

NECESSARY FICTIONS: RESPONSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN  
HISTORICAL FICTION

PhD Thesis – Erin Aspenlieder

McMaster University – English

NECESSARY FICTIONS: RESPONSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN  
HISTORICAL FICTION

By

ERIN ASPENLIEDER, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement

for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

© Copyright by Erin Aspenlieder, 2011

PhD Thesis – Erin Aspenlieder

McMaster University – English

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2011)

McMaster University

(English and Cultural Studies)

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Necessary Fictions: Responsibility in Contemporary Canadian Historical Fiction

AUTHOR: Erin Aspenlieder, B.A. (McMaster), M.A. (University of Western Ontario)

SUPERIVSOR: Lorraine M. York, Ph.D.

NUMBER OF PAGES: 255

**Abstract**

This dissertation considers the *use* – both the function and the value – of history in nine contemporary Canadian historical novels: Steven Heighton's *Afterlands* (2005), Don Gillmor's *Kanata* (2009), Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1995), Fred Stenson's *The Trade* (2000), Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* (2003), Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), Marilyn Simonds's *The Holding* (2005), Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* (2004) and Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* (2006). It asks what responsibilities authors of historical novels hold to the past and to readers in the present. It argues for making a distinction between irresponsible and responsible historical fiction, a separation marked not by the strict adherence to “fact,” but rather by the acknowledgement of the continued effect of past actions and relationships on the present, specifically the present configuration of the nation called Canada. I also characterize responsible historical fiction as committed to the notion of “truth-to-meaning” and requiring an engaged and active reader.

### **Acknowledgements**

It might be the case that I have spent as much time thinking about my gratitude to those people who made this dissertation possible as I have about the dissertation itself, knowing that my work and my ability to work owed so much to others.

I benefited tremendously from the generosity and intelligence of my supervisor, Lorraine York. While her (frighteningly prompt) responses to my questions and my writing provided a near-constant flow of intellectual stimulation, her warmth and enthusiasm gave me the encouragement I needed to keep going or to try again. Likewise, at every stage of this process my first reader, Daniel Coleman, and my second reader, Roger Hyman, offered keen and thoughtful commentary, while never failing to express their excitement for the project. Thank you each for giving me so much.

I am a member of a terrific community at McMaster. Thanks to the members of the Canadianist Reading Group, to my colleagues, and to the professors who coupled intellectual rigor with an ethic of care; to my colleagues on “Team York,” most especially to Paul Huebener, my thesis-writing-Blizzard-eating-idea-sharing partner; to the administrative staff of Antoinette Somo, Ilona Forgo-Smith, Bianca James and Aurelia Gatto who solved my problems before I knew they were problems; to the folks at the Centre for Leadership in Learning for valuing my interest in teaching; to the members of writers group for the creative stimulation (and the food).

Along the way I found encouragement and distraction from a crew of wonderful people. Thanks to Eva Lane, Emily West, Brandon Kerfoot, Richard Davila, Lucy Langston and Lisa Kabesh for all the pints, plates of breakfast, games and uninhibited laughter; to Chelsea Lloyd and Sarah McDonough for emails, phone calls, cards and conversations about the world outside the academy. Thanks to Nick Holm for asking me about Canada, for sharing books with me like *Banal Nationalism*, for worrying as much as I do, and for believing I could do it. Thanks to Pam Ingleton for nine minute phone calls, for trips and grand schemes, for telling me all the things I ought to know but don’t, and for caring 110%.

Thanks to Iain and Adrienne for going first, for living your lives with an enthusiasm and generosity I admire and aspire to.

Thanks to Matthew for being my partner in crime, in conversation, in life.

Finally, thanks to my mum and dad for reading to me as a little person and for continuing to share books and ideas; for believing the work I do is valuable and for telling me so; for phone calls and cards of encouragement; and for their undefeatable faith in me. Their love for stories and communities has taught me more than my education ever will. Thank you.

**Contents**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: EXPLORING THE BORDERS OF NATION: SKETCHES TOWARD AN INDEFINITE MAP</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: CLOTH AND TRADE: LOCATING (HISTORIC) RESPONSIBILITY AND JUSTICE IN TRADE STORIES</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: (UN)SETTLING PAST AND PRESENT: USING AND INHERITING HISTORY IN SETTLER NARRATIVES</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>245</b>

## Introduction

History is what Canadians have in common.  
-Desmond Morton, *A Short History of Canada*

History is so distorted it is irrelevant.  
-Georges Sioui, *Histories of Kanatha Seen and Told*

Listen to me now. I have a story to tell you.  
-Michael Crummey, *River Thieves*

On August 15<sup>th</sup> 2008 the Canadian Environment Minister, John Baird, announced a federal investment of \$75 000 in a Parks Canada search and rescue mission. The mission, to recover the wrecks of the *Erebus* and the *Terror* – two ships lost during John Franklin's failed 1845 expedition to chart the Northwest Passage – aimed to use the wrecks to reassert Canadian “use” of the arctic waters. In his announcement Baird stated that “We [the Canadian government] think every bit of weight we can put behind our case for sovereignty is important. Adding history to that equation can only enhance that case” (CanWest). Baird's emphasis on the utility of historical material to Canada's claim of arctic sovereignty reflects a common expectation that history can be, and indeed ought to be, put to use in the service of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Baird's understanding of history as useful invites the questions of what and whose ends might history serve?

This dissertation considers the *use* – both the function and the value – of history in

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, political commentators J.L. Granastein (1998), Andrew Cohen (2007), Michael Valpy (2004), John Ralston Saul (2008), and Rudyard Griffiths (2009) all argue for the utility of Canadian history in improving democratic participation and citizen engagement. They differently, but consistently, argue that a shared knowledge of Canadian history is vital for the continued coherence of the nation-state.

nine contemporary Canadian historical novels: Steven Heighton's *Afterlands* (2005), Don Gillmor's *Kanata* (2009), Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1995), Fred Stenson's *The Trade* (2000), Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* (2003), Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), Marilyn Simonds's *The Holding* (2005), Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* (2004) and Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* (2006). It asks what responsibilities authors of historical novels hold to the past and to readers in the present. It argues for making a distinction between irresponsible and responsible historical fiction, a separation marked not by the strict adherence to “fact,” but rather by the acknowledgement of the continued effect of past actions and relationships on the present, specifically the present configuration of the nation called Canada. I also characterize responsible historical fiction as committed to the notion of “truth-to-meaning” and requiring an active and engaged reader.

In this introductory section I will describe the critical context of historical “truth-to-meaning” and the central paradox of historical fiction as both a critique and reassertion of historical truth. I will then describe how, given the creation of a historical narrative in contemporary historical fiction, authors must grapple with issues of responsible representation of the past and responsible engagement with the realities of the present. I will then identify the specific characteristics of a responsible historical fiction and present preliminary arguments for its importance in contributing to contemporary narratives of the nation and of national belonging by introducing each of the three chapters contained in this study.

**Acceptable Truth: Beyond the Post-structuralist Critique of Historiography**

What is “truth-to-meaning”? Historian Ann Rigney theorizes the difference between “truth-to-actuality” and “truth-to-meaning” in her 2001 text *Imperfect Histories*. She argues that

Representations that are “true-to-actuality” claim fidelity to historical sources and their authority is thus based on their relation to evidence and to the historical particulars gleaned from it. . . . In contrast, representations that are “true-to-meaning” claim to have insight into the underlying configuration of past events, and their authority is based to a lesser degree on evidence and much more on confidence in the understanding and learning of the interpreter. (26)

Katherine Durnin takes up Rigney's theory of “truth-to-meaning” in an article on Fred Stenson's *The Trade* in which Durnin suggests that the “The play of imaginary and real archives in the novel shows how the fiction writer, in imagining the unknown contexts behind the historical record, may offer true and satisfactory interpretations of history” (82). The imaginative aspect of “truth-to-meaning” recalls Aristotle's distinction in *Poetics* between poetry and history: “Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (17). “Truth-to-meaning” differs, however, from Aristotle's notion of the universal truths relayed in fiction, in that it aims to incorporate those historical facts widely accepted as true in narratives that interrogate the intentions of both the historical evidence and the perceived gaps in state, public and personal archives – what I refer to here as “the historical record.” Thus “truth-to-meaning” relies on the author's imaginative interpretation of historical events and absences, while remaining committed to presenting

a version of history bound by widely accepted historical facts.

I specify “widely accepted” historical facts because, in the wake of Hayden White's work on the dependence of historiography on the discursive conventions and subjective interpretation of historical evidence, the impartiality and the very possibility of historiography came under intense scrutiny from philosophers, historians and literary critics in the 1970s and 1980s who suggested that such dependence prevented historians from accessing unmediated historical truth.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the subjective assemblage and interpretation of evidence, the representation of the historian's interpretation in narrative form, and the ideological assurance that a historical narrative can represent the past on its own terms formed significant sites of debate. Herb Wylie's introduction to his field-defining 2002 text, *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*, offers an excellent overview of the structuralist and post-structuralist arguments that present history as necessarily discursive. Wylie concludes this overview by noting that

If post-structuralist theorizing of language, representation, and subjectivity has created a certain ontological insecurity, Foucault's description of the operation of discursive regularities and White's view of historical discourse as figurative and allegorical limit the arbitrariness that is seen as the inevitable and disturbing outcome of critiques of reference. Discourse, in short, may not refer to a transcendent, objective reality, but it is nonetheless highly regulated rather than boundless. (31-2)

Wylie's observation highlights the danger that in accepting all historical writing as

---

<sup>2</sup> See E. Ermath, *Sequel to History*; R. Barthes, *The Discourse of History*; M. Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*; H. Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation*; R. Berkhofer, *The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice*; A. Rigney *Imperfect Histories*; D. Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel*; K. Jenkins.

necessarily discursive, and all historical “facts” as arbitrary interpretations or assertions, the “truth” of the past might dissolve into relativistic claims and counter-claims. His conclusion, that the discursive regularities that govern what may be considered a historical “reality” mitigate the danger of historical relativism, provides a bulwark against unjust or immoral representations of historical truth.

The authority of discursive regularities – those rules that govern the formation of discursive statements – remains partial, however, because as Wyile acknowledges, “historical discourse appears as an act of power, the assertion of a particular reading of the past that involves particular power relations, the exclusion of certain historical material and certain points of view, and the projection of a particular ideology, which traditionally, unsurprisingly, has been that of the victor” (12). Indeed revisionist histories and historical fiction operate against the power of established historical discourse to determine suitable subjects for historical inquiry. Moreover, for historical fictions, the investigation of the discursive power of history includes interrogation of both subject and form resulting in “not just a more historiographically liberated form, in which the materials of history are made highly malleable, but a much more diverse, heterogeneous, and self-conscious form” (Wyile 17). In other words, many writers of contemporary historical fiction seek to undermine the discursive authority of history not only by questioning who and what might be considered suitable subjects for historical inquiry, but also by self-consciously parodying, dismantling or self-reflexively displaying the formal conventions of historiography in their fictional works.

If the discursive regularities of historiography provide assurances against historical relativism and these same regularities are the subject of critique and challenge from revisionist historians and novelists, the fictions add dirt to the already muddied waters of historical truth. Indeed, in their critique of, and challenge to, the discursive regularities of historiography, historical novels cannot but open the possibility of historical relativism. This possibility is a fundamental risk of historical fiction: that in the proliferation of narratives that question and undermine the exclusionary practices and subjects of official historical discourse, a space is necessarily and inescapably created for fictions that work against “widely accepted” historical truths.

What follows, then, is the recognition that whether or how one chooses to distinguish between novelists and historians, writers of historical narratives must be guided by a rational determination of the plausible, what Gertrude Himmelfarb calls “partial, contingent truth” (158) or what Keith Jenkins refers to as the “more and less plausible” (23) – and what I am referring to here as “truth-to-meaning.” “Truth-to-meaning” accepts a certain opacity in existing historical evidence, as well as a skepticism about what registers as historical evidence in the first place, even while it asserts a likely, or plausible, explanation of past events that combines an investigation of the competing historical truths of historical evidence with the legacy of past actions and relationships in the present.

While Rigney's explanation that “truth-to-meaning” emerges from the experience and learning of the historian, I extend the responsibility of determining “truth-to-

meaning” to the reader of historical narratives. While Jerome de Groot suggests that historical fiction requires a more involved reader, in the sense that the reader is “slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past” (4), I argue that the responsibility of readers of historical narratives extends to an evaluation of a given narrative's “truth-to-meaning.” Historical fiction demands a mindful reader, one skeptical of univocal and unproblematic presentations of historical truth, but nevertheless open to the “reconfiguration, rather than the repudiation” (Wyile 33) of truth, in such a way as to consider “truth-to-meaning” not in a temporal vacuum but against the known and experienced reality of contemporary social, political and national life. The mindful reader of historical fiction should not be construed as a more adept reader, a reader more attuned to textual nuance, or a reader well versed in literary analysis; rather, the mindful reader of historical fiction is one willing to consider the genre's disruption of historical truth and its assertion of a competing historical story, and he or she is one who suspends chronological rigidity in order to consider the diffusion of the past in the present and the present in the telling of the past.

### **The Central Paradox: Historical Fiction Critiques History By Writing History**

Thus emerges the central paradox of contemporary historical fiction: a critique of the discursive regulations that shape the subjects and form of history that still manipulates these same regulations to assert visions and revisions of the “truth-to-meaning” of a historical moment, character, event or relationship. In spite of its varying levels of self-

reflexive skepticism of historical facts and historiographic conventions, it is nevertheless the case that historical fiction presents (re)visions of the past that function as histories, in that they offer readers a representation and an interpretation of the past.

Critics of Canadian historical fiction have done remarkable work in exploring the ways historical fiction and its readers interrupt or contest the authority of the historical record and historical writing. Linda Hutcheon's work on historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) and *The Canadian Postmodern* (1988) appeared two years after Dennis Duffy's survey of Canadian historical fiction, *Sounding the Iceberg* (1986), and complemented Duffy's extensive survey by focusing on the work of authors in the 1980s and 1990s and theorizing the interplay in these works between postmodern literary conventions and historiography. Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction as those novels "that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" (19) initiated a long, and continuing, conversation about the strategies for unsettling the discursive authority of historiography through fictional interpretations of the past, and the implications of doing so.

Following Hutcheon, many critics explored the effect of formal innovations and changes in subject matter in Canadian historical fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. Works like Martin Kuester's *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels* (1992), Manina Jones's *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary collage' and English-Canadian Writing* (1993) and Marc Colavincenzo's *Trading Magic*

*for Fact, Fact for Magic: Mythologizing in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction*

(2003) focus on formal innovations such as: chronological disruptions, intertextual references and inclusions, violation of grammar rules and diction choices, self-reflexive commentary on archival sources and searches, and the parody of historical writing in the inclusion of footnotes and bibliographies and the citation of source documents.

Colavincenzo's work examines how “postmodern Canadian historical fiction dismantl[es] the myth of historical practice and discourse” (xvi), while Kuester considers how parody operates in historiographic metafiction to unsettle historical practices like archival research. These works argue that formal “play” in postmodern historical fiction highlights the unacknowledged constructedness of traditional historical writing while opening space for imagined histories to do more than supplement didactic historiography, but to rival it as an equally valid means of representing the past.

Concurrent with these studies of the formal innovations of historical fiction, Marie Vautier's *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction* (1998) focuses on the relationship between the form of postmodern historical fiction and its subject matter, to argue for “new world myth” as an “exchange of [myth's] traditional function as transhistorical master narrative for a function characterized by postmodern indeterminacy, complex postcolonial attitudes, a questioning of history, and a developing self-consciousness that creates provisional and relative identities” (xi).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Vautier's work is exceptional in the studies of Canadian historical fiction for its analysis of works by English and French Canadian authors.

Vautier's work emphasizes how the deployment of a “new world myth” in contemporary historical fiction encourages the reader to re-evaluate how the present nation and how national belonging are imagined and defined in historical writing. Indeed her study shares with Colavincenzo, Kuester and Jones descriptions of how the innovations – whether in form and/or in content – of historical fiction intersect with discourses of the nation.<sup>4</sup>

The nation receives particular attention in Herb Wyile's *Speculative Fictions* (2002) in which he extends the conversations of his theoretical predecessors to argue that the historical fictions of the 1990s are “less radical” and “more ambivalent” (xiii) in their form because the postmodern and postcolonial sensibilities of the authors must be reconciled with the commercial market. Nevertheless, “[*Speculative Fictions*] main aim is to suggest some significant developments, shared interests, and recurrent strategies in the writing of history by [English-Canadian] novelists” (xv). Wyile's thoughtful consideration of the textual strategies and the subject matter in a wide range of contemporary Canadian historical novels concludes with the observation that the most recent works – those of the late 1990s and early 2000s – “come across as less profoundly skeptical about historiography, less concerned with fracturing and interrogating retrospection, and largely, if what somewhat ambivalently, rooted in historical verisimilitude and an engagement

---

<sup>4</sup> Which is not to say these critics attend exclusively to form or content; indeed their works emphasize the interdependence of form and content in challenging traditional models of history writing. Rather, it is to draw attention to the specificity of these foundational works and the complexity of the questions raised by postmodern history writing. Further I am wary of presenting a teleology of criticism that might suggest limitations in earlier criticism overwhelmingly focused on the changes in characteristics and subjects of history and fiction writing. Instead I want to signal the importance of these works to my own theorization of responsible historical fiction and that their work facilitates my recognition of the central paradox of historical fiction without the need to rehearse a well traversed theoretical landscape.

with (rather than abandonment or disruption of) the historical record” (263). Wylie's insight into the change in formal strategies of contemporary novelists – a return to realism – as a reflection of consumer demands begins a conversation about reader involvement in historical fiction that I aim to continue here.

However, my dissertation differs from these important critical antecedents in that it is less interested in the formal strategies employed by authors insofar as these strategies disrupt the authority of historical discourse, and it is less focused on the incorporation of traditionally marginalized historical subjects – indeed, several of the novels under study explicitly focus on traditionally heroic historical figures like David Thompson or trailblazing Scottish settlers. Rather, I accept these existing critics' formulations about the disruption historical fiction poses to traditional historiography, as well as the possibilities posed by historical fiction for those historical subjects absent from, underrepresented by, or unassimilable within, the historical record. My dissertation begins from the central paradox of historical fiction and asks: if historical fiction presents a version of history, even as it contests history's veracities, what responsibilities follow from that presentation?

### **Necessary Fictions**

The title of my dissertation, “Necessary Fictions: Responsibility in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Fiction,” signals the necessarily fictional elements of any historical writing, but points also to the necessity of fiction to readers of the past. These fictions are of necessity to a reading public who, for better or worse, value the works of

historical fiction discussed here by buying the books in large numbers and by awarding them prizes.<sup>5</sup> They are also of necessity to a reading public because the novels offer readers a space to consider the continuation of historical injustices, their participation in the perpetuation or reconciliation of these injustices, and the political and social uses of history in arguing for the coherence of the nation called Canada. This is not to say all of the books studied in “Necessary Fictions” approach history in the same way, or with the same opportunities to question the function and value of history in the present. Thus, in each of the three chapters, I analyze three novels in an effort to demonstrate the various strategies that make the works more and less effective in involving the reader in a process of reevaluating accepted or popular truths about the past and the reader's position in the present. To this end, those texts that are more effective express characteristics of what I call here “responsibility.”

Historical fiction is responsible to the present, and so responsible historical fiction requires an acknowledgement of the present. This acknowledgement might mean the self-conscious reference to the known history of the years intervening between the represented past and the writer's contemporary moment; or, it might mean the explicit call to readers in the present to respond to the events of the past, a call that disrupts an understanding of

---

<sup>5</sup> I am frustrated each year when national newspapers publish the findings of national surveys claiming Canadians do not know Canadian history, and bemoaning the failings of history curricula, without commenting on the veritable outpouring of historical fiction in the country and, more importantly to the didactic desires of those surveyors, the high sales figures attached to these fictions. My frustration emerges from the apparent disconnect between the popularity of Canadian historical fiction and the recognition of these fictions as legitimate sites of historical truth, or as potential sources for historical instruction.

the past as fixed and impenetrable; or, it might mean the admission of fluidity in temporality such that no one epoch or era can be separated from another with a definite temporal border that says “this is past,” and “this is now.” Responsible historical fiction must grapple with the realities of the present in its representation of the past because to fail to do so idealizes the past and belies the continuation of past relationships in the present.

Further, to not acknowledge the present is to suggest implicitly that the past can be engaged on its own terms, without the influence of present concerns or questions. Alan Munslow points out that “If we want history to be an ethical activity, historians must acknowledge the moral choices they make as they construct the past as a representational narrative, rather than assume that ethics exist *in* the past and out of which they can somehow be 'discovered' and mined” (95 – emphasis in original). That is to say, the ethical valences of historical fiction only ever gesture to the choices of the author and cannot be confused with the ethical circumstances of the past. This distinction may appear particularly important to make in works of historical fiction that, in their yearning for “truth-to-meaning,” imagine relationships and events not necessarily represented in the historical record; yet, it must always be the case that in representing history – regardless of the declared form (e.g. fiction or history) – authors imbue the past with the moral questions of the present.

