexual, omniscient third-person, thus allowing details of the story outside of Grace's perception, such as Simon's life away from Grace, to surface. But Grace gets to tell her own story, which Atwood allows almost out of vengeance for the community's unfair assumption of control over her identity. Her voice is returned to her, and the reader should be more apt to believe the story "from the horse's mouth." Simon's part in the story, however, is told by an unknown third-person. The female hold on power is thus visible in the narrative structure of the novel.

The journey of Simon into Grace's psyche in search of her past through story-telling metafictionally resembles the journey of the reader into the book. By reading *Alias Grace*, the

reader explores a version of the past through Atwood's story-telling. But, just as Grace has amnesia about the past, the history-writer can come across blank spaces in history, places where he or she may have to do a little fiction-writing to complete the narrative. In researching for this novel, Atwood has done just that. She collected the historical documents, as displayed at the beginnings of the sections, and filled in the gaps to complete her version of the story, to give Grace Marks another alias. The (hi)story of Grace Marks, murderer, is another location in the Canadian past where a version of Canadian identity, an identity including the female voice, can begin forming. Atwood's novel is a manifestation of what Hutcheon notes is "the relationship between the national search for a cultural identity and the feminist seeking for a distinctive gender identity in terms of the paradoxical (and I would say, postmodern) recognition and combatting of 'colonial' positions toward the power of dominating cultures" (*Canadian Postmodern* 6).

HISTORY AND FICTION AS A CONCLUSION

These three novels are examples of Canadian identity if for no other reason than by virtue of the fact that they are indeed Canadian. But the simple application of that adjective "Canadian" is insufficient evidence that they have earned the adjective. More proof is needed to justify this claim. What makes these novels Canadian?

First of all, they each search back into the chronological list of historical events which have transpired on geography that is contemporarily called "Canada" for historical figures who existed in that Canadian geography. George Vancouver, Robert Hood, and Grace Marks spent at least part of their lives on Canadian soil or what would become Canadian soil. Their actions on that Canadian soil were not insignificant, as evidenced by the duration of their names through

history and the historical documents presented in the novels. So, one can establish that the novels present versions of historical figures out of Canada's past.

But Vancouver's story could be just as well written by an English author. Simply because he trod upon future Canadian ground doesn't make his story Canadian. These novels must exhibit Canadian characteristics apart from their geographic situations to be considered authentically Canadian. For instance, to continue focusing on geographical terms, Hutcheon claims that "the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada's perceived position in international terms" (*Canadian Postmodern* 3), while Kroetsch calls Canada "supremely a country of margins" (*Lovely Treachery* 22). These novels' stories certainly occur on a margin, whether it is the coastline dividing the Pacific Ocean from the North American continent; or the northern boundary of Canadian territory, heading into a northern blindness; or the frontier past Toronto, where the edge of the expanding science of psychology is pushed.

These Canadian margins are not just places "of transgression. The periphery is also the frontier, the place of possibility" (Hutcheon *The Canadian Postmodern* 3). The novels don't just pass through these borders, they take place on and take possibility from the borders. Vancouver must have a physical line to trace and transfer to his map. The Franklin expedition receives food, supplies, advice, bewilderment, and conflict from the Indians at the border before continuing on their way. Simon must be willing to sit, face to unveiled face, with an accused murderer, before delving into her mind. The authors as well found their novels on the fragile boundary between history and fiction, then lead their narratives in both directions at once.

Wiebe thinks that Canada "is a polyglot, pluralistic state; that in it the cultural 'melting pot' does not and never did exist" ("Canada" 113), while Kroetsch claims it is both "the nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel" ("Beyond Nationalism" xi). The novels provide no

ultimate, melted down Canadian, blended to purity, but instead always a Canadian multitude of kinds, races, and points of view: Indian, white, English, American, female, scientific, exploratory, imperial, traditional, homosexual, educated, Irish . . .

But at the same time, Canada is an example of what Homi Bhabha calls the "transnational dimension of cultural transformation—migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation" ("Postcolonial Criticism" 438), a characteristic of postcolonial culture that defies a person's being succinctly defined, thus allowing Kroetsch to claim that the "escape from definition excites the Canadian beyond all reason" ("Beyond Nationalism" viii). Perhaps best shown in the child of Hood and Greenstockings (a truly Canadian child, both red and white), hybridity shows up elsewhere in these novels: Englishmen and Indians fornicate; Vancouver sleeps with Quadra, himself a Peruvian in charge of Spain's navy; Grace is an Irish immigrant, and Kinnear Scottish; Grace ultimately marries a Canadian in the United States.

As in these characters' backgrounds, there "is no single source; rather, a multiplying of possibilities" (Kroetsch "Beyond Nationalism" vi), both historical and fictional, on which the novels base their (hi)stories. Wiebe breaks up his chapters with some of the expedition's journal entries; Atwood's sections are prefaced by newspaper clippings, poems, and secondary sources; and Bowering creates his possibility for George Vancouver on the infinite choices in his own and in his reader's imagination.

Canadian identity is in fact a multiplying of possibilities, and not just the possibilities contained in the selected texts, but also those of the writer and those of the reader. The texts are already multiple; then the writer takes them, combines them, rearranges them, and improvises upon them, creating anew, creating a *novel* (etymology: new) out of the possibilities of him/herself and those of the texts; the reader, in turn, acts as the writer did, improvising

possibility upon that novel. The history is there, the writer is there, the story is there, and the reader is there, working together to posit possible versions of Canadian identity.

After all, if Canada is a postmodern country, as Kroetsch claims (*Lovely Treachery* 22), no one meta-narrative can exist in a position of authority over the nation's identity. If a meta-narrative does exist, it exists along with a multitude of other meta-narratives, each available as a particular choice. This is the case because the Canadian writer's search for identity is a genealogical search. Looking into the Canadian past in search of that moment of origin, postmodernism's endless chain of signifiers is revealed in place of a specific located beginning: "Bogat bogat bogat" ("Beyond Nationalism" v) is really begun begun begun . . . *Burning Water*, *A Discovery of Strangers*, and *Alias Grace* are each the respective author's attempt at locating a jumping-off point from which the reader can define his or her version of Canadian identity. Wiebe says that "Identity is always . . . an individual question," so, as an individual writer, he seeks "uniqueness/distinction: not any average, period" (Juneja "Looking" 17). George Bowering, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Atwood are not average, and neither are their novels, period. But, together in their differences, they do create the Canadian story out of the Canadian history. The result is a plurality of people, a multitude of stories, a polyglot of histories, and a multiplicity of identities, each with a claim to Canadian-ness.

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