Alongside this acknowledgement or signalling of the present in history writing, responsible historical fiction must allow for the opacity of the past. One of my greatest

concerns with (fictional) representations of history is the deliberate and devious misrepresentation of the partial, contingent “truth-to-meaning” of history. Certainly this concern arises from anxiety about misuse of histories for the aims of those who circulate them, but my concern extends to the integrity of the actors of the past, those individuals who lived and died, and who in their death became unwitting objects of historical study and use, and to whom writers owe responsible representation; that is, representation that aims for the plausible while recognizing the impossibility of ever really knowing the (historical) other.

Responsible historical fiction requires the involvement of the reader. The use of the word “involvement” is purposely vague. It is intended to include the impossible-to-measure reactions of the reader, and the indirect and direct evocations of the reader or listener in the narratives themselves. The role of the reader figures in some of the narratives as a listener, someone willing (or unwilling in the case of Don Gillmor's *Kanata!*) to hear a story and to respond to it, while in all of the works studied here the relationship between story-teller and listener is significant for how change is imagined. In the case of Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*, for instance, the story-teller offers a history of a crime not with an expectation of anything from the listener, but because telling the story changes the speaker. While in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* and Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass*, the offer of a story significantly alters both the story-teller and the listener in a way that suggests the responsibility of listeners/readers to attend to stories and to remain open to change through hearing them.

Change in historical fiction might initially appear to be an oxymoron. What possibilities exist for change in a narrative describing the already and irrecoverably finished? As I suggested earlier, change in the subjects and form of historical fiction has involved a widening scope of the “who” and the “how” in history writing; however, this is not the kind of “change” signalled in the works studied here. Rather, in Chapter One, “change” measures the impact of contact between European explorers and Indigenous people on both groups and individuals within these groups, while in Chapter Two “change” figures as the possibility of individual choice – to make changes – within ideological and economic structures that limit individual agency. Chapter Three sees “change” take on a material significance whereby “change” and its consequences are alternately recognized or banished in landscape, objects, and the physical bonds of genealogy. In all of the chapters, the invocation of change marks responsibility because it involves an invitation to the reader to reconsider how the development and role of the nation in the past affects their present; further, the invocation of change presents the possibility that actors in the past respond to the structures that informed their daily lives and understandings of themselves in a uniform fashion.

I stress the differences between responsible and irresponsible historical fiction, and my chapters include examples of both, because these novels are poised to contribute to our understanding of the nation and what kinds of citizens it values. The contribution of fiction to what Benedict Anderson describes as the “imagined community” of the nation requires an understanding both of the responsible and of the irresponsible because

by casting back, these fictions are put to *use* in imagining who belongs in the nation now, who is valued within it, and what kinds of histories and memories are recognizable in the present. Thus in this dissertation I describe and hold to account the histories presented in these nine works of historical fiction because they are put to *use* in imagining the nation and its citizens, and some do so responsibly, while others do not. This is not a call for radical action against irresponsible fictions or irresponsible fictional strategies; rather, it is a call for reader awareness and attentiveness to the perils of forgetting, the presentation of historical stasis, and the banishment of history and its inequities to the past.

I ought to make a final observation about responsible historical fiction before addressing the organization of chapters, and that is that no single novel can stand as representative of responsible or irresponsible writing. Indeed it would be dangerous to praise or decry a work as singularly or utterly one thing or another. Texts contain, and ought to contain, contradictions and fluctuations in meaning. My purpose here is to describe the overall impression each novel conveys through close and careful analysis of passages, characters, motifs and themes. Close reading recognizes the nuances of texts while insisting that through plot, character, symbol and setting they offer positions, if not lessons, on the questions they raise. Moreover, this methodology reflects my belief in the importance of readers in constituting and contributing to the meaning of a text and my understanding of a responsible reader as one curious about the text and willing to read closely to assess it.

### **Necessary Decisions, Organizational Divisions and Unfortunate Exclusions**

The three chapters of this dissertation, “Exploring the Border of Nation: Sketches toward an Indefinite Map,” “Cloth and Trade: Locating (Historic) Responsibility and Justice in Trade Stories” and “(Un)Settling Past and Present: Using and Inheriting History in Settler Narratives” loosely cohere around three historical Canadian figures: the explorer, the trader and the settler. These figures defined early colonial policies in the space that came to be called Canada: How could cartographers influence and extend the fur trade? Would New France be a trade post or a settler colony? When is a settler settled? While the dissertation begins with these figures as a chronological and thematic organizational device, it expands the connotations of each to ask questions about responsibility and agency: how did exploration define as much as describe borders? What else, and who else, was traded in economies of exchange? How is the settler's longing for the Indigenous to be understood?

This project's interest in historical fiction about the period of Canada's uncertain formation and emergence as a nation state, rather than its inevitability, aligns with my reading of the nation and national belonging as unfinished work, an undecided process; however, this interest also puts a reluctant, but necessary, limit on possible works to include.<sup>6</sup> My consideration of works that prefigure the nation does not preclude analysis of responsible representation in historical fiction focused on later periods; in fact, my view of the nation as an ongoing construction invites just this kind of analysis. The novels

---

<sup>6</sup> Works like Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*, George Elliot Clarke's *George and Rue* or Elizabeth Hay's *Late Nights on Air* are thus examples of unfortunate exclusions from this study because they focus on later histories of the nation.

in the third chapter are a marked exception to the general focus on the early historical moment in that they each contain split chronological frames of the historical past and the contemporary moment of the author's writing; however, far from undermining my argument for these novels as demonstrative of the active emergence of the nation, the split chronologies precisely indicate the ongoing nature of national formation that interests me.

Against the suggestion that national literature or narratives about national development are *passé* I include in Chapter One a reading of Steven Heighton's *Afterlands*. The novel engages with how national space operates in an increasingly global or “post-national” world and argues for the continued relevance of the national and local in individual lives, despite the possible appeal of a world without borders. Chapter One continues to take up how the creation of geographic-cum-national borders effected a simultaneous imagining of who best belonged within those borders in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* and Don Gillmor's *Kanata*. As *Afterlands*'s anachronistic attention to the “post-national” suggests, the novels in Chapter One explore the function of the future-now-the-present in responsible historical fiction with Wiebe's consideration of prophetic characters, and Gillmor's representation of oblivious ones.

Chapter One concludes with the understanding of borders as structures – both ideological and physical – that simultaneously define a space or group and signal an anxiety about the permanence or efficacy of such limits. Chapter Two picks up from this point with a consideration of how histories of trade represent the value and worth of different bodies within borders. Value and worth are worked out within the economies of

trade, but also within systems of justice, as the value of particular bodies make them more or less likely to be censured for a crime. Indeed, in each novel a crime takes place and the narratives consider both how justice is served and how it might otherwise be achieved. The novels in this chapter thus engage with the provocative question of what kind of justice can be expected when righting/writing historic crimes.

While Chapters One and Two focus on histories of the public sphere, the novels in Chapter Three turn their attention to the histories of the private space of settler homes and individual memories. If Marilyn Simonds's *The Holding* sees forgetting as a necessary step in personal and national healing and progress, Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* emphasizes the discordance between the desire to forget and its impossibility. The chapter concludes with a reading of Jane Urquhart's *A Map of Glass* in order to explore both the precariousness of memory and history and their ubiquity in the material objects of everyday life. The dissertation concludes with these novels and their more personal histories as a way of returning to the role of the reader in responsible historical fiction, suggesting that one who attends to history must also consider how to individually remember the past.

This dissertation does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of all the Canadian historical novels that engage with explorers, traders and settlers. I made choices to include particular works that contributed to my main aim of exploring the characteristics of responsible historical fiction within the frame of the emerging nation called Canada, and these decisions necessitated the unfortunate exclusion of other, no less

compelling, works. My methodology, and my criteria of responsible historical fictions, applies to other historical fictions, and so rather than attempting the impossible in an inclusive survey, I chose these novels which allow me to highlight these criteria at work.

The works studied are all written in English, but Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* provides a history of Québec and Québec in Canada, as do, to a much lesser extent, *A Discovery of Strangers* and *The Trade*, which describe the role of canadien voyageurs. I see a comparative study of French and English-Canadian historical novels as a necessary enterprise, but unfortunately, this dissertation does not have the scope to provide such a reading. Instead I include Laberge's text in the discussion of memory and forgetting as another Canadian text exploring the role of history in defining families and the nation.

Finally, the notable absence of Indigenous authors from this study will be apparent to any reader. Herb Wyile notes in his Introduction to *Speculative Fictions* that at the time of his writing the absence of historical fiction in the creative work of Indigenous authors might arise from “the dominant culture's association of native people with the past that stressing contemporary existence has been first and foremost a decolonizing literary strategy” and that “the persistence of colonial assumptions hampers both the production and reception of historical writing by natives” (xvi). Following *Speculative Fictions* the publication of Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* in 2005 shifted critical attention to Indigenous authors and historical fiction, and critics have since begun to take up Boyden's

work and others.<sup>7</sup> However, to date, and to the best of my knowledge, no novel by an Indigenous author concentrates on the historical periods studied here. Wyile's prediction that “soon we will be seeing such a perspective developed in more detail” (xvii) was astute in 2002 and I expect critics writing on this topic in another ten years time will find an ever growing body of work to learn from.

What I have learned while researching and writing this dissertation is summarized in the three quotations that open this introduction. On the one hand, Desmond Morton's assertion that “History is what Canadians have in common” identifies the utility of history in imagining and sustaining a unified nation; on the other hand, Georges Sioui's observation that “History is so distorted it is irrelevant” reminds us that the malleability of historical truth taken to its logical end – a complete abandon of a consensus on plausible historical truth – is useless: something that could mean anything, means nothing. I turn to fiction to resolve these apparently opposing positions on the usefulness of history. The fiction reminds me that history is not useless, but it should not be taken and used as an unequivocal statement of truth about the borders and belonging of a national community. It is instead a story that must be heard with attentiveness to the motivations and expectations in its telling, and a willingness to hear in its story the shape being imagined for the national community today. Michael Crummey's protagonist demands, “Listen to me now. I have a story to tell you,” because the stories of history may be versions of a

---

<sup>7</sup> For instance, a fascinating essay in *National Plots* by Shelley Hulan reads George Copway's *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* as historical fiction, and Herb Wyile has published on Boyden's *Three Day Road*.

partial truth, but they are useful to their tellers, as they are useful to their readers in making sense of their place in the present.

**Chapter One: Exploring the Borders of Nation: Sketches Toward an Indefinite Map****“Almost nothing is sillier than a colonial mind at work”: John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country*<sup>8</sup>**

When John Ralston Saul's book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* came out in 2008 it created quite a stir. Editorials praising or challenging Saul's arguments appeared in all of the major national newspapers and Saul began a speaking tour that found him giving talks at venues ranging from CBC Radio One program “Ideas” to the Hamilton Public Library to the University of Guelph to the popular TVOntario program “Big Ideas.” Saul's ambitious and wide ranging tour schedule effectively stimulated public and academic debate on the merits of his arguments and so I begin this first chapter with a reading of *A Fair Country* both because it stimulated such enthusiastic conversations about Canadian history and identity and because its perspective on Canadian identity echoes the recent works of Canadian historical fiction considered here. In *A Fair Country* Ralston Saul advances the argument that Canada has a unique national identity, one formed in equal parts by Indigenous and European cultures, and that because Canadians<sup>9</sup> have thus far been afraid to recognize the Aboriginal within, the nation suffers because it cannot express itself in a true language or with a true mythology.

---

<sup>8</sup> Saul, John Ralston. *A Fair Country*. 230.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout *A Fair Country* Saul distinguishes between “Canadians” and “Aboriginals,” a distinction that troubles his chief assertion that Canadians and Aboriginals are two of the three founding members of one Canadian nation (the other founding member being French Canadians – nothing is said of non-English or non-French immigrants) because it relies on an “us” - “them” binary (indeed he regularly uses “we” with respect to Canadians and “them” with respect to Aboriginals) that undermines the supposed unity of the nation.

Saul provides an extensive list of the challenges facing the contemporary nation<sup>10</sup> but he maintains, “The single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment, so far, has been our inability to normalize - that is, to internalize consciously – the First Nations<sup>11</sup> as the senior founding pillar of our civilization” (21). Indeed, for Saul the solution to all of the problems facing the nation can only be solved by first addressing the biggest problem: integrating and normalizing Indigenous peoples into “our” civilization. Many of the changes Saul proposes as necessary to achieve this “conscious internalization” are admirable: the reassertion of “fairness,” greater citizen engagement, a re-launching of the co-operative movement, the adoption of a language that reflects Aboriginal and Canadian experience. However, aside from failing to offer concrete examples or suggestions for how the country might go about achieving greater levels of “fairness” or “civic engagement,” he manifestly ignores the possibility that Indigenous and Métis peoples may at the very least have no interest in being “internalized consciously,” and indeed may resent and refuse the repeated appropriation of their customs, lands, and languages for the benefit of Canadian identity.

Saul justifies his argument by pointing to historic examples of cooperation and community between Indigenous and Europeans. Significantly he points to “marrying up” by way of marriage *à la façon du pays* as the means by which European explorers and settlers secured their survival (both practically and socially) and concludes that these

---

<sup>10</sup> Saul can be differentiated from fellow critics of contemporary Canadian political life like Andrew Cohen, Rudyard Griffiths and Jack Granatstein in that he does not include “immigration” as a pressing concern for national unity; this may be the case because Saul does not mention immigration at all.

<sup>11</sup> “First Nations” and “Aboriginal” are used interchangeably throughout *A Fair Country*.

relationships, and the Métis children born from them, are the “true” origins of an authentic Canadian identity.

The three novels examined in this chapter, Don Gillmor's *Kanata*, Steven Heighon's *Afterlands* and Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, all participate, to varying degrees in a similar project of recasting the contemporary Canadian nation-state as a Métis nation and all three of them use the Métis child as the forerunner and founder of a Canadian identity that is both unique and just in its relationship with Indigenous peoples. Both Saul's embrace of the “Aboriginal pillar” and the novels' imagining of the Métis child as the future (i.e. the reader's present) of the nation risk forgetting a history, and a present, of abuses and neglect and of remapping the structural racism of the contemporary nation-state. Gillmor's *Kanata*, in particular, promises contemporary readers that Canada is “fair,” and that Canadians are innocent of racial oppression and violence because they are inheritors of a Métis heritage.<sup>12</sup> That said, the novels do not approach the imagining of history or the question of Canadian, Indigenous and Métis relationships in the same way, and each offers opportunities to consider what role historical fiction plays in either challenging or reinforcing contemporary assumptions about Canadian identity.

---

<sup>12</sup> The novels and Saul all figure individuals of particular racial or ethnic groups as behaving (with few deviations) according to prescribed racial roles and as incapable of internalizing racist beliefs towards themselves. Neither do any of the texts suggest the possibility that members of one racial group might behave violently, or with racially motivated hostility, towards members of their own racial group. This is a significant point given that the promise of Métis heritage is given as a way of assuring dominant white Canadian subjects that because they are Métis (too), racism is an effect of not understanding (or “consciously internalizing”) their own identity, rather than structural and individual inequality.

All three novels in this first chapter look at expeditions: one to reach the North Pole, one to chart the Canadian North West and one to find the North West Passage. Each of the expeditions involves the interaction between colonial and Indigenous groups, and each set of interactions offers a model of how contact, and the kind of relationship that follows, informs the contemporary moment of the novel's reading. These relationships evolve in the novels amid considerations of how exploration problematically changes land from ostensibly unmarked and unlimited to claimed and defined by borders and discourses of the nation-state. As the explorers set out the geographic limits of what will become the nation-state for the contemporary reader, they simultaneously determine what kinds of people or what kinds of bodies belong, and under what conditions. Taken as a whole, each novel also offers an opportunity to consider how the representation of history – as univocal, contested or refractory – affects its ethical valence; in other words, the different approach each novel takes to the writing of history reflects different understandings of how the contemporary national subject might make *use* of the past.

In Don Gillmor's *Kanata*, motifs of maps and mapping dominate and contribute to the novel's representation of the Canadian nation-state as lawful by virtue of its claim to otherwise “empty” land.<sup>13</sup> *Kanata* uses an idea of the almost-fully-assimilated Métis to permit the presence of Indigenous people and history in a narrative that otherwise seeks to

---

<sup>13</sup> The acquisition of “empty” land in *Kanata* is slightly different from the colonial framework of *terra nullius*, which did not discursively empty the land of inhabitants, but rather suggested that Indigenous peoples possessed no legal claim to ownership of the land. In the case of *Kanata* the land explicitly figures as “empty,” and not simply free of ownership, in order to facilitate the settler's non-violent acquisition.

erase or replace their presence in order to more firmly establish the authority of the Canadian nation-state.

Against the realism of *Kanata*, Steven Heighton's *Afterlands* parodies this creation of national land through acts of naming and border-drawing. By so doing, it questions whether belonging in a geo-political space is determined by race, ethnicity, nationality, or some immeasurable combination of all three; and, further, the novel asks to what extent the individual may be confined to, partially claim, wholly identify with, or refuse any or all forms of affiliation with these categories. The post-national exuberance of the novel's parodic reading of national land and belonging is tempered by characters' failed attempts to defy the limitations of racial, national or ethnic limits because characters are ultimately required to settle within these borders in order to find satisfaction.

If *Afterlands* asks what it might mean to be without nation, Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* asks what the nation could have been if the relationship between Indigenous people and colonial explorers had evolved differently. Like *Afterlands*, *A Discovery of Strangers* cannot dispense with the contemporary nation, but what it can do is re-imagine a founding relationship based on mutual recognition and vulnerability that result in the birth of a desired future national subject: a Métis child; however, *A Discovery of Strangers* represents Canada as an inevitability in the process of becoming. Wiebe's canny use of prophecy insists on a discussion of the reader's national present and the pre-national past.

**“It is sometimes hard to tell progress from decline”:** Exploring the Map in Don

**Gillmor's *Kanata***<sup>14</sup>

Don Gillmor's *Kanata* (2009) represents the central personal relationship in the novel as profoundly one-sided, the protagonist, high-school history teacher Michael Mountain Horse, only ever speaks to (or perhaps "at") his student, the comatose teenager Billy Whitecloud. Billy Whitecloud's coma serves several important symbolic functions in the novel: it represents the narrator's perception of Canadian youth as oblivious to the world around them; it exemplifies the wilful ignorance of Canadian history that commentators like Jack Granatstein have so strenuously criticized;<sup>15</sup> it stands for Indigenous people held captive by and in Canadian history; and it personifies the perception of Canadians as absolutely uninterested – to the point of a coma – in their history. Because he is in a coma for the entire narrative, Billy is never afforded the opportunity to respond to, or question, the didactic history "stories" Michael tells him in his hospital room. Likewise, Billy is never given the chance to contest or complicate his representation at the hands of Michael; indeed, Billy is silenced from the outset in order to provide a platform for Michael's uninterrupted lectures on Canadian political and military history.

The reader must be expected to learn something from *Kanata*; after all a teacher-

---

<sup>14</sup> Gillmor, Don. *Kanata*. 77.

<sup>15</sup> A perceived imbalance between "real Canadian history" and the history being taught in public elementary and highschools in Canada inspired J. L. Granatstein's 1998 polemic *Who Killed Canadian History?* In it he argues that attention to the "many histories" of immigrants, women, the working class, and Indigenous peoples has not only threatened knowledge of the "history of the Canadian nation and people" (xi), but has threatened the very nation itself. He identifies "a growing concern that the nation is in danger of fragmentation, and not only from Québec separatism" (xvii), but from the failure to adequately or properly instruct Canadian youth in Canadian history.

student relationship is the justification for the plot, but what the reader learns is perhaps not quite the intended lesson. While Billy Whitecloud is never explicitly named as belonging to a particular First Nation, his name, his stereotypical “Indian” father, and his reserve birthplace all indicate as much.<sup>16</sup> By depicting an Indigenous student and a Métis teacher, the narrative appears to intend the history lessons of *Kanata* to be in some ways inclusive of the multicultural and multinational foundations of the nation-state, yet this version of Canadian history the text as a whole conveys. The “disappearance”<sup>17</sup> of Indigenous and non-preferred immigrant peoples and histories in the novel results in a simplistic representation of preferred national subjects as uniformly British and entitled to the benefits of the dominant subject-hood they enjoy. Here I will investigate the discrepancy between *Kanata*’s purportedly inclusive and “epic” scope and the instances of wholesale silencing and appropriation of Indigenous voices and lands that take place in order to construct the coherent national narrative. I will give disproportionate focus to the earlier sections of the novel that deal with the history and character of David Thompson both because his representation follows the thematic focus in this chapter on fictions of exploration and discovery and because his characterization as the “father” of the modern

---

<sup>16</sup> Billy’s nationality is not the ostensible focus of the narrative, but by leaving his nationality ambiguous the unintended result is the disproportionate attention to the question of Billy’s nationality. I say this is an unintended result because elsewhere in the text Gillmor directly names Indigenous and Métis belonging, suggesting that in Billy’s case it is neither a reluctance on the author’s part to ascribe nationality, nor an interest in complicating the reader’s assumptions about what “signs” are at work in determining nationality, but rather the opposite, that the “signs” offered to the reader should be so self-explanatory and self-evident, that no explicit naming of nationality is necessary.

<sup>17</sup> I intend “disappearance” to signify here both a physical disappearance in the sense of removing, hiding or destroying bodies and a rhetorical disappearance in the sense of overlooking, ignoring or banishing voices and stories.

Canadian nation – both geopolitically and ethnically – warrants close consideration.

**“A map was the view from above: How high do we have to go before we can place ourselves?”<sup>18</sup>**

The novel opens with Michael's class “drawing a map, a historical mural to mark Canada's centennial” (5), and maps and mapping continue to appear in *Kanata* as metaphors for order, rationality, instruction and inclusion. Only once does the narrative grapple with the limitations of maps as an organizing device when Michael rhetorically asks whether “the mapmaker reflect[s] the world's existence or his own?” (423) The question follows a description of “the first maps” which “were to dispel fear” and to “claim those spaces, piss on the trees to mark out territory” and is followed by an acknowledgement that “each new map is eventually made a lie” (423). Michael's answer to his rhetorical question is that they *eventually* lie because “towns wither and die and that small dot lingers, inert, for years until Rand McNally finally erases it” (423). In other words, the lie maps tell is not in the creation of borders or the limiting and claiming of space, but rather in the temporality of the borders; he suggests that when mapping reaches a point of continual updating the map will cease to lie.<sup>19</sup> The mapmaker thus reflects the world as it is, if only momentarily.

The notion of a map functioning as an unmediated, realistic representation of the physical geography has undergone serious criticism from geographers and literary critics

---

<sup>18</sup> Gillmor, Don. *Kanata*. 445.

<sup>19</sup> I say “when” here and not “if” because the technology of Global Positioning Systems allows for the continual updating of mapped space.

alike. Graham Huggan echoes Michael's questioning of the veracity of the map and provides his own answer: "Simply put, maps lie; they inevitably differ from the reality they purport to represent" (xv). It is not the temporal specificity of the map that prevents representational accuracy, but rather the involvement of the mapmaker (whether human or otherwise) who invariably limits the map to "not a copy, but a semblance of reality, filtered by the mapmaker's motives and perceptions" (Huggan 3). The mapmaker's interests may be explicit (i.e. the mapmaker may consciously determine to map towns but not hamlets), or they may "reflect and articulate the ideologies of their makers" (11) (i.e. the mapmaker may represent North America on the top half of the page, placing it symbolically "above" South America). Further complicating the representational veracity of the map is the map-*reader*, who also brings to the map a set of ideological expectations and limitations. Which is not to say that maps do not have utility as reference pieces; as Alfred Korzybski points out, "a map is not the territory it represents, but, *if* correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness" (58 – my emphasis). In using the conditional "if" Korzybski raises the possibility of more and less accurate maps, an accuracy that depends upon the similarity to the land. Nevertheless, both the mapmaker and map-readers' ideological investments complicate the usefulness of maps and should render inclusions on the map suspect and raise questions about possible omissions.

It may be surprising to find that far from questioning the inclusions and exclusions of maps, *Kanata* represents maps as creating, defining and fixing geographic

space and devotes particular attention to the role maps play in geopolitical contests.

Thompson argues that “A map was knowledge” and that “At some point, there would be claims upon that land, as there were upon all lands” (55), the implicit suggestion being that the knowledge of the land and settlements provided by a map will resolve land “claims.”<sup>20</sup> Gillmor's fictional representation of David Thompson's experiences of mapping and his perspective on maps are of particular interest in *Kanata* as Thompson describes his desire to “map this country” in order to make “it something” (37).<sup>21</sup>

Mapping makes “empty space” perceptible and manageable to the extent that Thompson declares he “invented the North West” (83). His statement reveals the assumption in the novel that not only are space and place discursively created, but that the value of the place and those who live in it might be similarly conjured. To this end, Thompson recognizes the role of maps in creating socio-political borders that allow governments to “claim” a space by virtue of the “emptiness” of the mapped space. He has not mapped Indigenous settlements or hunting routes; he has not mapped animal migration routes or populations. He “created the land” (55) by “draw[ing] lines around nothing” (37), in other words, he discursively invents the North West for the purpose and pleasure of the British trade

---

<sup>20</sup> The specific example offered to demonstrate the kind of “claims” a map could resolve is the war of 1812, in which “Thompson had seen the clash with the Americans coming, the lack of clarity about the border, the chafing of interests at the Pacific, the growing ambition in the American Congress” (78). A surprising example, perhaps, given the contemporary resonance of “land claims” with Indigenous rights.

<sup>21</sup> As in all historical fiction the author's representation of historical figures takes imaginative licence in creating dialogue, character interactions and character motivations. Throughout this section when I note something Thompson “said” or “thought,” I refer only to the character of Thompson in *Kanata* and not Thompson's reflections in his published journals. That said, by comparing Thompson's own reflections on events and peoples with the representation of him in *Kanata* one can see the extent to which Gillmor celebrates Thompson and assigns him a heroic status that Thompson – in his journals – does not claim for himself.

companies.

Particularly troubling in this representation of the land as “empty” or “nothing,” are the resonances between Thompson's map and the map Michael has his class make. Both are “twenty-five panels” (7) (79) and both are meant to “lay out the country in all of its idiosyncrasies” (7); that is, both Thompson's map and the students' map are unironically presented as representative and inclusive versions of the nation, a nation “invented” through the mapping of so-called empty space. Thus the novel takes the historic example of Thompson's mapping-over of Indigenous land rights and obligations and repeats the appropriation in the novel's present of the 1960s when once again “empty” space is claimed by and for the nation. By paralleling the students' map and Thompson's, Thompson's view that mapmaking is “creating space” becomes the unproblematic and standard function of mapping in the novel. It is not insignificant that the map as a national claim must be repeated. The necessity to continually reassert the authority of the nation over the land, or the authority of Canadian nationalism over the people, suggests the very instability of these authorities. The repeated affirmation of borders as “creating the land” (55) legitimates the creative license to fill “empty” space and belies the nation's insecurity by demonstrating just how tenuous and indefensible the ideological and material borders of the nation are.

Alan Lawson's essay “Postcolonial Theory and the Settler Subject” provides an explanation for several motivations colonial explorers and the contemporary settler subjects have for projecting the land as “empty.” He argues that “For epistemological

reasons, then, but also for professional ones, the colonial explorer had to empty the land of prior signification – what is already known cannot be discovered, what already has a name cannot be named” (5). Lawson argues that the epistemological crisis of finding oneself “at the point of negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native” (4) compels the colonial explorer (or settler) to empty the land in order to mitigate the anxiety of being caught between subjectivities (e.g. colonial or Indigenous). The professional reason for emptying the land certainly resonates with Gillmor's representation of Thompson – for Thompson to “invent” or “create” the North West the land must be empty. *Kanata* participates in the discursive emptying of the land in the repeated references to the “empty space” of the North West (4-5) and goes about emptying and filling the space without any indication of irony.

Any potential for this repeated “re-mapping” to be read as subversive through the inclusion of Indigenous students is lost because the Indigenous students map the political and military history of the Canadian nation-state as it has been taught to them in their history class (and the meta-history text of *Kanata*). Michael describes their map and “what we are” - that is, what we are as a nation – asking “What are we?” and answering:

Thompson's Great Map, Wolfe's reckless climb. Macdonald's drunken genius, the flaws of our fathers, and the corpses of Passchendaele bloating in the mud waiting for the kiss of history. Laurier's genius, Mackenzie King's shrewd indecision, the threat of snow. The path of the wolf fleeing the modern, New France, the smell of mustard gas and wild rose, the dead at Batoche, the dust settling on a million bison. A railway, revolution, a gathering of the dead on a prairie night. (444)

The reader thus ends the novel (this passage comes from the second last page) with the

reinscription of the map of the nation-state and the included choices vigorously defending the political and military history of the nation, while simultaneously casting the “wolf” as fleeing from the modern nation-state.<sup>22</sup>

**“This is the map we all begin with, filled with faith and doubt and error and fear, and with that imperfect document, we sail away”:** Mapping Chronology<sup>23</sup>

In this conflation of the students' map with his version of Canadian history, Michael offers the reader a reification of his narrative map of Canadian history. Each chapter devoted to a major Canadian politician or military hero argues for a coherence to the national narrative that can be read like a map by placing the characters alongside one another – except a map offers its reader a closed frame inside which all pertinent information is included, meaning the map-reader may take in the framed information in any sequence desired. The written narrative, on the other hand, adheres to page numbers and to beginning and end, in other words, to chronology. Many writers of contemporary Canadian historical fiction have experimented with different approaches to historical chronology, for instance using flashbacks and flash-forwards to convey a sense of indeterminacy in the ordering of historical events and the permeable borders between events of the past and sentiments of the present. In a limited way *Kanata*, too, grapples with the limitations of historical chronology by casting the character of Michael Mountain Horse as a history teacher who interweaves his personal history with the history lectures

---

<sup>22</sup> I will return to the novels' images of Indigenous people disappearing or dying and their representation as tied to animals shortly, but undoubtedly here the “wolf” represents Indigenous people.

<sup>23</sup> Gillmor, Don. *Kanata*. 8.

he gives on political and military heroes. With the exception of two parts titled “Michael Mountain Horse” the stories of his personal history form unnumbered chapters, set sequentially before the numbered chapters that form each numbered part, of which there are eleven. The formal partitioning of personal history from state and national history limits the effectiveness of the personal history as a disruption to the straight chronological chapters. Indeed Michael’s profession as history teacher leaves no uncertainty that the numbered chapters are meant to be didactic<sup>24</sup> and that the pedagogical approach of the reader’s history teacher – Michael – offers a straightforward chronology of political and military history.<sup>25</sup> As Michael’s narrative is awkwardly stitched into the national narrative, the question arises as to how he manages to turn up at each “crucial” national moment. In this sense the narrative uses Michael as a flat character, rather than as an independent character, in order to explore particular national moments.<sup>26</sup>

Michael’s limited characterization and remarkable historical appearances complement the unconventional pedagogical strategy he employs with his fictional students: the creation of a mural-map of Canadian history. The mural the students

---

<sup>24</sup> Readers may also be justified in feeling some familiarity with several sections of the narrative, if not because they studied them in a history classroom then because they are (in some cases verbatim) echoes of Gillmor’s work on the CBC production *Canada: A People’s History*.

<sup>25</sup> The historical characters described are: Samuel de Champlain, James Wolf, Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, David Thompson, Sir John A. MacDonald, Darcy McGee, George Brown, Louis Riel, Wilfred Laurier, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Norman Bethune, John Diefenbaker, and Lester Pearson – “the lisping Nobel bow-tie nancy” (419). The events: Frobisher’s trip to Baffin Island, Cartier’s trip down the St. Lawrence, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, mapping of the Northwest, the War of 1812, the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (no mention of Chinese labourers), the Statute of Westminster, the Northwest Rebellion, settlement of Rupert’s Land, the First World War, Mackenzie King’s meeting with Hitler, and the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>26</sup> In this regard Michael is something of a Métis-Forrest Gump, arriving at the national event only long enough to describe it, before running toward the next national moment.

construct is “huge for one thing, and who doesn’t admire the epic” (443). Moreover, the scenes the students have drawn are the same episodes described in the novel; in other words, the mural-map is intended to represent the very chronological history narrated by Michael. The written chronological history and the symbolic creative mural-map reinforce one another as authoritative histories: the map is made authoritative by the lecture-chapters; the lecture-chapters gain credibility because the students learned and expressed their content. By mutually reinforcing one another, the two modes of history telling attempt to persuade the reader that their histories are at the very least important, if not complete.

**“Some of the French soldiers . . . have become savage in this savage land”:**

**Assimilating Histories<sup>27</sup>**

The vitality and presence of Indigenous history complicates the epic scope (and who doesn’t admire the epic?) and history of the novel. In order to justify the national history of heroic white male leaders that have formed “what we are” (444), the existence and vitality of Indigenous and Métis culture and history must be remapped, or rather, mapped over. One way the novel achieves this is by figuring Michael Mountain Horse's and his brother Stanford's personal histories as representative of all Indigenous peoples in Canada. Because their personal histories show, as in the case of Stanford, the disappearance of the “savage Indian,” and in the case of Michael, the Indigenous man made civil, both versions of “representative” Indigenous history successfully assuage any

---

<sup>27</sup> Gillmor, Don. *Kanata*. 14.

contemporary anxiety that Indigenous people in Canada remain on the one hand threatening, and on the other, unassimilated or unassimilable. *Kanata* remaps Indigenous history by orienting the reader toward successful stories of integration and assimilation, posing the Métis body as the contested space which either a civil or savage individual will emerge, but in either event, one which is manageable by the nation-state.

Michael traces his heritage back to David Thompson and an illicit affair Thompson had with an unnamed Cree woman. Michael acknowledges it is a “tenuous claim,” but that “despite its pitfalls, the oral tradition has some benefits. My mother, Catherine, knew the story, the names, and I pieced it together from what I had read of Thompson” (97). Because the novel celebrates Thompson as the creator of the modern nation in the sense that he brought it into existence out of nothing (51, 83) his paternity confers upon Michael an inheritance of commitment to the founded nation-state.

Paternal commitment to the nation recurs in Michael's father, Dexter Flemming. Dexter arrives in the North West from London, England to join his friend Bertie Beckton in the creation of “the New World!” which “looks somewhat like the old one . . . only without the scenery” (151). Dexter, like many aristocratic British men who emigrated to the Canadian North West in the 1880s, lacked the necessary experience in farming to have much success growing crops.<sup>28</sup> He takes a domestic servant, Catherine (no last name) of

---

<sup>28</sup> British farmers who immigrated to the North West experienced difficulty growing crops and managing livestock because the climate differed from that in the British Isles. Under Wilfred Laurier, the first Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, attempted to entice immigrants from Eastern Europe because they were expected to fare better given their experience farming in a similar climate. However, Sifton's replacement, Frank Oliver, returned the focus to immigrants whom he believed would better assimilate

the Blood Nation, who quickly takes over the running of Dexter's ranch, being “a better judge of horses than he” (161) and she soon “keep[s] the books, tend[s] to the horses, buy[s] the cattle” (162). In effect “she was the ranch” (162). He fathers the two children, Michael and Stanford, but notes that “he was their biological father but they were Catherine’s sons” (161). Dexter's lack of agricultural skills limits his practical value to the nation, but he does his symbolic national duty by being of aristocratic English heritage and fathering two sons. He likewise does his rhetorical duty: the narrative requires that the protagonists be of Métis heritage in order to extend compassionate inclusion in Canadian history to Indigenous peoples, but that inclusion must be balanced by the unquestioned British and/or heroic paternity of fathers like Thompson and Flemming.

The narrative poses the destruction and disappearance of Indigenous peoples both as a way of guaranteeing the “emptiness” of the land and as a way of assuring the reader that state policies and projects of assimilation served the best interests of Indigenous peoples who, left to their own devices, would destroy themselves. To this end, the narrative chronicles instances of Indigenous “savagery.” A few such examples include: “The Indian soul [Montcalm thinks] is black as pitch, and some of the French soldiers have slid into this morass, have abandoned themselves, their country, and their God, and have become savage in this savage land (14); “The natives were wary of friendship and indifferent to trade. They slaughtered Cook and his men and boiled them over a fire on

---

into Canadian society, and to this end instituted the immigration policy of “selectivity,” which created categories of undesirable immigrants.

the perfect white sand, and then ate their fears” (27-8);<sup>29</sup> “There’s Indians can cut your heart out so fast they’ll take a bite out of it before you’re dead” (32); “They used to sacrifice [virgins], you know. I suppose they still do” (37); “The blood lust of the war party hadn’t been sated; Thompson could see it buzzing around them” (44); “I hear the Mandans eat the tongues of their enemy . . . I hear everyone is their enemy” (70); “The Canadian commander tells the American commander: You and I are civilized men schooled in the rules of war, but these savages under my command, well, I can’t control them once the fighting starts. God have mercy on you” (101). These examples characterize Indigenous people as cannibals or as so closely aligned to “darkness” that colonial figures must always be on guard lest they “go native” themselves – another notable example not listed above is the narrative Thompson gives of a “Weetego,” or cannibal, among the Peigans (32, 51, 61).

The examples of undifferentiated and essentialized “savagery” come to an end when Tecumseh dies: “the dream of an Indian Nation dies with the prospect of empire gone” (103). In its place stands an “army of dying warriors,” who succumb to disease and to “whiskey,” which “took what starvation and disease hadn’t” (146). The Indigenous people decide that “We cannot last the winter. We must walk north and hope for the protection of the Great Mother” (146). This narrative of Indigenous savages felled not by the direct action of Europeans, but through the “accidental” introduction of disease and

---

<sup>29</sup> While this example pertains to Cook’s expedition to the Sandwich Islands, it also speaks to the larger project in *Kanata* of representing Indigenous peoples as dangerous savages in dire need of civilizing.

the actions of the Indigenous peoples themselves through alcohol addiction and war, serves the pernicious function of suggesting that the involvement of colonial figures only benefited Indigenous peoples in that the colonials provided necessary intervention and “protection” of the Indigenous peoples from the “accidents” of colonial arrival, from themselves and from their “dying race.”

Protection likewise characterizes Dexter’s relationship with Catherine. Dexter “insisted on [her education] . . . The spindly child, first an employee, a colonial responsibility, then becoming something like a daughter. The daughter grew up. And what did she become then?” (161). Dexter imagines a relationship in which Catherine is first wholly dependent on his paternal and colonial authority and then matures not into independence – as the teleology of Canadian national development is so often figured – but to another form of dependence, as Dexter marries Catherine, thus once again professing his male and colonial entitlement to dictate the terms of her participation in their “partnership.”<sup>30</sup> By emphasizing Catherine’s Christian and English education the narrative strives to prove that only those Indigenous peoples who attained a certain level of civility joined in the populating of the nation, and further, that these markers of civility were achieved through the benevolent intervention of the British.

In *Kanata*, experiences of the fictional and historically unknown individual stand

---

<sup>30</sup> The novel suggests marriages involve equal partners as Michael muses, “Countries are like marriages . . . they are born in negotiation and remain in ongoing negotiation. They are unresolved, irresolvable” (103). While this observation certainly speaks to the novel’s argument for a necessity to constantly repeat the wedding of the Indigenous and colonial, it also elides the very definite power imbalance inherent in the particular marriage of Catherine and Dexter and the marriage of the colonial and Indigenous that they symbolize.

in for the experiences of the (fictional) nation in a way that attempts to balance the didactic intent of the novel and a desire for narrative consistency (and, presumably, popular appeal). So it is that Catherine and Dexter are wed as individuals, but also as symbols for the respective people groups they represent; likewise their Métis children – Michael and Stanford – are cast as representatives of two options for the future of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Even though Michael acknowledges that he and Stanford are “somewhere between Indians and whites,” (193) he sets up a binary choice whereby both of them must decide whether to be one or the other. He suspects that “Stanford made an instinctive decision to embrace his Indian past. I was leaning the other way” (193). He also suggests a racial distinction between the two that was either manifested or cultivated from an early age. He says, “His mother used to tell them stories and read to them, and Michael wondered if the white books had been for him and the native tales for Stanford” (376). Once again the complexity of Métis identity is reduced to an either/or selection, but the even more insidious outcome of Michael’s repeated characterization of Stanford as the “Indian” one and himself as the “white” one can be found in the narrative’s descriptions of Stanford's violent behaviour, particularly during the First World War when he scalps soldiers (both enemy and ally) and deserts only to wrap his hair in bones, tattoo his body (426), and steal food and supplies from behind both lines.<sup>31</sup> That Stanford behaves

---

<sup>31</sup> Stanford's representation in the First World War recalls Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*; however, the intertextuality works against Gillmor, as Stanford reads as a particularly painfully outdated and violent

violently because he is an “Indian,” is left unstated, but the implicit cause is clear: because “scalping” is a specifically “Indian” trope that is not attached to any other people group in the novel and because of the marked contrast between Stanford's embrace of his “Indian past” and his concomitant “savage” behaviour and Michael’s adoption of a “white identity” and its supposedly attendant rational comportment.

Michael finds he “leans the other way,” that is, he identifies himself with the dominant white national subjects. Michael's development throughout the novel from dependent brother to soldier<sup>32</sup> to Hollywood stuntman to oil worker and finally to high school history teacher allows him to participate in several of the key historical moments Gillmor wishes to illustrate (e.g. the Calgary Stampede, Hollywood's golden era, the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Alberta oil rush) and suggests a character used both as a model of adapting (or assimilating) to many different circumstances and expectations and as a way of accessing these historical moments. His final role as a history teacher serves the important symbolic function of representing his complete indoctrination in the policies and practices of the nation-state to the extent that he can now impart the founding moments of the state's unity to the next generation.

Gillmor's choice of a Métis protagonist, and intradiegetic narrator, is by no means accidental. Nor is the representation of Michael as a model Métis man, one who chooses to “lean the other way” and identify with the white half of his heritage. I do not intend to

---

stereotype against Boyden's nuanced critique of colonialism and modernism in his representation of Xavier and Elijah.

<sup>32</sup> Michael serves both in the First World War and in the Spanish Civil War.

undermine the individual choices people make with respect to their racial or ethnic identities, but I do question the relative simplicity of the division between “Indian” and “white” in *Kanata* and the troubling conclusion whereby the “Indian” child dies – alone, and at the hands of supposed comrades – and the “white” child becomes the spokesman for a cohesive national unity based on a history of white British men and their military and political successes. I find further difficulty with the *use* of a Métis protagonist whose apparent narrative functions are to inform the next generation of students and the reader of the glowing accomplishments of the nation and to fend off criticism that *Kanata* erases, silences and disappears Indigenous peoples. Would that this narrative included some of the nuance and complication that will be discussed in Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* or Heighton's *Afterlands*, but as it is, Gillmor's *Kanata* delivers a history of the nation that expediently disposes of Indigenous life, land and culture, putting in its place a “Métis” history remarkable only for its complete concordance with dominant Canadian history.

**“The idiot willingness to choose sides is what feeds the abattoir of history”:**

*Afterlands*<sup>33</sup>

The title of Steven Heighton's 2005 novel, *Afterlands*, alludes to the central preoccupation of the novel: what might it mean for individuals to be “after” land, or more specifically, after national land? The novel principally investigates the implications of “after” in terms of temporality – i.e. subsequently – but it also invites a consideration of a

---

<sup>33</sup> Heighton, Steven. *Afterlands*. 322.

secondary meaning of “after” as it relates to desire – i.e. how individuals seek or pursue national land. Throughout the novel, identity categories, and of particular interest here, national identities are represented as dependent on location and circumstance; the external imposition of national identity based on racial or ethnic assumptions; and the individual adoption and performance of national affiliations. While the novel explores the negative consequences that arise from the “idiot willingness to choose sides” (322), the novel's imagining of Roland Kruger as a character without, or perhaps beyond, land and national affiliations concludes with the recognition that a life “homeless, stateless, unaffiliated” (319) can only be led in the abstract, and that despite the limitations and violences of prescriptive identifications, the material world of lived experiences compels affiliation with a “side.”

*Afterlands* view of nations satirizes the concept of the nation-state that emerged from the Westphalian peace settlements of 1648: the concept of the nation-state deriving its continuation from its claim to authority and legitimacy over the land; the novel questions the rationale and justice of state authority over state-defined land areas. The novel further demonstrates the ways in which people living within the borders of the nation-state complicate the idea of a bordered nation, as citizenship and its attendant rights do not automatically extend to every individual entering the nation. While every individual within state borders is subject *to* the nation-state, its laws and modes of enforcement, only those who by birth or circumstance acquire citizenship are subjects *of* the nation-state.

Recent critics of Westphalian sovereignty – national sovereignty based on fixed borders and independent rule – such as Arjun Appadurai suggest that the increasing international flow of trade goods, people and ideas (i.e. globalization) challenges the integrity of the Westphalian nation-state. *Afterlands* explores the limitations and possibilities of the nation-state and national belonging by addressing how characters come to be recognized by one another as particular national subjects by the external imposition of nationality based on race or ethnicity, and how some characters seize opportunities to contest or refuse such external impositions. In its exploration of how individuals come to be regarded as national subjects, the novel questions whether the nation-state itself may be in the process of reassessing the fixity of its borders and ultimately concludes that while a post-national, globalized world holds appeal, the “reality” of geo-political borders remains.

Whereas characters routinely identify one another as belonging to this or that nation-state based on racialized bodies, the performance – or refusal to perform – national belonging gives individuals license to contest, if not refuse, these racialized identifications. What, then, does it mean to “perform” national belonging? The language characters speak; the customs of sex, consumption and trade they adhere to; the religions they practice; and the symbols – e.g. flags and uniforms – they value all contribute to the performance of national belonging. These performative markers of national belonging draw on the characteristics Peter Alter describes as participating in the formation of the nation, when the nation is: “a social group . . . which because of a variety of historically

evolved relations of a linguistic, cultural, religious or political nature, has become conscious of its coherence, unity and particular interests” (qtd. in Kertzer 17).<sup>34</sup> Through performances of nationalism characters like Kruger and Hannah dispute the imposition of nation based on race or location and instead suggest that national affiliation might better be decided by the individual. Unfortunately, this idealized individual who can choose to perform – or not, as is the case with Roland Kruger – national belonging is overpowered in the novel by the ultimate insistence on locating individuals based on categories of race and the nation-state.

### **What's in a Name?: Making and Breaking National Land**

Four parts divide *Afterlands*: “Bury Me at Sea,” “Versions of Loyalty,” “Afterlands” and “Last Versions.” The first two parts narrate the experiences of nineteen crew members aboard the 1871 *Polaris* expedition – an American expedition which planned to be the first expedition to reach the North Pole. The crew begin the first part unloading supplies from the *Polaris* before a storm. It is dark, the ice cracks, and the nineteen people find themselves abandoned on an ice floe without proper winter clothing or view of the ship. They pass the night on the floe expecting the *Polaris* to return and rescue them when the sun rises. The boat never returns and so the 19 people – including five German sailors, one English steward, a Swedish and a Danish sailor, a “Negro” cook, an American officer, four Inuit adults and five Inuit children – remain on the ice floe for approximately six months as it drifts south from between Ellesmere Island and Greenland

---

<sup>34</sup> See: Alter, Peter. *Nationalism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Edward Arnold, 1994. Print.

to Labrador.

At first the ice floe functions as a temporary and transient life raft; however, the instability of the ice has immediate consequences for the castaways and on the second night the ice breaks and separates the people from their main store of supplies, as well as from one of two lifeboats. Although the ice breaks, the castaways repeatedly confuse the impermanent and unstable ice mass with solid land.<sup>35</sup> That the ice form constantly shifts location and changes in size and shape makes some impression on the sailors, but it is not until the spring when the ice begins to melt that they realize the consequences of confusing unstable ice with land.

The symbolic relationship between the impermanent ice and national land becomes apparent when the castaways *first* assign names to regions of the ice floe.<sup>36</sup> The narrator describes this process: “The castaways, inspired by Herron, have been taking lyric liberties in naming the floe's 'landforms,' which amuses them but also gives them comfort, making it easier to fool themselves and pretend that Great Hall island *is* an island, and stable, out here where nothing is” (68 – emphasis in original). In effect, this naming refuses the possibility of reading the drifting ice floe as a deterritorialized space and instead names it in order to exert control over it.<sup>37</sup> By naming the island after the

---

<sup>35</sup> Of course continental land masses also shift (earthquakes) and also move (continental drift theory), however, the movement and change of land are most often ignored or forgotten; as is the case in *Afterlands* land appears to be fixed.

<sup>36</sup> I specify that this is the *first* naming because the castaways soon rename areas of the floe, reinscribing nationality onto its surface and policing these borders along national and racial hierarchies of belonging.

<sup>37</sup> This process of naming in order to exercise control appears in *Kanata* and *A Discovery of Strangers*, too, and is a common characteristic of exploration literature, generally. Characters assign names and in so

deceased captain of the expedition, Charles Francis Hall, the castaways assign a name that is, in some respects, nation-neutral. Though the name is undoubtedly English, all sailors served under Captain Hall on a ship that sailed international waters and functioned for many of the crewmen as a space outside (racial) hierarchies. For instance, the only black man on the ice floe, Jackson, explains that he “prefers working on ships – the men on whalers and so on, it's like they forget the customs of shore just as soon as they pass the sea break” (95). On board the ship, racial and national hierarchies cease to hold the importance and permanence they do on nationally defined land because the ship is “a special kind of island” (95) where merit promises to trump race or nationality.

Associations between the ice floe and national sovereignty soon complicate the process of naming in order to exercise authority over a literally unwieldy and unstable space. Tensions rise among the castaways once they conclude that the *Polaris* will not return. Chief sources of tension are control over the store of food, the location of the drifting floe in international waters and the possession of firearms. Initially Tyson – the American and first officer – holds a weapon, but the German crew members “confiscate” the gun when they deem him “unfit for command of the *majority* here, which is German” (96). In this instance the German crew count ethnic heritage and race as the determining factors in group formation, but their math does not quite add up, as the Inuit castaways number nine to the German's five and so the majority is not German, but Inuit. This counting mistake might be dismissed because five of the nine Inuit are children; but more

---

doing the land becomes not only familiar, but also fixed and ordered.

likely the division is made without considering the Inuit at all because they are, according to Tukulito, “invisible to these men, or irrelevant” (74).<sup>38</sup> So it is that neither the majority based on ethnicity, nor the majority based on democratic preference determines leadership; rather, leadership falls to the group prepared to exercise violent force to secure their power: the Germans. After declaring command, the German leader, Meyer, proceeds to divide the island down ethnic lines, and to rename the entire floe “New Heliogoland” (96). Significantly this act of naming moves from exerting control over an unpredictable natural landscape by naming, to declaring the “land” – as tenuous a form as it might be – as German property by giving it a German name. Dependence on the Inuit hunters limits the Germans’ sovereignty on the ice floe, because despite their imperial ambitions, they require the skills of the Inuit to survive.

Before the castaways begin assigning names to both the floe and its geographic regions, Jackson notes that because “sea ice is a constantly shifting extension of the Esquimau homeland; this [ice floe] is Tukulito's ancestral kitchen” (58). Here, Jackson repeats the same arguments used by the Canadian government in 2009 in their effort to claim arctic sovereignty: the ice that the Inuit hunt on and travel over can be considered an appendage to the arctic land, and because the Canadian nation-state claims sovereignty over Inuit land, the classification of ice floes as a “shifting extension” affords sovereignty over the ice filled waters, too. Both the fictional example of issuing land claims based on

---

<sup>38</sup> Tukulito and Ebierbing are also called “Hannah” and “Joe” respectively, depending on the context of their address. Tukulito most often refers to herself as “Hannah,” and Ebierbing most often as “Joe,” but neither self-identify consistently. Non-Inuit characters are also inconsistent in their form of address to these two characters.

Inuit ice use and the Canadian government's tactic disregard any Inuit claims to the land itself. In the novel, the Germans assert ultimate authority over all people and activities on the ice floe, yet concede guns to the Inuit so long as they prove themselves useful by hunting.

A physically etched line divides the floe, “a deep, straight line carefully scored in the ice, up from the sea-edge and on toward the floe's center” (120), into German and American “nations,” with each displaying two flags, “the makeshift Eagle over the crew hut and the Stars and Stripes now fluttering over Tyson's” (130). The division of the floe extends to language “laws,” as Meyer, the self-appointed German leader, decrees that only German can be spoken on the German side of the island. The impact of the border is not only symbolic, but has implications for survival, as animals hunted on the “German” side of the floe are believed to belong to the German crewmen, a belief that forgets that the Inuit men do all of the hunting.

Although the non-Inuit quickly forget who does the hunting when the meat arrives, they readily remember who is responsible for hunting when food is scarce or when the Inuit threaten to withdraw their skills. When Hans refuses to hunt anymore, Joe – the best Inuit hunter – reports that “The men may kill him soon. They'll never let an Inuk lie around in his iglu, same as they do, and eat up the stores – whatever they haven't stolen yet – without working. They'll kill him and his family and you know the rest of it” (167-8). Far from a nation in their own right, the Inuit are only tolerated by the non-Inuit crewmembers because of the vital labour they perform.

Against Jackson's suggestion, the novel quickly dispenses with the idea that the Inuit themselves might hold sovereignty over the Arctic, and so over the drifting ice floe, allowing that they might view the area around Cumberland South as home, but precluding the idea that their habitation would guarantee sovereignty. The novel opens with a conversation between an unnamed man and a minor character, Mr. Wilt:

‘He says softly, I would agree that the question of the Esquimaux' nationality is a highly vexed one. But I maintain that the girl must be deemed Canadian, because her home, in Cumberland Bay, is in Canadian territory.’

‘But that would make her a subject of the British Empire, wouldn't it?’

‘Indeed it would, sir.’

‘The white-haired man chuckles. You can hardly expect us to accept that, Mr Wilt. As you know, the family resides down here in Groton now. And the Polaris expedition was an American enterprise. No, no, Mr Wilt, our claim is thoroughly staked! . . .’

‘Some have declared, sir, that your Polaris expedition was in fact a German one. . . .’

‘So now you're claiming the Esquimaux for Germany!’

‘It must be remembered that her parents enjoyed their first contact with civilization in England. They took tea and dined with the Queen herself! The accent of the mother, I am told, is still English! . . . I understand furthermore that her husband has returned to the Canadian Arctic. Returned, Mr Wilt, with another American expedition! And he is expected home within the year. Home, Wilt, to Groton! (6-7 – dialogue quotation marks added for clarity)

This view of Inuit people as transferable commodities in an international negotiation among nation-states persists in the novel and again recalls the ongoing international debates over arctic sovereignty as each involved nation stakes its claims. Even as the castaways form discrete “nations” on the ice floe, the region of the floe where the Inuit snow huts are built are considered on the “American” side of the floe. The absurdity of the division contributes to the principal irony of the novel and its clear resonance with

contemporary politics: that the nation-state holds sovereignty based on control of the land should guarantee the Inuit sovereignty over the geographic region of the Arctic, rather than the countries that assert their right to the region. Indeed, dividing the ice floe without the express consultation of the Inuit emphasizes the extent to which “control” over land stems principally from military might and not from historic habitation or ethnic and cultural dominance. So despite being the only American among the group of nineteen, Tyson can claim the “land” of the floe and the Inuit who live there as American because he possesses a gun and the vestiges of naval rank.

The absurdity of dividing the ice floe into ethnic-based nations and of insisting the Inuit remain cheerful helpers – or else “dead meat” – is made apparent when the ice floe begins to break up in the spring. As the “land” on which the nations have been established begins to dissolve, all the members of the disparate groups must join together in “one boat.”<sup>39</sup> Before the ice begins to melt, national divisions allow the castaways to forget the perilous position they are all in and choose instead to focus on independent rescue plans: Tyson believes they should wait on the floe until a sealing ship sees them; the Germans plan to take the one remaining ship and row to Greenland; the Inuit hope to make their way across the ice to the land of Cumberland Sound. The castaways hotly debate these rescue plans, but as the strength of each position depends on the location of the ice floe, the uncertainty about where the floe *is* in relation to land renders the debate

---

<sup>39</sup> There is certainly a contemporary resonance here with global warming – the melting of the polar ice caps! - and all the nation-states of the world being united in their vulnerability to the “might” of Mother Nature.

something of a farce. Before the debate resolves, the ice floe begins to break up and the castaways must act together to get themselves to safety. The dissolution of the ice floe makes the inherent fragility – whether to environmental disaster, civil unrest, international conflict, economic collapse – of nations literal. By emphasizing first how nations are *made* in the very literal sense of drawing borders in the snow and dividing peoples along ethnic, racial and linguistic lines, and then dramatizing the *unmaking* of the nation in the literal collapse of the land and the reunification of peoples in times of crisis, the novel asks readers to consider under what conditions nations are both made and broken, and to re-examine their position within the nation: members of a group who police those who do not obey state sanctions or citizens who openly challenge the authority of the state to create hierarchies of authority and belonging or some negotiation of these two positions.

### **Arctic Ethnography: Rendering the Inuit Other**

In her study of Canadian culture and the Arctic in *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*, Renée Hulan describes the move from ethnographic realism to new or postmodern ethnography as instigated, much like the shift from historical realism to historiographic metafiction, by a recognition that realist texts rely on fictional conventions and by a desire to challenge the presumed authority of the ethnographer (or historian) himself/herself as an unbiased or unexaminable observer. Hulan describes the conventions of realist ethnography as: “the ‘marked absence’ of the narrator as a first-person presence and the use of the omniscient third-person point of view”; “suppression of the individual in favour of the whole, organization of the text by cultural unit,

generalization, use of jargon and exegesis”; and “[the] camouflage of representational techniques by leaving the author out of the text” (31-2). One further characteristic is the perceived need to live with the studied society in order to understand the “native point of view” (37). Postmodern ethnography follows similar conventions to new history in that its advocates demand the “demystification of the narrator’s authority through dialogue, intertextuality, and self-referentiality: the new ethnographer, in other words, poses as a storyteller who stresses his own subjectivity in an attempt to expose his authority over the text and the subject culture” (33). Depending on the conventions used, the ethnographer may assign more or less authority to the subject culture; that is to say, the choice of ethnographic conventions shapes the extent to which the subject culture is positioned as a culture made up of differing subjects able to represent themselves (to the ethnographer and to the reader) or as a culture subject to the inscrutable gaze and authority of the ethnographer (and reader).

The conventions of realist ethnography and realist history are of particular importance in *Afterlands* because the novel takes George Tyson’s 1874 memoir, *Arctic Experiences*, as a source both for information about the *Polaris* expedition and of inspiration for imagining the experiences and perspectives of other members of the group of castaways. *Arctic Experiences* makes use of all of the conventions of realist ethnography that Hulan identifies, and Heighton opts to include whole and unchanged sections of *Arctic Experiences* in *Afterlands*. In effect these sections demonstrate how realist ethnography, or the external imposition of identity on a racialized group – the Inuit

– overlooks differences within groups and instead presents a homogenized representation of the group.

Meyer participates in ethnographic activities, but not to the same extent as Tyson and not with the same pretence of benevolence. He believes that the castaways stranded on the ice floe might provide an excellent opportunity for the study of starvation. He marvels: “When ever have the descendants of so many different peoples been gathered in such a small space before? We have Esquimaux here, an African, an American, an Englishman, a Swede, a Dane, a Russian-German, and of course ourselves, Germans. What an opportunity for comparative observations, tests, measurements!” (90) Meyer's exuberance for the possible study of the effects of starvation on racially and ethnographically categorized peoples delimits the borders of identity around racialized features, but more nefariously, he hopes to use these categories to determine more “equitable” resource distribution because he believes that the “Esquimaux” “are more naturally *adapted* to starvations of this sort...and should therefore actually receive a lesser ration than we” (90 – emphasis and ellipses in original). Once suggested, the Social Darwinian logic of Meyer's plan never materializes, as Kruger manages to convince him that the Inuit's hunting abilities are keeping them alive and to deny the Inuit food would be, in effect, to deny food to the rest of the castaways, too. Furthermore, the narrative construction of Meyer as both a radical and eventually, as a man without the full capacity to reason, reduces his “scientific study” to the absurd and irrational. Thus, while the narrative views Meyer, and by extension his proposed study, as unreasonable, the

evocation of such experiments based on perceived differences between racially marked bodies once again recalls the material effects of external delineation and enforcement of identity categories.

A closer consideration of Tyson's representation of Tukulito, Punnie and Ebierbing in Tyson's "field notes," the sections of *Arctic Experiences* included in Heighton's novel, and Tyson's point of view as it is imagined in the latter narrative, point to the ways in which members of an outside, and dominant group, construct the other by drastically reducing their complexity, and indeed advancing moral judgements about the behaviour and values of the Inuit as if they were authoritative. Heighton satirizes this ethnographic arrogance by including these ethnographic passages and then describing both the biases of Tyson – the ethnographer – and the complexity of Tukulito – his subject.

Like Myer, Tyson characterizes the Inuit in racist and essentialist ways. The predominance of *Arctic Experiences* in the text and the narrative weight given to his point of view demand a closer reading of his character in particular. Unlike Meyer, Tyson holds his racist assumptions in tension with benevolent feelings. He begins the novel by sharing his belief that while "He likes Hannah and Joe very much, he admires them truly, but he takes it for granted that they are unusually advanced members of a primitive, doomed race" (27). Tyson's belief corresponds to a prevailing myth circulating among non-Indigenous people in the nineteenth century that Indigenous peoples belonged to a dying

race.<sup>40</sup> This myth gained credence from widespread death due to imported European diseases that decimated Indigenous populations from the beginning of European colonization of Indigenous lands in North America. Disease alone cannot account for the falling Indigenous populations, and naming “disease” as the principle killers suggests an unjustified degree of innocence on the part of colonizers. Bonita Lawrence points to a number of “destructive processes” aimed at destroying Native societies in *'Real' Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*:

These processes have included deliberately introducing disease and alcoholism, wholesale land appropriation, resource plundering practices, the deliberate use of starvation tactics, settler violence and organized military violence to subjugate communities and suppress resistance, centuries of widespread and concerted attacks on Indigenous spiritual and ceremonial life, and finally the theft of Native children, first into residential schools and then into the foster care system. (17)

The “destructive processes” aimed at killing Indigenous peoples have been employed differently depending on the nation, region and level of contact with colonizers; however, Tyson's belief that the Inuit are a population in decline (and his failure to identify his own role in this decline) fuels his ethnographic impulse to “preserve” the endangered culture through his observations and written records. By positioning himself as a benevolent superior – one who *likes* the other, but still believes in their inevitable demise – Tyson sets up the rest of his observations about Tukulito and Ebierbing as similarly authoritative and well intentioned.

Tyson explains his beliefs about the Inuit as an undifferentiated group early in

---

<sup>40</sup> And in some contemporary circles, too, as we saw in Don Gillmor's *Kanata*.

the excerpts of *Arctic Experiences*. He notes that “there is no thrift in them [the Inuit]. Still, they do seem free of the selfishness that commonly goes along with thrift, and they will share all they have with a stranger; and, also true, they will sometimes store away provisions, and build *caches* on their travelling routes . . . Only Hannah, I imagine, is more like a white person in this regard” (66). At this point in his narrative Tyson explains the behaviour of the particular Inuit characters as exemplary of “all” or of “them.” He is only able to account for the individual differences, specifically the different behaviour of Hannah, by attributing her ability to ration food as a behaviour she learned spending so much time among white people. Critically, Tyson's belief in Hannah's “unique” qualities does not extend far, as he holds that while she “had seemed so *white*” (105 – emphasis in original), her actions eventually “[transform] her into a very different creature; or perhaps, expos[e] a *truer self*” (105 – my emphasis). The novel situates Tukulito between two cultures and dithers about her nationality – though she identifies it quite clearly – but never questions her racial identification as Inuit. Because Tyson categorizes people solely on the basis of racialized and ethno-national markers, he discounts any of Tukulito's actions or beliefs that might suggest she identifies herself as anything more than one of “them.”

Indeed, Tyson's absolutist belief in the consistency of racialized bodies leads him to create metaphoric borders around what racialized individuals can do or believe, borders that do not permit the entrance of contradictory or hybrid identities, behaviours or ideas. Tyson begins his “field work” in earnest when he moves from his shelter with Meyer to

live with Tukulito, Punnie and Ebierbing. He observes them as they cook, sing, sleep and have sex and records his observations in a field notebook that he plans to use to write an account of his experiences on the floe.<sup>41</sup> In this respect Tyson is a textbook ethnographer; however, his dependence on Tukulito and Ebierbing for food and protection engenders a different sort of power relationship. So while Tyson believes he controls the means to describe and represent the Inuit to an English reading public, he also recognizes his reliance on the family for his survival. The necessary intimacy of the living space – the igloo is purposefully constructed to be quite small so as to keep in as much body heat as possible – and the likewise intimate sleeping practice of “spooning” bring Tyson in closer contact with the “objects” of his study than ethnographers typically experience.

Together with the close contact and the belief that starving people hunger for both food and sex, Tyson develops an interest in Tukulito that soon becomes sexual. In the fictionalized experience, Tyson wakes one night to hear Ebierbing and Tukulito making love and engages in his own form of voyeurism, eventually pleasuring himself with a mixture of “shame and disgust” (104). Tyson's voyeurism repeats later in the narrative, and again his sexual arousal fills him with self loathing. The narrative explains his feelings of shame as originating not from watching Tukulito and Ebierbing in particular, but as “an inevitable part of sex, perhaps even stimuli” (105). Tyson cannot acknowledge any genuine attraction to, or sentiment for, Tukulito because to do so would

---

<sup>41</sup> He understands that he will have to seriously edit his account to cover-up the mutiny. When he finally does publish *Arctic Experiences* the Introduction points out that he lost all of this field notes in the course of the recovery, but that he has recreated them to the best of his memory.

threaten the defined borders he relies on to separate himself as a civilized white American from the uncivilized and doomed race of Inuit. Instead he perpetuates a relationship of benevolent paternalism, thus allowing himself to care for Tukulito only insofar as he maintains rigid control over the racial hierarchy that both separates them and prevents him from acknowledging or exploring his sexual feelings for her. The borders Tyson constructs around the Inuit characters limit what he can expect from them: good hunters, animalistic sexual behaviour, improvident, and members of a doomed race; these borders are not, however, impermeable, and Tukulito's actions and beliefs offer the reader the opportunity to explore how, and to what extent, individuals might transgress borders of racial categorization.

**“Some, of course, might submit that they are a nation unto themselves”: Individual Identity and Border Crossing<sup>42</sup>**

In different ways, Tukulito and Kruger attempt to define the borders of their national identities for themselves. While Tukulito negotiates among Inuit, American and British identifications, Kruger searches for a self-identification that exceeds national borders. For Tukulito, where one is and how one behaves determine national identity; for Kruger, national identity imposes limits that are best ignored in favour of intimate personal connections. Ultimately the two characters find their goal of self-identification unrealizable in a world that both demands, and requires, filiations.

Tukulito learns to speak English during her tenure as a “Living Exhibit” at P.T.

---

<sup>42</sup> Heighon, Steven. *Afterlands*. 7.

Barnum's American Museum in New York in 1882.<sup>43</sup> She eventually stops working as a literal exhibit of her people, but she continues to believe that she must be a “sort of emissary, an emblem of her people” (260). Tukulito's self-conception as a “living exhibit” fuels her desire to transcend the negative stereotypes of the Inuit held by white people and to prove herself, and by extension the Inuit people, as assimilable. Little context is given in the novel as to why Tukulito might want to be assimilated into white society. The narrative suggests that her time spent as a “living exhibit” and her experience with the upper class of first British and then American societies are sufficient motivations for her to adopt the beliefs, language and customs of white, Christian life. The novel does complicate Tukulito's professed commitment to the “white world” (260) in the chapters on the ice floe by having her vacillate between the English and Inuit language, Christianity and the belief in the Woman of the Sea, and monogamy and polygamy. Nevertheless, Tukulito remains aware of her role as an “emissary, and emblem” (260) and in several instances in the narrative she describes herself as conflicted, as “on two different floes” (258). What makes Tukulito such an interesting character is her ability to shift, as she says “almost seamlessly,” between the customs and expectations of one national group and another, all the while denying the difficulty of doing so and all the while believing it is her responsibility to the Inuit to behave as a “good Christian woman”

---

<sup>43</sup> The practice of displaying Indigenous people for a European viewing audience began with Jacques Cartier's capture of Donnacona and his sons between 1535-7. A 1987 art installation by James Luna titled "Artefact Piece" critiques this practice and the implication that Indigenous peoples are of an era properly confined to the museum by having Luna placed in a glass display case only to move and speak when museum visitors pass by in another incarnation of the “living exhibit.” [http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/images/artwork/2005-06/cohen/james\\_luna-9.jpg](http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/images/artwork/2005-06/cohen/james_luna-9.jpg)

in order to counter the negative stereotypes attached to her racial group.

Tukulito speaks English and claims the language as hers “by adoption” (58). Her English is inflected with a British accent, which is explained by her having learned the language while on display in England. The Britishness of her accent must remind the reader of the ways in which British colonization involved the imposition of the English language on colonized peoples. That Tukulito claims the language as her own speaks to the extent to which she came to adopt not only the language, but it does not necessarily follow that she likewise adopts the values of the British colonial project more generally.

With few exceptions she speaks English throughout the stay on the floe. In one instance where she speaks Inuktitut, it is to sing Punnie a lullaby, and in this instance she sings first “a song of her people, a survivor's lullaby” before moving “with no transitional pause . . . into the verse of a hymn” (86). The seamlessness of the transition reinforces the understanding of Tukulito's identity as dependent on location and circumstance. While she is on the floe, starving and comforting her child, speaking or singing in Inuktitut is appropriate, even necessary. That in this circumstance she transitions immediately to English suggests that she feels some attachment to the English language and has not uncritically adopted British values and the English language. Nevertheless, while on the floe Tukulito does not reflect on her language choice except to point out that it is one of the markers of her difference from other, less civilized, Inuit. In her insistence on speaking and being spoken to in English, Tukulito hopes to be seen by others – to be exhibited – as English.

Tukulito's religious beliefs follow a trajectory similar to her language association. She earnestly expresses Christian beliefs while on the floe (203, 140), encounters problems that test the consistency and commitment of her Christian beliefs (72, 157, 175), and then as she approaches her death returns to her Inuit beliefs about the afterlife (289). Her commitment to monogamy is tied to her Christian beliefs, and this commitment too, moves from steadfast, to tested, to abandoned: she insists her marriage “in London, before God, by a vicar of the Church of England” (203) protects her from any untoward advances by the men on the floe. When Tyson stays with her and Ebierbing in their iglu, and Ebierbing suggests she have sex with Tyson as it is for the Inuit “a custom – a kindness” (140), she refuses. Finally, just before her death she has sex with Chusely – Punnie's music teacher – an act that is given little explanation in the novel, except perhaps that Chusely very much wanted the relationship, and so might be viewed in its own way as “a kindness.”

The reader is aware that Tukulito has not fully internalized English values when she expresses fear that Punnie may be “forgetting her mother tongue” (23). Although Tukulito claims English is her language – and Punnie's – “by adoption,” for her, language marks a “true” or “ultimate” identification with one group or the other. That Punnie speaks only English as she dies concerns Tukulito, because for her, this means Punnie has forgotten her people and has adopted not only the English language, but Englishness itself. In contrast, as Tukulito dies she finds that “some things she can say only in Inuktitut” (258) and “her own grasp of English . . . seems curiously reduced” (285). At the

same time as she loses her English fluency, Tukulito describes herself as “los[ing] the strength to keep her feet planted in two worlds” (258). In effect Tukulito concludes that one cannot inhabit two racial or cultural identities, and that one must choose to identify with one culture or the other. In her death she finds she cannot continue to “interpret herself to others” (258), that is, she can no longer serve as an emblem or exhibit of a properly assimilated Inuit woman. Instead, she embraces Inuktitut and the feeling of having returned to an identification more properly her own, and one that allows her to be understood by her people in a way that “foreigners” cannot.

The narrative point of view in *Afterlands* shifts among third person omniscient, third person limited, and the first person of Tyson's *Arctic Experiences*. Kruger's point of view, like Tukulito's and Tyson's is narrated in third person limited, effectively highlighting the narrative importance of these three characters and their positions on nationality and belonging. Tyson figures as the ethnographic observer who feels justified in drawing the borders of identity around others based on racialized behaviours or beliefs; Tukulito grapples with an identity formed between two nations, two languages and two sets of religious beliefs. Ultimately she claims her self-identification as Inuit. Kruger's point of view discloses yet another position on identity and belonging.

Kruger's position on national belonging is given especial importance, as his narrative point of view is given the most space in the novel – it is the only one to continue through the last two sections of the book that follow the rescue of the castaways from the ice floe. These sections describe his attempt at suicide, and then his travels to Mexico

where he takes up residence, forms a family, and joins an Indigenous resistance movement. During his time on the floe Kruger flatly rejects the appeals to German nationalism made by Meyer and his supporters. When Meyer asks “Why have you stood against me?” Kruger responds, “Because you all think with your blood” (172). On the floe Kruger's rejection of blood ties as a means of forming coalitions or of uniting people in common causes puts him in life-threatening danger. Because Meyer only understands “blood” belonging – national belonging based on race and ethnicity – he believes Kruger is a traitor; because Tyson associates individuals with national groups based on their language and place of origin, he believes Kruger is a German spy. Both Meyer and Tyson vilify Kruger because they cannot comprehend an individual freely choosing to reject borders of identity defined by nation.

Kruger's rationale for rejecting national identification comes from his apparent belief that this form of identification leads only to violence. He claims that “the idiot willingness to choose sides is what feeds the abattoir of history” (322) and gives evidence of the violence resulting from choosing sides from his experiences on the ice floe and in the civil war in Mexico. He observes other scenes of nation-based violence; for instance, while on his way back to Mexico after a trip to Groton he is stuck in an Orangemen's parade and describes their display of nationalism as, “The hatreds of cavefolk but with improving weapons, again” (395). The cumulative effect of the varied scenes of Kruger encountering nation-based violence is to pose statelessness or post-national identification as the only viable form of peaceful existence.

For the better part of the novel Kruger fills this post-national role. After the rescue from the ice floe he, like Tukulito becomes a “sort of living exhibit, a popular one, although many found him difficult to class – as he preferred” (11). Unlike Tukulito he is a “living exhibit” not of a particular national group, but of an unidentifiable, ambiguous national affiliation. He serves in the novel as an emblem not of Germany, or Mexico, but of the potential to be without a state, to be beyond national identification - “as he preferred.” Though he freely identifies himself as German, Mexican and American, depending on the political expediencies of the moment, he most often defines himself in relation to these nations as “an accidental Mexican,” or a “circumstantial Catholic” (319). That is to say, he takes on these identifications without intent and certainly without conviction. Indeed, the only belief he professes to hold is that “only the solitary and the uninvolved, the un-enlisted, could think and act with true moral independence, and be a loyalist only to Truth” (319). His romantic take on the stateless wanderer as one who is free to commit himself to “Truth” disregards the political and material ramifications of being without state affiliation. After he is mugged in Mexico and has his German identification papers stolen, he concludes that “Now he's truly and finally homeless, stateless, unaffiliated” (319), but he also learns the dangers of being without national affiliation when he tries to cross the state border between the United States and Mexico, admitting that he has “no legal identity” and is “a border ghost” (395). He makes the crossing in secret, all the while aware of the risk to his life should he be caught.

But for all the seeming difficulties in being without national affiliations, a “solo,

arduous path” (319), as Kruger calls it, it is the position the narrative seems to exalt above all others. Kruger is the most sympathetic character, his point of view is given the greatest attention, and he maintains peace where others inspire violence. His rejection of national affiliation appears the most logical and most humane when placed in scenes of nationally inspired violence like Meyer's mutiny or Luz's pro-nationalist Mexican attack on rebel villages.

But the narrative cannot sustain Kruger as “homeless, stateless, unaffiliated” (319). Much as he might like to live this way, Kruger ultimately asks: “How is an abruptly old man to inhabit an abstraction?” (319). He finds that for all its attraction and promise of peace, it is impossible for him to be and live in the world without some form of national belonging. He tries to belong, like Tukulito, to “a young, flourishing family – one's own small tribe, in fact, with its own language and rituals, customs and difficulties,” but finds that the family unit is too small, and is “All subject to extinction” (390). In the last pages of the novel he returns to Mexico to join the Sina camp and to, presumably, participate in their fight for freedom from the Mexican nationals.

That Kruger ends up identifying with a national group that is both without state sanction or power and not tied to his ethnic or racial origins is telling. The novel first explores the possibility of being without national associations and concludes that this possibility, this abstraction, is not yet liveable. But the novel offers another possibility: if individuals must continue to be identified in relation to a national group, this identification might be made by the individual, for themselves. The narrative certainly

acknowledges that external sources, whether other individuals – e.g. Tyson – or states – e.g. The Mexican nationals – have the power to impose identifications, but the narrative also leaves room for the possibility that individuals might reject the external imposition of national identity and instead independently identify their national belonging.

The unacknowledged tension in the novel arises from the conflation among race, ethnicity and nationality, whereby each is treated interchangeably and each can be imposed, adopted, or refused in equal turn. While Kruger's ability to contest the external impositions of identity reads as a triumph of individual freedom, the difficulty remains that Kruger has the freedom to contest external impositions of his identity because he lacks the racial markers that immediately identify Hannah as Inuit and not British. Likewise, Hannah's "return" to her Inuit customs and beliefs at the close of her life reinforces the idea of an inescapable "thinking with blood," that undermines the strength of a life led "on two floes." If Kruger is free to choose his national, ethnic and racial affiliations, Hannah's racial markers preclude the same possibility. In either case, both must allow that despite the appeal of being without national belonging entirely, the individual cannot (yet) live "after" land.

**"An extraordinary... connection...": *A Discovery of Strangers*<sup>44</sup>**

Like more recent examples of Canadian historical fiction that narrate the encounter between colonial explorers and Indigenous peoples (e.g. Steven Heighton's

---

<sup>44</sup> Wiebe, Rudy. *A Discovery of Strangers*. 204.

*Afterlands*, Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*, Fred Stenson's *The Trade*), *A Discovery of Strangers* criticizes colonial explorers for their arrogant belief in the superiority of their language and technology; their ignorance of basic survival strategies in the local environment, and of the natural cycles of seasons and animal migration; and their voracious appetites for meat, Indigenous labour and material resources. Despite these criticisms of its colonial characters, *A Discovery of Strangers* is a novel that uses the moment of colonial-Indigenous contact to interrogate the emergence of the contemporary national subject. That is, the contact between groups of “profound difference” (Wiebe 207) emerges in the novel as an encounter that witnesses the groups as they form and reinforce prejudices about one another and yet also sees the groups change in their own beliefs and practices as a result of the “discovery” of one another. Consequently, the novel provides a limited explanation for the violence of the colonial encounter by suggesting that rather than malicious colonial intent, it is the “profound difference” of the groups, in terms of expectations for behaviour and belief that result in the catastrophic end to the Tetsot'ine way of life. In contrast, the sexual and spiritual union of Robert Hood and Greenstockings suggests the possibilities of communion and “...connection...” (204 – ellipses in original) in the colonial encounter rather than an experience of “profound difference” (207). The likely and tangible outcome of such a union – a child – is indeed born, and so *A Discovery of Strangers* represents the exemplary colonial figure as the father of the future nation.

Like many authors of revisionist history,<sup>45</sup> Wiebe takes a well-known historical event – the first expedition (of three) led by the British explorer John Franklin from 1820-22 – and narrates the encounter between the explorers and the Indigenous peoples from the third-person limited perspective of several members of the Tetsot'ine Nation, or the Dene as they are perhaps better known. Wiebe's focus on the traditionally marginalized Indigenous peoples is complicated by the inclusion of excerpts from the journals of Franklin; his medical officer, John Richardson; and midshipman, George Back. To these excerpts Wiebe adds a fictional account by the “ordinary seaman” John Hepburn and the third person limited perspective of the British officer Robert Hood. The interplay between Indigenous and colonial voices and their versions of events provides the reader with the opportunity to consider how the colonial characters describe the Indigenous characters, and likewise, how the Indigenous characters represent the colonial ones. Janne Korkka suggests that Wiebe's historiographic interest lies “not [in] recreating the smallest detail of what actually happened, but in recreating circumstances in order to explore the possibilities of interpreting lives led in a lost world” (360). I am less interested here in the historical circumstances of the Franklin expedition than I am in the ideas of historic loss and future potential, in the ethical valences of “discovery,” and in the colonial-Indigenous relationship of mutual recognition and change.

Herb Wyile has taken the novel's title, *A Discovery of Strangers*, as an ironic

---

<sup>45</sup> Critics are divided on whether *A Discovery of Strangers* can be considered historiographic metafiction or whether its lack of metafictional reference to Wiebe as author and irony excludes it from this specific genre categorization. For arguments in favour of the novel as historiographic metafiction see: Birkwood (2008), Hoepfner (1997), Tremblay (1997). Arguments against, see: Hulan (2002) and Wyile (2002).

inversion of the typical expectation that explorers “discover,” by posing the explorers as the subjects of discovery, as it is the Tetsot'ine who discover *them*. Wyile argues that,

The programmed response is to read the “discovery” as the customary, active pursuit of the explorer. Here, however, the use of “strangers” suggests that it is the explorers themselves who are discovered, in this case by the Tetsot'ine or Dene. The title's inversion of the trajectory of colonial exploration mirrors the general inversion of the narrative as a whole, which focuses largely on the reaction of the Tetsot'ine to the coming of the whites. (38)

In his eagerness to discuss the representation of the Indigenous voice and perspective, Wyile's analysis does not do justice to the complexity of the narrative which insists on a reciprocal relationship of discovery: the explorers and the Tetsot'ine discover one another. Monika Bottez makes this observation, noting that “discovery . . . obviously works both ways” (51); however, Bottez does not go far enough in her consideration of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the Tetsot'ine and the colonial explorers, as she dismisses the exceptional character of Robert Hood as perpetuating a “harmful delusion” by imagining the possibility for happiness in his relationship with the Tetsot'ine female protagonist, Greenstockings. Similarly, in Susan Birkwood's assessment of the novel the “dramatically opposed” (31) groups cannot be reconciled and, again, Hood is dismissed because he “dies on the Barrens. Hope, it seems, is always qualified or compromised or killed” (36). Maria Fruhwald, too, argues that the exceptional relationship between Hood and Greenstockings must be understood as confined to the past because “Hood . . . dies in the end, and with him, it seems dies the last attempt at decency on the part of the European colonizers” (141). The tendency in criticism on *A Discovery of Strangers* to discuss the revisionist inversion of perspectives and the “death” of potential intercultural

exchange has led to short or absent treatments of characters like Michel or Hood, who do not conform to the characteristics or beliefs of their racialized and nationalized groups, but who do, even in death, contribute to lively and vital representations of reciprocity and subjective exchange.

The term “discovery” itself demands closer examination. The Oxford English Dictionary defines discovery in a number of related ways. One definition regards discovery as “The action of disclosing or divulging (anything secret or unknown); revelation, disclosure, setting forth, explanation.” In this case, discovery is a wilful action on the part of the subject: I make a discovery of myself to you. The Dictionary notes that this usage is now “rare” (though still in use in legal settings); indeed, the idea of discovery as something revelatory about a subject “I” or subject “you,” rather than the later usage of “discovery” as pertaining to mineral deposits or “exploration, investigation, reconnoitring, reconnaissance,” reorients the action of discovery from a broad, external and imposed investigation to a specific, personal offering of information that, without the agential decision to disclose, would remain secret. These definitions are critical in appreciating the complexity of discovery in the novel. Discovery can be both a revelation of the self to the other and the imposed investigation of the self by the other; the narrative involves both variations of discovery, and both the Indigenous characters and the colonial ones find themselves engaged in these varied forms.

A final definition of discovery worth attending to is that of “the unravelling or unfolding of the plot of a play, poem.” This usage of “discovery” is important in the

context of *A Discovery of Strangers* because so much depends upon the reader's interpretative assemblage of the disparate and inconsonant voices that form the narrative, such that the “discovery” in the title becomes the reader's “unravelling and unfolding” of both the narrative and the “strangers” that speak throughout the narrative. The “discovery” that I make while reading the novel sees the self and the other meet and discover one another, both by divulging and investigating. By analyzing interpersonal discovery in several key relationships I find that the relative willingness of characters to reveal themselves to the other while respecting the borders that separate themselves from one another determines the ethical valence of the relationships.

The ethics of self-other relations are explored by Judith Butler in her 2005 text, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Butler contextualizes her theory of self-other relations within a philosophic history spanning Hegel to Foucault (and beyond), and within a post-modern view of subjectivity as formed and invested in a social world. Butler argues that because the subject is formed within social structures that at once precede and exceed the self, a complete account of the self cannot be given. For my purposes here, this degree of unawareness or what Butler terms “opacity,” requires that any self-revelation, or any opening of the self to the other, is necessarily partial or incomplete.

Butler draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to suggest that self-revelation, or giving an account of the self, must occur in *relation* to another. She maintains “every account of oneself is given to another, and every accounting takes place within a scene of address” (50). An ethical relation between the self and the other requires “both parties [to]

be sustained and altered by the scene of address” (50); both the speaking “I” and the “you” must recognize the elements of opacity, and must further recognize that by giving and by hearing an account *both* have been altered.

On the contrary, relationships are “ethically violent” when an individual attempts to make a claim for the universality of their ethics – when ethics are understood as moral rules that govern relationships. Within the context of self-other relations, ethical violence can be understood as the refusal to recognize the differences of the other and to insist on the application of the self’s moral standards at the expense of those of the other; or, to insist on the knowledge and totality of the “I,” thus rejecting the dependence the “I” has on the other.

*A Discovery of Strangers* is not damning of colonial explorers, as much as it critiques colonial explorers who refuse to recognize the integrity of the Indigenous other and their dependence on this other for both survival and self-identification. At a basic level the descriptions of Indigenous people in the explorers’ log entries that universalize and essentialize Indigenous characteristics, beliefs and practices, such as George Back’s observation that, “the Indian mind rejects accident” (45), participate in a limited, ethnographic, and prescriptive representation. Wiebe does, however, add a layer of nuance to the ethnographic descriptions by including the explorer’s sense of righteousness and entitlement. By including some context for the explorer’s reductive statements, Wiebe invites the reader to question the easy assumption that the explorers are just “bad” men, and points to the larger system of exploitation inherent in colonialism that the explorers

themselves are also affected by or subject to. In one instance, George Back tries to persuade the Tetsot'ine to provide a map or a guide for their proposed expedition:

This, our great flag, is the sign of the King of England's power, who is your king also! The King of England is your Great Father! We are not traders, we are the King's warriors, as you can see by our uniforms. We are not come to trade, but to establish good relations between us and yourselves, and to discover the resources of your country. We already know one great river to the north, but if you show us the way of the other great river to the Northern Ocean, and if you hunt for us as we follow it, the King will be very thankful. He will send ships bigger than a hundred voyageur canoes combined to trade with you. Then your enemies will fade away with envy at your wealth and power, and you will be richer than all your ancestors together. (42)

I take issue with both the way Back infantilizes the Tetsot'ine, and the way he seamlessly enfranchises them into the colonial system of kings, allegiances, favours and promises. But this example also highlights the way in which Back himself, and the explorers he is associated with, find their worth and value tied to the success of their expedition to “discover the resources,” and to “discover[r] how to get east to Hudson Bay while mapping the northern coastline of North America” (49). Back's invocation of the King's *power*, but also of the accoutrements of that power – the flag and uniforms – offers a partial rationale not only for why the explorers are there, but also why they behave with such arrogance: as the King's representatives they channel his authority and purpose, qualities that in their experiences are beyond question or reproach. One of the repeated questions the Tetsot'ine ask each other and themselves is what “they [the explorers] want here” (202, 232, 242, 266), and indeed the reader, aware of the history of Franklin's first expedition (as well as the fatal third expedition), might also reasonably ask why the

explorers have come to such a demanding environment, so poorly prepared, and with such seemingly ill-defined and inadequately formulated goals. The text offers no single or direct answer, but instead suggests that duty to king and country, as well as ambition for wealth and prestige, might be the motivators.

By offering some motivation and context for the explorer's reductive and essentializing representation of the Tetsot'ine, Wiebe does not go so far as to forgive or excuse the colonial project. Rather he assigns blame to the colonial characters for the eventual destruction of the Tetsot'ine by noting the introduction of European diseases to which the Tetsot'ine had no natural resistance. The difficulty with this explanation is its strategy of guiltless blame. So while he does cite disease as one of the factors in the Indigenous genocide,<sup>46</sup> the narrative also includes the introduction of foreign systems of capital exchange and commodity accumulation as another contributing cause. In this example, Richardson and Franklin discuss the “problem” of how to introduce a British economic system:

“We will never control any Indians, not in this wild country, until we teach them the absolute, practical necessity of money.”

“They hardly seem to require it, since they trade for what they need.”

“Exactly. I believe that is the fundamental problem in the economic

---

<sup>46</sup> See Robinson (1985), Neu (2003), Hill (2010). The title of Robinson's text, *Infested Blankets, Canada's Constitution, Indian Genocide* alludes to the practice of distributing smallpox infested Hudson's Bay Company blankets to Indigenous peoples in an effort to spread the disease. Hill argues against the belief that these diseases were “accidentally” introduced, pointing out that “such a perspective disregards the conditions in which these diseases were introduced. Conditions such as: wars, massacres, slavery and scorched earth policies and the subsequent destruction of subsistence agriculture and food-stocks, and the accompanying starvation, malnutrition, and the dismemberment of communally-based cultures. These conditions were not introduced by “unknowing” Europeans; they were part of a calculated campaign based on exploitation in which the extermination of Indigenous people was a crucial factor” (17). These examples point to the intentional use of disease as a mode of murder.

development of primitives.”

“If they understood money, they would work harder to get more of it, in order to buy what they want.”

Franklin shook his head. “But... it seems they want so little.”

“Exactly,” Richardson murmured, closing his notebook. “They must want more than they need. That is civilization.” (59 – ellipses in original)

In keeping with the trope of reciprocity, the narrative does not dictate that these colonial characters *impose* these systems directly, but rather that the incentives for participating and the consequences for not doing so compel the participation of Indigenous people.

Related to the idea of an “imposed” capital system, the text principally offers examples of Indigenous characters who – despite the supposedly attractive incentives – resist the pressures to adopt the colonial economic system; indeed, the text portrays these characters as making the most rational and balanced choice.<sup>47</sup>

It is Keskarrah, the father of Greenstockings and the community member who “knows something a little” – meaning both that he can dream/predict the movement of animals and that he holds a social position of authority and respect – who connects the physical sicknesses imported by the explorers with the similar destruction caused by the introduction of their value system. He says, “I thought sickness was no more than blisters, bleeding perhaps, and some People lost in their bodies . . . But that's not it – the sickness they bring is a *spirit*, of *things*. It is connected somehow to this endless killing of more and more animals, and this shining little shit they hang around People's necks” (269). Here Keskarrah identifies the violence inherent in the colonial importation of a capitalist

---

<sup>47</sup> Ervin Beck criticizes Wiebe for idealizing and romanticizing Indigenous life pre-colonial contact.

value system. The novel thus asserts that the limits of colonial violence extend beyond material injuries or illness to include the introduction, and in this case, indirect imposition of colonial value systems.

While the observation that the imposition of colonial value systems is violent remains a fairly obvious one, it is one worth making if only because the colonial characters (with the possible exception of Hood) consider themselves on a “scientific” exploration and not in any sense as participants in a violent encounter. The explorers arrive with assumptions about Indigenous people that further contribute to the violence of the encounter. The explorers describe the Tetsot'ine as “fickle, changeable” (275), “superstitious” (41), “lazy” (47), “children” (204), possessing “limited language” (43). These now stereotypical representations of the Tetsot'ine leave little room for the possibility of an *exchange* of knowledge, practices or values. In one example, the Tetsot'ine, mourning the deaths of two hunters, proceed to destroy their belongings by tearing and breaking them apart. The explorers interpret the Tetsot'ine mourning practice as evidence of their failure to understand the value of objects and the importance of capital accumulation. Frightened that the destruction of so many objects may threaten the Tetsot'ines' chances of surviving the winter, Hood intervenes and hides things, saying, “They *want* us to save their things, we aren't Yellowknives, and we *can* save their things” (65 – emphasis in original). To which Richardson replies, “We know our duty. These people have mourned before, and they still live” (65). Hood's desire to intervene (however paternal in nature) stems from his recognition that the only reason the hunters

died, and indeed the only reason the Tetsot'ine mourn, is because “they were hunting for us [the explorers]!” (66) His feelings of responsibility and guilt are contrasted with Richardson's insistence on being a spectator rather than participant. Richardson's emotional and physical detachment exemplifies the trope of ethnographic observation and demonstrates the degree to which Richardson sees himself, and the other explorers, as separate and autonomous, a self-conceptualization that means the complete disavowal of dependence on the other.

However, when they return, starving, from their expedition to the Polar Sea, the explorers cannot ignore their dependence on the Tetsot'ine. Dependence in a Butlerian sense can be non-corporeal, that is to say, the self is not strictly dependent on the other to sustain its body; rather, to acknowledge dependence is to recognize that the self relies on the other to know itself and that in its interaction with the other the self changes, just as the other changes, too. In the scenes following their return, the explorers exhibit both kinds of dependence, which marks a subtle shift in their perception of the Tetsot'ine. Richardson reports that “*The Indians treated us with the utmost tenderness, gave us their snowshoes and walked without themselves, keeping by our sides that they might lift us when we fell . . . The Indians cooked for and fed us as if we had been children, evincing a degree of humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized of nations*” (295 – emphasis in original). This description still presents a few problems such as the point of comparison for their behaviour as the “civilized nation,” suggesting that the Tetsot'ine civilization is not civilized on its own terms. However, these qualifications do not

completely undermine the shift in tone and intent in Richardson's report from the earlier derogatory characterizations of the Tetsot'ine. Finally, the willingness of the explorers to be fed by the Tetsot'ine is an important indication of dependency, particularly in a text where feeding and eating regularly figure as an act of intense reciprocity, as we shall see with Hood and Greenstockings.

I stress the change in the explorers' views of the Tetsot'ine for a few reasons. First, I want to challenge the assessment of critics like William Closson James that there is “almost complete incommensurability between the Native world view and that of the white European explorers” (77) by suggesting that both groups reconsider their assessments and prejudices of the other. I also stress the importance of the change because the novel is preoccupied with how relationships may first seem to be unbalanced, but on closer consideration evince reciprocal need.

So it is that the explorers are not the only ones altered by these scenes of discovery and dependence. The Tetsot'ine change their seasonal migration routes and their hunting patterns as a result of the explorers' demands for resources from the local environment, but the Tetsot'ine too have preconceived notions of what “Whitemuds” are like, and they too are represented as having some openness to re-evaluating their beliefs. When the explorers arrive, the Tetsot'ine make note of how the white men are: demanding (36), forgetful (75), motionless (76), lazy (147) and fixated on immediate results - “Now!” (17). Whereas the explorers do not reflect on the differences between themselves and the Tetsot'ine, aside from noting the negative qualities they perceive the Tetsot'ine to

have, the Tetsot'ine carefully consider the origin of the differences between the two groups, and what actions they might take in response to the differences. Keskarrah, having heard the Christian story of original sin, concludes: “Their first story tells them everything is always wrong. So wherever they go, they can see only how wrong the world is” (132). He worries that the power of the story “could drag [the Tetsot'ine] together with Whitemuds” because “a story can tangle you up so badly you start to think different” (127).<sup>48</sup> The novel is not neutral about the changes that take place for either group. It represents the explorers’ increased humility and greater awareness of the humanity of the Tetsot'ine as a necessary change, if inadequate on its own. Here, as in the other examples of the ways the Tetsot'ine change, change is represented as harmful when it makes the Tetsot'ine more like the “Whitemuds,” and is especially harmful when it is undertaken too rapidly, as is the case with Bigfoot who is described as “acting different too fast” (134).

### **What Would Have Been: Lost Possibilities and Past Prophecies**

The narrative bias that favours the Tetsot'ine way of life and is critical of the influence of the colonial characters is most certainly an effect of the novel being historical fiction. That is to say, the possibilities for positive reciprocal exchange must be set against the known history of violence that follows in the years after the expedition. So while the narrative remains interested in, and hopeful for, moments of shared openness and mutual discovery (in both senses of the word), it does not forget the legacy of colonial violence

---

<sup>48</sup> This is an interesting metatextual moment that reminds the reader of the power of the story Wiebe is telling and the intent that readers should “think different” about the origins of national land and national belonging.

that instrumentally affects the Tetsot'ine.

One of the ways the narrative signals the future for the Tetsot'ine is through the character of Birdseye and her prophetic powers that grant her a “bird's eye view” of the relationship among the Tetsot'ine, the explorers, and the traders with whom the Tetsot'ine will develop an increasingly dependent relationship. Birdseye not only predicts the future, but her character in many ways symbolizes the future for the Tetsot'ine. From the outset of the narrative she is afflicted with a disease, simply called “the Eater,” that causes ulcers to break out on her face, which in turn become a “deeper blackness which opens always wider in [Birdseye's] face” (116-7). Birdseye's symptoms foreshadow the physical diseases that will soon infect the Tetsot'ine and wreak disaster on the population; but the name of the illness – the Eater – also gestures to the spiritual sickness Keskarrah identifies with the desire to accumulate more European objects (guns, kettles, knives, beads). Richardson's salve, which numbs the pain of the ulcers, complicates the symbolism of the Eater-as-future by suggesting that the Tetsot'ine have been anaesthetised to the (likely) disastrous outcome of relationships with the explorers. Keskarrah admits that his desire to save Birdseye's life prevented him from understanding that “to ask like Whitemuds ask – for everything at once – is far too dangerous” (269). In his desire for the salve, Keskarrah fails to recognize the symbolism of the disease and the consequences it could and will have for his People. The Eater's literal consumption of Birdseye's face points to the ways in which the Tetsot'ine, too, will be consumed and killed by the colonial impulse, or what Robert Hood calls “the English duty,” to “EAT” (235).

In third person limited narration, Greenstockings, who also has prophetic abilities, predicts this future (or what is now the known past) most explicitly in a passage in the last few pages of the text:

Sickness, strange and various sicknesses beyond anything they have ever known in the past generations of all their stories, will continue to kill so many of them, and the endless thefts and raids the men will be so strongly tempted to increase against their nearest enemies, the Dogribs will destroy them as a People – after all, the Tetsot'ine have so many guns, so much powder and shot from trapping so many small furs, of which the traders always want more! Always more! . . . And they have this endless source of powerful weapons if they just kill enough animals – and those enemies they do not kill they can certainly try to enslave and force to labour for them like Whites do paddle-slaves – sickness and the men's unrelenting aggression will destroy Greenstockings' People. (316)

Though it is not a first person prediction or a spoken one (as is the case with Birdseye), the third person limited narrative perspective leaves no question that Greenstockings is aware of the future fate of her People. Unlike her mother's view of the future, Greenstockings identifies both gender and the participation of the Tetsot'ine themselves as contributing factors in their destruction.

Both of these sorts of looking forward in a narrative set in the past – so a looking forward to what is either the present for the reader or the very recent past – is not an unusual strategy in historical fiction. Writers make use of parallel narratives as a means of comparing the reader's past with the reader's present, often with the implicit suggestion that little has changed in the intervening decades or centuries. Further, parallel narratives, or in the case of *A Discovery of Strangers*, the presence of the future in the form of prophecy, unsettle the assumed fixity of the past by examining moments of possibility or

rupture framed by known outcomes. Revisionist histories like *A Discovery of Strangers* revise traditional accounts not by changing the outcome of history, but by changing the perspective on events, or by re-evaluating accepted hero-victim binaries and in so doing attend to the “truth-to-meaning” of the past. What makes these histories so compelling, and so disheartening, are the scenes of what-could-have-been juxtaposed with either the parallel narrative or the prophecy that reminds the reader that the narrative is neither fancy, nor whim, but must instead resolve in the known future.

Another way of thinking about this sense of lost possibility is by way of an impossible nostalgia for a past that was never realized. Renato Rosaldo describes a similar, if more pernicious, “imperialist nostalgia,” “where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed. Imperialist nostalgia thus revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention” (108). The difference in Wiebe's novel is that the narrative does not yearn for an idealized past of harmony between colonials and Indigenous peoples; as we have seen, the novel makes no secret of its criticisms of colonial arrogance and greed. Instead, imperialist nostalgia occurs precisely in the moment of imagination when the narrative invites a consideration of what-could-have-been but was not, and is thus an impossible nostalgia.

One more observation about “would have been”: the verb forms offer another way to conceptualize the impossibility of colonial longing. The conditional “would”

coupled with the past perfect of “have been” puts in tension the ideas of possibility and contingency associated with the conditional tense and the notion of already done, surely and irreversibly finished, associated with the past perfect. It is this contradiction, or perhaps this moment of absolute tension, that marks historical fiction more generally and *A Discovery of Strangers* specifically: what, Wiebe asks, would the moment of exchange between two cultures have been like? What kinds of possibilities existed in those meetings? But to these questions and contingencies Wiebe must return the known future, and so the possibilities available in imagination and fiction must be reconciled with the fixity of what has been irreversibly finished.

The scenes exploring what-could-have-been in *A Discovery of Strangers* show the kind of Canada and the kind of Canadians Wiebe longs to *have been* realized. The possibilities opened in the relationship between Robert Hood and Greenstockings remain unequivocally limited to the realm of the *impossible* because Hood dies on the journey back from the Polar Sea. Yet despite the already certain impossibility of their future – a certainty that Greenstockings recognizes before Hood even leaves on the expedition because her mother has foreseen his death – their relationship evokes longing for a tender reciprocity in colonial-Indigenous relations that was never realized.

Greenstockings initially intends for her relationship with Hood to be one of mutual exchange, but a commodified exchange, not one of feelings. She plans to trade him the opportunity to sketch her for medicine or a cure for Birdseye. She soothes Birdseye's concerns about the dangers of being captured by a drawing that “shows

more...and less...” (38 – ellipses in original) than her reflection, by explaining that “If one of them can draw what he wants, maybe their medicine man will do what you want” (39). Both Hood and Greenstockings get something from the exchange, but the exchange of drawing for medicine is not one based in equal agency. Greenstockings feels a *need* for the medicine, while Hood expresses only an intense desire.

Renée Hulan raises concerns about the ethics of Greenstockings and Hood's relationship by pointing out that it is an example of a union without violence, which overlooks the history of the relationship between colonial and Indigenous peoples as violent in nature (173). While I do not wish to understate the legacy of violence in the colonial-Indigenous relationship, the scenes between Greenstockings and Hood complicate Hulan's questions of power and violence. Greenstockings certainly knows, by way of prophesy, the future that the colonial presence may bring to her people, and yet she still willingly, and agentially, decides to engage in a relationship with Hood. Hood, on the other hand, does not know he is being used, and indeed, manipulated – Greenstockings practices saying his name because “If she can say it right, he will do it” (39). The “it” is purposefully ambiguous, connoting both sexual relations and the delivery of medicine; the next sentence is only one word, “Safely,” and offers further evidence that Greenstockings intends to use sex as another “commodity” to exchange with Hood. Meanwhile Hood remains remarkably oblivious to the intent behind Greenstockings' attentions, and with characteristic civility, only draws her, and only in the presence of her parents. That *A Discovery of Strangers* emphasizes the known future (i.e. the present) of

the reader suggests that it would be remiss to dismiss the nuances of Hood and Greenstockings relationship because it is uncharacteristically a union without violence; indeed, it is precisely the exceptionality of this relationship that bears consideration.

As the two characters spend time together, Greenstockings changes her opinion of Hood as a means to another end; she sees him as different from any man she has met before: he “asks nothing, demands nothing, forces nothing to happen with his possible male domineering” (161). Greenstockings's changed perspective on Hood opens the opportunity for them to exchange more than commodity goods; they soon exchange words and food, as well as sharing their bodies. Because neither one of them understands the words the other speaks they both feel free to “[say] whatever” (160). Greenstockings in particular feels liberated by the relationship; she thinks “she has never thought it before about a man; she will tell him anything, whatever has always been unspeakable, his incomprehension gives her freedom” (160). Important in this sentiment is that Greenstockings does not confine Hood's “incomprehension” to his inability to understand her language, but that “even without words he often does not know anything” (160). Hood is different from any man she has ever met in terms of his mannerisms – he is neither controlling nor demanding – and in terms of what he knows (or pretends to know) about the other. He approaches the other with an ethical incomprehension: neither demanding to know everything about her, nor expecting that such a demand could ever be met. Greenstockings likewise gives Hood the opportunity to explore previously unspoken, or unspeakable, ideas. When feeding Greenstockings he laughs because he calls her teeth

“beautiful,” a word “which he has never said aloud to a woman before” (168). For Hood the freedom Greenstockings offers is the opportunity to inhabit moments without words.

He does not want to understand any word she ever speaks. None. The freedom of watching, of listening with incomprehension, fills him with staggering happiness: all the reports they are duty bound to write, the daily journals, the data piled in columns upon page after page – but in this warm place thick with indescribable smells there is no listable fact, not a single word. (158)

Greenstockings *is* talking: she describes the food she is preparing and the dangers of starvation. However, because Greenstockings speaks words that Hood cannot (immediately) understand, he is freed from language and thus the colonial dependence on the written word.

The narrative represents colonial attachment to the written word as irresponsible by figuring the explorers' attentive written descriptions as attempting to “fix” the world in a way that denies what the Tetsot’ine view as its ever changing nature (78). The explorers' conviction that what they write in their journals, and later in their expedition reports, must reflect a noble version of events leads to elisions, exclusions and blatant fictionalizing of events (particularly in the formal reports of cannibalism). Indeed, Richardson wonders whether he “should burn his notes” because “things have taken place that would not be understood properly” (247). This example reflects a preoccupation in contemporary historical fiction with alerting readers to the way every historical narrative, and especially those that present themselves as authoritative and unadulterated, conceal their fabrication and the events, feelings, descriptions or conversations that could not be recorded. Hood’s reticence about the written word, and his delight in his exchanges with

Greenstockings that are without, or more properly beyond, words, mark him as a character that understands the violence inherent in a report that seeks to “fix” the truth of an experience, or to claim the meaning of an experience as absolute.

Hood’s rejection of the written word and the violence attached to “fixing” meaning contributes to Greenstockings’s attraction to him. It also serves to differentiate him from the other explorers, as he is someone who “may be able to understand a little” (88). The Tetsot’ine venerate those in the community like Keskarrah and Birdseye who “know something a little” (28-9). These community members are able to dream the location of animals for the hunt, and can often explain or predict extraordinary events. Thus the phrasing that Hood “may be able to understand a little” is quite significant as it marks Hood as someone who is not only open to a different kind of understanding, but has some form of this understanding himself. Hood has, in “understanding a little” an openness to not-knowing and continually learning from others.

Alone, Hood’s undemanding relations with others and his openness to being changed by them would not be sufficient for an ethical relationship to be formed, as relationships by necessity require more than one being. So it is that Greenstockings’s changed view of Hood becomes important to their interactions; that is to say, Greenstockings’s intentions for their relationships are just as important as Hood’s honesty or his gentleness. The parameters of their ethical relationship established, the two engage in a series of reciprocal activities that both cement the intensity and frustrating inimitability of their relationship and epitomize the kind of reciprocal relationship

between Indigenous and colonial subjects that the novel imagines would have been.

Of the three moments of reciprocity I will examine – eating, singing and sex – eating carries the most complicated constellation of connotations in the text. As already noted, the explorers are figured as voracious consumers of animal meat – “all their men ate so much” (74) and “they are very big and eat everything they can’ (34) – as well as of the material and human resources of the Tetsot’ine: demanding the women prepare clothing and footwear for the journey and that the men escort them North. Such is the insatiability of this hunger that eventually the animals leave, and the Tetsot’ine complain about the demands made on their generosity and their sense of obligation to care for guests. But this hunger, this “English duty [to] EAT” (235) carries the even more pernicious association of disease, as Birdseye’s illness, “the Eater,” consumes her physical body as well as her spiritual ability to dream, leaving her the “burden of dreamless dying without the final mercy of death” (268). Hunger plays a significant function in the death – and the continued life – of the explorers, too. On the return journey from the Polar Sea the French-Canadian voyageurs who Franklin hired to work as “paddle slaves” die first because the burden of their labour for the British explorers compromised their health – only two of them survive. The British explorers, on the other hand, all live, with the notable exception of Hood. They live not because they possess any talent for hunting, but because the Tetsot’ine pity them and feel obligated to respond to

their need.<sup>49</sup>

That said the explorers do manage to find some food while on the return journey. They scrape lichen off rocks and eat their clothing, but these forms of sustenance are not enough to satiate what I term an “unspeakable hunger,” a hunger so strong the individual transgresses the taboo of consuming human meat. This is an unspeakable hunger because both cannibalism and the hunger for human flesh go unnamed in the text and are instead described as the hunger that “no one can speak of anymore” (172), the “last impossible word” or the “unthinkable words” (239). The cannibal hunger cannot be named because the acknowledgement jeopardizes the British explorers’ claims to civility. Indeed, the two characters to who cannibalistic acts are openly attributed, Michel Terohate<sup>50</sup> and John Hepburn, are already outside the categorical borders of civility by virtue of race and class, respectively. Thus it falls to these two to cannibalize corpses so as to sustain and protect

---

<sup>49</sup> It would be misleading to suggest that all of the Tetsot’ine shared the same feelings with respect to whether or not to give food to the – once again – demanding British explorers. Keskarrah and Bigfoot debate whether to help them, both agreeing that “we couldn’t . . . withhold food from anyone if we have some, especially from those to whom we have already given hospitality” (299). But Keskarrah believes that in continuing their relationship, the Tetsot’ine jeopardize their future survival, as these relations establish “obligations” (299), which may not always serve the long-term needs and goals of the Tetsot’ine.

<sup>50</sup> The representation of Michel is somewhat problematic. He is the only Métis man to serve as a “paddle slave” for the British explorers and his characterization stands in marked contrast to both the French voyageurs and the Tetsot’ine. Michel is aggressive, violent, ill tempered and disrespectful. He abducts Greenstockings, disregards the authority of the British officers, and is accused of both killing and eating two of the French voyageurs before also murdering Robert Hood. The representation is problematic because as Renée Hulan points out with respect to the abduction of Greenstockings, his representation reinstates the “conventional images of northern representation – the erotic triangle, the treacherous half-breed, the acquiescent female” (177). Further, regardless of the support provided by the historical record with respect to Michel’s aggressiveness, it falls to Wiebe, in a narrative that is otherwise dedicated to re-evaluating the characterization of Indigenous peoples, to offer some further context for Michel’s behaviour and attitude. The suggestion that his attitude owes something to years of colonialism needs further exploration to be deemed credible by the reader, and so as it is, Michel simply figures as another cannibal native who must be controlled at all costs.

the “shining Christian principals” (293) and the lives of the British officers. Granted, the two go about cannibalizing corpses in very different ways and with different motivations. Michel expresses “hatred toward white people, some of whom he said, had killed and eaten his uncle and two brothers on the Ottawa River as they had devoured Mohawks for two hundred years” (284). Michel’s motivation, according to Hepburn’s report, is a combination of revenge and frustration: revenge for the history of colonialism that consumed – whether literally or metaphorically – his people, and frustration because Hood’s illness prevents the party from continuing south. In contrast, Hepburn and Richardson kill Michel, and then Hepburn eats his flesh to gain enough strength to carry Richardson south to the camp. Hepburn explains that he can eat Michel because “Meat is...meat. If I have to I’ll eat anything” (293). The narrative makes clear that both Richardson and Hood also ate human flesh, but allows the men to misrecognize the meat as “wolf meat” rather than human. For the characters who cling to notions of civility, the cannibal act must go unacknowledged and unnamed; to do otherwise would be to dislodge the border separating ideological constructions of civil-savage/Christian-pagan behaviour and belief.

While cannibalism marks an absolute difference (and yet a complete dissolution of difference), (Kilgour 4-5) *A Discovery of Strangers* does not pose all instances of eating or feeding as inherently violent or threatening. Indeed in the series of scenes that Greenstockings and Hood spend speaking truths to one another, they also feed one another. Greenstockings prepares a deer stomach for Hood, a delicacy and “her favourite

food” (157). She tells him that “We can, together . . . eat it all” (158) and then “you can eat and I will eat with you, our fingers feeding each other” (162-3). The moments of reciprocal feeding and communion evoke maternal tenderness and the vulnerability of the child dependent on food from the mother. Greenstockings asks “I could feed you now, should I give you my breast, should I sing?” (163). Hood too plays the maternal role, telling Greenstockings to “purse your lips a little” as he feeds her with a spoon, evoking childhood memories of being fed. The two of them laugh during this “game of eating” (169), both “aware only (she thinks, he thinks) of each other side by side” (160).

This instance of shared thoughts – without shared language – is one of several in the text that involve the two characters knowing information the other has spoken to them, even though the words spoken were not understood. For instance, Greenstockings advises Hood on the dangers of starvation and tells him that when he is starving (because Birdseye has prophesized that he will hunger) to look for ravens who will guide him to wolf meat. Though Hood does not understand these words, when the explorers are starving on the ice, Hood says that “If we could see the sky . . . we might see...ravens. Ravens always eat” (223 - 1st ellipses added) and then when Michel returns with “wolf meat” Hood thinks “*The ravens and the wolves shall feed thee* He has always known that, wolves and ravens” (236 – emphasis in original). It is possible that Hood already knew ravens to be scavengers before Greenstockings told him, but whether he knew or not is

less relevant in the text than the parallel knowledge shared by the two.<sup>51</sup> The two also sing together; the words are different, but in the different songs the two recognize feelings: melancholy, tenderness, longing. Their ability to communicate complex ideas to one another without words offers yet another confirmation of their relationship as a model for the kind of transcendental reciprocity that could have formed the basis for Indigenous-colonial relations, but did not.

The narrative does not end with the absolute abandonment of the possibility that Hood and Greenstockings's relationships represents some kind of hope for future relations between Indigenous and colonial figures because the two conceive a child and the child is born as one who will "know something a little" (305). The child, born in "the split-footed caribou" track, symbolizes yet another potential, this time the potential for the mixed raced future of Canada and for the potential that this child "will be left to remember them [the Tetsot'ine] in the long winter evenings" (316). Greenstockings is unequivocal when asked whose child it is, the implication of the question being a demand for paternity, her answer clear and repeated: "Mine" (317). She does not want the baby to follow the path of Twospeaker, who serves as a translator for the British and "has given two years and very nearly his life to these English" (317). She does not want the baby to be split from her family or from the traditions of the Tetsot'ine, and she does not want to relinquish possession of the child that came from the ethical union of differences.

---

<sup>51</sup> Clare Omhovere suggests that Hood must have known already about the powers of ravens because of biblical instruction as a child (85).

By concluding the novel with the birth of the “split” child, the narrative qualifies the critical tension it developed between what could-have-been and the historical reality of Indigenous-colonial relations with another could-have-been that imagines the future (i.e. contemporary) national subject as Métis. As in John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country*, this configuration of the national subject does admirable work in drawing attention to the history of Indigenous-colonial relations, but nevertheless overwrites the autonomy of Métis nationality and identity within a celebratory narrative of Canadian origins and authentic settler-invader belonging on the land. While the conclusion to the novel troubles me, both the representation of reciprocity and the prescience of Birdseye and Greenstockings offer critical pause. The temporality of the novel that allows Wiebe to weave the past and future-now-present in a way that encourages readers to see history and historic responsibility as bound to the present offers an exciting model for fictional engagements with history that seek both to revise one version of history and reinstate another. Hood and Greenstockings's relationship of ethical openness mirrors the ethical form of this novel and both stand as exceptions, but also ideals.

**Chapter Two: Cloth and Trade: Locating (Historic) Responsibility and Justice in Trade Stories**

In January of 2007 the town council of Hérouxville, Québec, voted in favour of a town “Code of Conduct,” “*Les Normes de vie*,” (Québec) which listed the expectations for citizens living in the town, including polemical statements like “no stoning of women in public” and “no female circumcision”; the council acknowledged its intention that new immigrants should use the “code of conduct” as an aid in integrating into the community (“Canadian Style”). While purported to apply to all new immigrants (and current residents), the “Code” undoubtedly imagined its targets as primarily Muslim, as many of the “prohibitions” responded to the dress and practices of Islamic cultures. The “Code of Conduct” received much national and international attention, with commentators alternately supporting the “Code” for beginning a conversation about reasonable accommodation and denouncing it as racist and xenophobic. The Québec provincial government responded to the (more often hostile) responses to the Hérouxville “Code” by establishing a commission in February 2007 led by Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor to investigate “reasonable accommodation of ethnic and religious minorities.” The Bouchard-Taylor Report, released in May 2008, recommended “interculturalism” and “open secularism,” in addition to suggesting a ban on the wearing of religious markers by judges, Crown prosecutors, and jail guards (but not teachers or health care workers) (Bouchard-Taylor).

Not surprisingly, the Bouchard-Taylor Report did not end the conversation in Québec (and to a lesser extent, in the rest of Canada) about reasonable accommodations

for religious minorities, in particular accommodations for Islamic women wearing the hijab or niqab. Also in February 2007, a referee banned an eleven-year old girl in Ottawa from playing in a soccer game because he deemed her hijab to be “dangerous”; FIFA upheld his decision. In March 2010 a Québécois French teacher expelled Naema Ahmed from class because he believed her niqab prevented her full participation. As I am writing, the Québec government continues to debate a full ban on religious “articles” in public service.<sup>52</sup>

The debate over what citizens can or should wear, or how representatives of the state working in the public sector should present themselves, recalls the work of cultural anthropologist Michael Billig in his 1995 text *Banal Nationalisms* where he argues that in established nations there is a continual “flagging,” or reminding, of nationhood. He suggests literal flags as one example of how “in so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding” (10). While Billig never explicitly addresses the *attire* of national subjects as a way of “flagging” the nation, the controversy in Québec (and elsewhere in Canada<sup>53</sup>) demonstrates the extent to which the clothing of citizens can either indicate their familiarity or distance from the cultural expectations of the nation. The heated conversation about hijabs and niqabs signals more than xenophobia; it suggests there is a “proper” way of clothing the nation.

---

<sup>52</sup> Religious “articles” could include crucifixes, nun habits, niqabs, hijabs or kirpans.

<sup>53</sup> Alberta likewise banned girls from wearing the hijab in soccer games; Ontario debated the ban of kirpans in classrooms in the early 1990s.

How might we determine what “dressing properly” entails? I’ve suggested that in the contemporary moment we might look to the instances of “what *not* to wear” as signals of what, conversely, should be worn; however, we might also look to self-conscious performances of dressing the nation. Billig points to the Olympics as a site of heightened displays of nationalism because of the ostentatious waving of flags; the Opening Ceremonies and the “national clothing” worn for them are other sites of spotlight-nationalism. Before each Olympics a Company receives the contract to design and produce a line of “Canadian clothing” for Olympic athletes to wear and Canadians to buy in a public and commercial display of how to dress as a “Canadian.” In the 2008 and 2010 Olympics the Hudson's Bay Company received the Olympic contract.<sup>54</sup>

I begin with these two examples of dressing the nation because throughout each of the three novels considered in this chapter – Fred Stenson's *The Trade*, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*, and Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* – clothing and bodily performances register how bodies belong to specific groups and how bodily performances might refute this belonging. Each novel draws attention to the power of colonial authorities to dictate how bodies signify based on what they wear and how they look as well as which bodies matter most, or put differently, which bodies register as “banal” and which as exceptional. Who decides what can be worn, when and by whom is one of the clearest indications in each text as to who holds power and who does not. Individual attempts to resist or challenge colonial authority can thus be detected in the

---

<sup>54</sup> See: Chapter Three, Introduction.

instances of individual refusals to “dress properly” for the position and value they have been assigned.

Value is a central concern in each of the novels in this chapter, as each narrative also addresses economies of trade where people and goods have flexible values and worth. Stenson's *The Trade* considers the post-amalgamation of the North West and Hudson Bay Companies period of the British North-West fur trade; Crummey's *River Thieves* uses the established trade of fish and pelts in Newfoundland in a way that blurs the boundaries between trader and settler; Hill's *The Book of Negroes* takes up the slave trade and the exchange of human lives that sustained the economies of the United States and British North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Trade” takes on a dual valence in this chapter as both a material system of economic exchange and as a symbolic register of how people negotiate for positions of greater authority. So, more than simply guns, beaver pelts and people, the trade objects in these novels often consist of more slippery material: virginity, wives, leadership, identity, and responsibility.

All three narratives share a preoccupation with responsibility. Like many texts of revisionist historical fiction Stenson, Crummey and Hill each narrate a period of Canadian history either little known or frequently recited as celebratory moments for the nation.<sup>55</sup> By returning to these periods and depicting violence and injustice, the novels raise questions about the responsibility of individuals in the period, and more broadly, about

---

<sup>55</sup> For instance the idea that Canada “never had slavery” is an example of the way these particular novels add complexity to established or popular ideas about Canadian history. The particular revisions of each text will be considered in greater depth throughout the chapter.

the role of historical fiction in responding to historic injustice. *The Trade* questions the limits of individual responsibility for colonial injustice, while *River Thieves* limits responsibility to confession – without imagining a response or exploring what a changed relationship between colonial and Indigenous characters might involve. *The Book of Negroes* implicates the contemporary reader and asks that the reader participate in refashioning what justice means. Each novel presents models for resistance to colonial authority and violence, but in each narrative resistance either fails or is qualified, and so questions of who to hold to account and how to mete out justice resurface. As in the novels I examined in Chapter One, each novel offers a different approach to these questions and so by thinking through these questions with respect to each novel we can approach an understanding of the responsibility of readers in historical fiction and the danger of confining responsibility to the past.

### **Trading Subjects: Economy and Exchange in Fred Stenson's *The Trade***

In Fred Stenson's *The Trade* (2000), the British colonial representatives, principally the character Governor Simpson, hold the authority to make assessments about the value of individuals within the trade economy based on physical appearance (i.e. skin colour and hair colour) and clothing. While these determinations of value are resisted and challenged in the text, ultimately the conviction of the colonial authorities that appearance determines value and worth – and their authority to assess appearance – remains intact.

Responsibility for the violence that results from the trade economy – regardless of

intent – is denied by the same colonial authority figures. Instead, they assign blame to the institutions that exercise authority over them (e.g. the London Committee or the “trade” itself). In effect, this shift of responsibility ensures that justice or restitution for the immediate instances of violence are not considered. Both Edward Harriott and One-Pound-One consider their culpability within the trade, but believe the political and economic power of the “Company” to supersede any effort they might take as individuals to challenge or refuse the structural inequity of either the colonial trade operation itself, or its representatives. The novel thus begins a conversation about the potential for individual action and assumption of responsibility in the midst of systemic injustice.

Some of the figures of colonial authority in *The Trade* are quite obvious. The London Committee dispatches Governor George Simpson to serve as the first governor of the amalgamated territories of the North West Company and Hudson's Bay Company in 1821.<sup>56</sup> Simpson is characterized by his vindictive leadership style and by his commitment to economize in all aspects of the trade. He promises “economy without mercy and no exceptions” (12) and throughout the text enacts this philosophy by punishing those who oppose him or by “pronouncing [them] a burden on Company finances” (165) and removing them from the sanctioned trade economy entirely. The Governor's authority to dictate the movement, location and trade positions of his colonial workers is based on an acceptance of a hierarchy of colonial command, whereby the

---

<sup>56</sup> In the same year the British Parliament issued “A Bill for regulating the fur trade and establishing a criminal and civil jurisdiction within certain parts of North America” that aimed to regulate trade grants and administer the “execution of processes civil and criminal” (8) in areas outside the jurisdiction of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Governor serves as the highest legal and moral representative of the London Committee<sup>57</sup> and its Hudson's Bay Company in the amalgamated territories. By 1826 Governor Simpson also oversaw both the Northern and Southern Departments of the Company in British North America, thus positioning him as the absolute representative of colonial authority in British North America.

At the moment of *The Trade*'s setting, all of the Company traders serve at the pleasure of Simpson and through him the London Committee. In this sense, all of the traders function in the text as agents of colonial authority, just as they function as agents of the trade. Through the use of third person limited narration, *The Trade* invites the reader to identify with particular traders, in particular Chief Factor John Stuart (known throughout the text as One-Pound-One) and Edward Harriott (who begins the novel a clerk and ends a Chief Factor of Edmonton House in 1846). Because Governor Simpson holds narrative importance by virtue of his position at the top of the Company hierarchy, and because the reader is invited to identify with One-Pound-One and Harriott, their respective positions on colonial authority and their assessments of appearance as indicative of value and worth invite closer consideration.<sup>58</sup> The differences among all

---

<sup>57</sup> The "London Committee" refers to the group of businessmen in London, England who managed the Hudson Bay Company's affairs in North America by sending and receiving letters from the Chief Factors.

<sup>58</sup> Kathleen Venema argues in "A Trading Shop So Crooked a Man Could Jump Through the Cracks': Counting the Cost of Fred Stenson's *Trade* in the Hudson's Bay Company Archive," that despite Stenson's claims that *The Trade* attends to the position of working class labourers in the fur trade, the novel is really an exploration of those same figures of colonial authority that dominate Whig historiography. While I take issue with other aspects of Venema's article, I do agree that the novel's ostensible focus on the everyday labourer is overstated.

three in terms of how they exercise authority nuances the portrait of colonial power in the narrative; however, all three colonial characters consistently use *appearance* as the primary indication of the *value*, but not necessarily the *worth*, of other characters.

Value, in the context of this chapter, indicates how much a particular object or person can be traded for either in the sanctioned fur trade or in what I term the economy of bodies. Objects in the fur trade have a value in “made beaver” – a currency created by the Hudson's Bay Company as a means of regulating trade goods. For example, beaver pelts – or “made beaver” – could be exchanged for a set quantity of rum, buttons, or a musket.<sup>59</sup> The value of people in the economy of bodies is a measure of what their bodies provide or promise to provide. For instance, an Indigenous or Métis woman's body can be traded in the economy of bodies to secure a fur trade relationship for her family, or to advance the position of her husband within the Company.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, a Métis body is granted value when it promises loyalty to the Company during a trade expedition. In both instances, value – or currency – changes depending on not only supply and demand, but on the authority of the colonial representatives. The Governor dictates the given value of

---

<sup>59</sup> For example, according to records of the Standard of Trade at Fort Albany, 1733, one beaver pelt was valued at 1 blanket or 12 dozen buttons. 10 to 12 pelts were needed to trade for a gun (“Fur Trade: Fort Albany”). The value of the “made beaver” shifted (in some cases, quite drastically) depending on both the fort and the year of trade. Harold Innis's *The Fur Trade: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* usefully points out the fluctuations in values and suggests some of the ways in which the Company could artificially inflate or deflate value in an attempt to regulate where and with whom Indigenous people traded.

<sup>60</sup> Sylvia Van Kirk points out in *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society* that “alliances with Indian women were the central social aspect of the fur traders' progress across the country” (4) and that “marital alliances cemented the social ties between Indians and the traders and had a beneficial impact upon the trade itself” (52). In this sense, both the colonial traders and the Indigenous families received something in the exchange - it is speculative whether the things received were of equal worth.

a beaver pelt, just as he attempts to dictate the value of a Métis woman's body.

Worth, on the other hand, indicates the *perceived quality* of the thing or person being traded. The value of a beaver pelt might be two dozen buttons, but the worth of the buttons depends on their perceived quality and utility. Perception is the crucial factor in determining worth. In the instance of trading bodies, the worth of the body refers both to the perceived quality in terms of physical form and physical skills, but also to the integrity and measure of the individual's character.

Having described how value and worth of trade objects and peoples operate, let me turn briefly to the material conditions that surround both the fur trade and the economy of bodies, before addressing some specific examples of the relationship in the trade(s) among authority, appearance and responsibility. These conditions are important to note as they frame the specific iterations of authority and the particular moments of resistance in the novel. The novel highlights alcoholism and illness as two of the principle negative outcomes for Indigenous people as a result of the colonial trade relationship with the British. Unlike some earlier works of historical fiction like R. M. Ballantyne's *The Young Fur Traders* (1856) and Alan Sullivan's *The Fur Masters* (1947) that obscure or diminish the impact of colonial exploration and trade, *The Trade* draws attention to the death and suffering of Indigenous and Métis peoples as a result of illnesses like smallpox and tuberculosis. With respect to the abuse of alcohol, *The Trade* suggests that it caused illness, damage to property, and violent behaviour. Against these two colonial impositions – disease and alcohol – the novel highlights how Indigenous people dictate travel

conditions for colonial traders and their access to particular regions and resources. In this sense the novel represents a nuanced power dynamic between the Indigenous and colonial traders, whereby the material conditions affecting the trade are not controlled exclusively by one party or the other. Over the course of the narrative, the conditions mediating the fur trade are subject to reassessment; and by the conclusion, the narrative suggests that the power of the colonial traders has surpassed that of the Indigenous and Métis, and that going forward, trade conditions will be set exclusively by the colonials. Stenson does not leave the reader with a sense that this “negotiated” trade relationship continued; his narrative suggests the inequities continued and intensified. However, in the representation of the “changed” relationship, neither the Indigenous people nor the colonials are assigned responsibility for the changes, nor are the changes in the relationship assessed as either a positive or negative development. As with the depiction of historic responsibility elsewhere in the text, *The Trade* withholds specific indictment in favour of blaming systemic structures and ideologies, or countries and companies.

**“You can't trade me. But I can trade myself”: Women and the Economy of Bodies<sup>61</sup>**

For Margaret Pruden, the daughter of John Peter Pruden and the cousin of Edward Harriott, men set the conditions of her trade as a female “object.” Margaret and Harriott want to marry, but John Peter believes Margaret's beauty and domestic skills are valuable and could be used to his advantage, and so objects to their union by “bell, book and candle” (96). Pruden turns out to be “prudent” in his refusal to allow Harriott and

---

<sup>61</sup> Stenson, Fred. *The Trade*. 127.

Margaret to marry because when the Governor arrives at Fort Carlton, Simpson finds her to be a most worthy woman and grants her his undivided attention. The Governor assesses Margaret's worth – her perceived quality – based entirely on how she appears. Before Margaret says anything to him, the Governor comments on her “lovely dress” and asks if she “bead[ed] it [herself]” (103) and then chooses her for his exclusive dance partner. “He took her by the tips of the fingers and led her onto the floor. It cleared before them . . . and while Margaret executed the foot stitchery of the dance, the Governor stood still with one hand cocked to his waist and the other in the air, the fingers turning – as if he were presenting her as a spectacle to the others” (103). Indeed, Margaret functions entirely as spectacle: she performs not only the dance, but performs her beauty for Simpson and the crowd. Whether she intends to be viewed as spectacular is less relevant than the intention of Governor Simpson, who commands the authority to not only “present” her to the others at the dance, but to view her himself. Margaret appears in the dance scene as entirely a trade object<sup>62</sup> deemed worthy by the Governor for her dress and appearance and viewed as valuable by her father who might now “pimp [his] daughter” (98) for his own advantage.

But Margaret is not consistently objectified in the text; rather, she attempts to be her own trade broker, though she recognizes that the only trade item available to her is her body. She explains to Harriott that she “thinks the Governor wants to trade” (126) and the

---

<sup>62</sup> Van Kirk identifies the tension between the object and agent position of women in the fur trade, observing a tension between “an easier existence at the fur-trade post” and the “traders' patriarchal views” (7).

two imagine that Margaret might trade her body for Harriott's promotion. Her body represents an opportunity for male advancement in the trade, but in this scene Margaret asserts her agency, telling Harriott that “You can't trade me. But I can trade myself” (127). Clothing reifies Margaret's intention to act as her own trade broker; her attention to the presentation of her body symbolizes her assertion of self-determination within a system of gendered oppression.

When the Governor arrives, he finds Margaret “there on the bed . . . wearing a dress gaudy with decoration, dense with beadwork” (139). Margaret's decision to wear the same white dress she wore to the dance is a calculated one. She made the dress of “beaded white deerskin [for] the day she moved into [Harriott's] house” (102) and wears it as a way to indicate the “way she feels” (135). At first the dress signifies her sexual maturity and availability and her decision to wear it represents a modicum of control in a system of exchange that largely overlooks her desires and intentions. After the dress appears in these scenes of sexual trade and exploitation, Margaret adds to it obsessive detail and decoration; the changed appearance of the dress refashions its signification to indicate a loss of proportion, decorum and rationality.

The shift from representing Margaret as trade object to a woman capable of brokering her own trade agreement is a potential not fully realized in the narrative. The Governor offers her a “silver brooch, a better class of bauble than he usually offered” (140), but Margaret wants something else: the promise of a better position for Harriott. By presuming to negotiate, Margaret challenges the absolute authority of the Governor to

set the terms of the trade and the hierarchy of gendered authority that disallows her autonomous negotiation. He responds with outrage, “If you think I'll pay in my own department for what I can have right this second for nothing...” (142 – ellipses in original). Because she is a member of a trade family, or perhaps simply because she is a Métis woman, the Governor imagines he owns Margaret and that his authority grants him unfettered access to her body. Margaret refuses this imposition, declaring “this is what I own . . . I can trade it or I can take it because it's mine” (143). In marked contrast to the expansive limits of what the Governor presumes to command, Margaret temporarily claims authority over her body. The Governor flees when Margaret brandishes a knife and the trade collapses under the threat of violence and the temporary reversal of established positions of authority.

Margaret's attempt at brokering her own trade concludes with an incomplete transaction, and this scene of trade stands as a turning point for Margaret's mental state. After this point Margaret stops speaking and takes to wearing the white dress, now a “monstrosity of bead-covered nonsense” (156) into the woods at night. Harriott claims “the trade made her lose her mind,” an accusation that blames the institution and, indirectly, Governor Simpson's violent sexual advances.

Stenson reveals the involvement of both the Governor and Margaret in gendered hierarchies that do not allow individual instances of resistance or negotiation to take place. While Margaret may be a strong woman and desirous of autonomous action, the hierarchy of gendered and colonial authority cannot bear this difference and challenge.

Similarly, while the reader might reject Simpson's presumptuous claim to the body of another person, Stenson invites the reader to see his actions, and his desires, as limited and prescribed by the colonial ideology from which he operates, and in which he benefits.

While Harriott dreams of killing Simpson and so exacting some revenge against the Governor and “the trade” (both the fur trade and the trade in bodies) he represents, he is unwilling, or perhaps unable, to take action, and so revenge for Margaret remains the illusory stuff of dreams. Margaret’s madness and Harriott’s subsequent failure to pursue or exact any form of justice from the Governor and the “trade” he represents, signal the novel’s preoccupation with the pervasive power of the operating systems of injustice; and, whether, how, and to what extent individuals within these systems may demand or hold responsibility. Margaret’s madness asks the reader to consider: If the Governor is responsible for her madness how might the chief symbol of authority be unsettled? If the “trade” itself is responsible for the injustice of Margaret’s madness, how might an abstraction, or a “system” be held to account?

**“Nothing more useless than an English wife”: The Appearance of Dignity<sup>63</sup>**

Margaret is not the only woman for whom these questions of responsibility, authority and agency apply: other Métis women, and white women, too, are implicated in an economy of bodies that overlooks responsibility for their abuse and misuse. The Métis wives, or “country wives” as they are known in the novel, hold value in the trade economy because of their usefulness. Sylvia Van Kirk points out the value of Indigenous

---

<sup>63</sup> Stenson, Fred. *The Trade*. 113.

and Métis women to the trade in terms of the bond they cemented between Indigenous and colonial traders. Beyond the alliances they could form, these women held value because of their domestic skills, including the production of moccasins and snowshoes, the preparation of fire and food, and the care of children. Even Governor Simpson, who establishes the official policy of breaking up “Halfbreed families” (16) in an effort to cut down on the costs of “far too many old people, women and brats” (11), has several mistresses and a country wife – whom he calls a “plaything and novelty” – named Margaret Taylor (169). But whatever the worth of a country wife, and whatever love and allegiance a colonial trader might feel for his wife, the novel represents the perceived value of a country wife as far less than the value of a white wife. The value of a white wife stems from her physical appearance and the concomitant association of that appearance with England, purity and civility; for the men who marry white wives, the use of the woman is derived not from her domestic skills or function in securing a solid trade relationship, but in her use as a display of success. Governor Simpson explains his motivations for returning to England to court a white woman:

Thing is, John, . . . it seems very likely that the old Governor Pelly, the only man who stands above me in this country, will give up soon. He's got a sick wife. I believe that the London Committee intends not to replace him but to give his responsibilities to me. Country wives are good for what they're good for, I suppose, but they command no respect. If I'm to be Governor of two departments, I must have a white wife who can adorn and dignify my court. A *white* wife, you see. (113 – emphasis in original)

It is easy enough to find Simpson reprehensible for his callous dismissal of Margaret Taylor, but by introducing the idea of the white wife as an obligation in order to advance

in the Company hierarchy, the narrative complicates a complete attribution of accountability to the Governor for his motivations, if not his actions.

There is little indication that the Governor himself feels conflicted about his decision to marry an English woman – he prizes advancement and authority above all else – yet when read alongside the repeated imperative that all Company men who wish to advance find white wives, the possibility surfaces that the Governor is not as responsible for the abandonment of Margaret Taylor and his children as is the London Committee, or perhaps England itself, to whom the narrative grants the authority to dictate the terms of civility and propriety. In one such instance, One Eye, an established trader, advises One-Pound-One that “McTavish and McMillan are already over there . . . They're looking for women already. English wives are the fashion nowadays, John. You'd better get one or you'll be left behind” (187-9). That white women might be “fashions” or objects to “adorn” an authoritative figure speaks again to the performative quality of value in the text, whereby value is not something one inherently possesses, but rather is something one puts on or is put upon. By locating England as the site of both the warehouse of authoritative garb – that is, decorous women – and the expectation that these women be “worn” as proof of civility, the narrative shifts responsibility for behaviour from individual men and husbands to the “Empire,” which appears in the novel only ever as an abstraction, and so beyond question, let alone reproach to most characters, though not necessarily to the reader.

**“The Company believed it had every white man's allegiance”: Privileging White**

**Skin and Cloak(ed) Resistance<sup>64</sup>**

Governor Simpson believes white skin to be an unassailable signifier of colonial loyalty and perceived worth. Through the characterization of Jimmy Jock Bird, the narrative shows this conviction to be false; however, despite the mistaken attribution of loyalty, Simpson continues to assign Jimmy Jock value because of his white skin. Like Margaret, Jimmy Jock negotiates with colonial authority with his own goals in mind, but, like Margaret, suitable terms are not reached because though Jock's attempts at unseating colonial authority are damaging they are ultimately ineffectual. Indeed, the conclusion of the novel sees him absorbed and incorporated into the very system he sought to disrupt.

Jimmy Jock is introduced in the narrative with a description that draws attention to how his worth depends on who is interacting with him:

Jimmy Jock, or James Junior, was ex-governor James Bird's oldest son, a Halfbreed like the rest and a particular favourite of Harriott's. The nickname Jimmy Jock had probably come about to set the boy apart from his father, but various permutations had arisen . . . . Some called him Jimmy Jock, some Jamey Jock, others Jemmy Jock. He came to be known by any and all of these names, seeming not to care which. (28)

Jimmy Jock's name and its “permutations” are one signal of his function in the text as a contested signifier dependent on the perceptions of those he interacts with. The pronouncement of a name, as has been discussed at some length in the first chapter with respect to land, attempts to control something perceived to be unwieldy; in the case of naming a person, as shall be seen throughout this chapter, the assignation of a name

---

<sup>64</sup> Stenson, Fred. *The Trade*. 45.

alludes to this same idea of control, but it also implies a familiarity with the person named. In the case of Jimmy Jock Bird, the name other characters choose for him reveals more about their perception of him than it does about Bird himself; likewise, the characters who interact with Jimmy Jock all imagine him as alternately useful or damaging to their trade. His worth, like his name, is imagined and assigned by each individual who encounters him.

But it is Governor Simpson's imagining of Jimmy Jock's value that matters most in the trade. Simpson views Jimmy Jock as a “Halfbreed” of considerable importance. Because he is the son of the former Governor, and because he is white, the Governor mistakenly interprets all of Jock's actions as proof of his loyalty to the Company. Jock lives with a Piegan community, a decision the Governor sees as a sign of his fidelity because, as the Governor explains, the Piegan are “one of the tribes [the Company] is most interest[ed] in expanding trade with” (110). Whereas the reader might wonder whether Jock's choice to live among the Piegan suggests he better identifies with his Indigenous heritage than his British, the Governor does not entertain such a notion because he cannot “believe” Jock would “choose his Indian side” (247). Instead he assumes Jock's loyalty because of his appearance and the lower value he assigns to Indigenous culture; he believes Jock's position among the Piegan will grant the Company access to furs in previously “inaccessible” areas.<sup>65</sup> In order to facilitate Jock's infiltration

---

<sup>65</sup> An area is deemed to be inaccessible if Indigenous tribes are present who resist British trade because they express allegiance to the American traders.

into the Piegan tribe he grants him “gifts galore,” exclusive trading rights and three trading outfits, all on the assumption that because he is white he is loyal to the Company.

Interpreting Jock's whiteness as proof of fidelity requires the Governor to overlook what might otherwise be considered telling signs of Jock's divided loyalties: his clothing. One-Pound-One assesses Jock's loyalty on this basis, and when he encounters Jock “[sitting] in an Indian saddle . . . [wearing] feathers in his hair and more feather in the forelock of his horse . . . naked to the waist” (208), One-Pound-One declares that Jock has stolen the trade goods the Governor has given him. Whereas the Governor cannot “believe” someone would “choose his Indian side” (247) and insists that “Jamey Jock be regarded as Harriott's principal ally and given every preference and opportunity in the trade” (214), One-Pound-One views Jock's appearance as evidence not only of his defection from the British, but of his deception: Jock has deceived the Governor and secured trade goods without ever intending to bring back furs, and indeed, Jock does trade the Piegan furs with the Americans. Because the Governor mistakenly attributes worth to white skin, he far over-estimates Jimmy Jock's value to the Hudson Bay Company, an over-estimation that One-Pound-One recognizes and that Jock willingly exploits for his own purposes. The Governor's misrecognition identifies the hierarchy of physical “markers” at work in *The Trade*, whereby skin colour holds the position of greatest significance. Though the hierarchy of appearance that places skin colour at the top and clothing further down is contested by the individuals who wear the “resistant,” or perhaps “counter-colour,” clothing, the authority of the colonial figures to accept and enforce this

hierarchy remains unchanged.

During a meeting<sup>66</sup> between Harriott and Jock on the first Bow River expedition, the narrative reveals what the reader already suspects: Jock's loyalty to the Company is far from certain. Harriott questions Jock's motivations for living with the Piegan, asking if he is with the tribe “because [he] couldn't rise in the Company” (68). Jock dismisses this suggestion, saying “You're not the first to think I'm here out of disappointment. Maybe I'm here for the opportunity” (68). Harriott misunderstands Jock's meaning and agrees that “If you have influence with the Piegan, you have influence with the Company,” to which Jock rejoins “Are you such a Company man as all that, Ted? That you can't imagine an opportunity that isn't about them?” (68). Jock implies that to be a “Company man” is both an employment position and an ideological position, and indeed Harriott makes the same mistake as the Governor in attributing loyalty to skin colour and in assuming that individuals trade for personal gain. In this scene Stenson withholds the particular “opportunity” Jock himself sees in living with the Piegan, and by doing so, encourages the reader – through the speculations of Harriott and One-Pound-One – to imagine what potential motivation Jock has for living with the Piegan, what worth he sees in trading on his Métis identity.

Power is the first possibility raised for why Jock may have decided to live among the Piegan. Harriott points out that “Now that his father was no longer Governor, Jamey

---

<sup>66</sup> “Meeting” is something of a euphemism. Jock rescues Harriott and his men who are starving by providing them with buffalo meat. When the men do not immediately return to Chesterfield House Jock captures Harriott and strongly advises him to return immediately, otherwise he will be killed by the Piegan who do not welcome his trade.

Jock and his tribe of Halfbreed brothers were all without a scrap of power and distinction” (28) and that Jock's talents as a translator could help him “acquire status and power in an Indian tribe” (65). Harriott reduces Jock's decision to an either/or equation whereby he either remains loyal to the Company and lives a life of limited power, or joins the Piegan, proves his loyalty, and acquires power as a translator. What his reductive analysis misses, however, is the power Jock gains with respect to the Company precisely because he joins the Piegan. Speaking in terms of “advantage” or gain inscribes Jock's decisions in a language of economy and trade that obscures his own intentions, situating all of his actions as *a priori* economically motivated.

The narrator presents another possible motivation for Jock's commitment to life with the Piegan, and that is his desire to see the “Blackfoot country free of white men and everything they built – no traders, forts, missionaries, nothing” (247). The narrator suggests that his desire is motivated by “revenge for [the British] not accepting him as white” (247). Once again Jimmy Jock's whiteness is represented as the primary factor in determining his relationship with colonial authority; however, in this instance, like the earlier conversation with Harriott, the narrative represents Jock's motivation as a desire for power among the Piegan because he is not *white enough* to attain colonial authority. Taken together, the representation of Jock as too white to be disloyal, but not white enough to gain power, defines a position for him “right in the middle where he liked to be or where nature put him” (193).

This external delimiting of Jock as white, or Native, or “right in the middle”

subjects his identity to the interpretation of those who view him and elides how Jock views himself. Jock only describes his affiliation once in the text, and in a markedly ambiguous way. He tells Harriott, “I’m on the side I’ve always been on. I thought you knew that” (238), leaving it to the reader to conclude whether the binary “side” Jock refers to is his white or Indigenous heritage, or whether, in fact, Jock is referring to a racial division at all. Perhaps the “side” Jock refers to is the side of justice or humanity, but the text offers no clarification or indication if this is the case. By presenting Jock as a character who negotiates his position, the narrative complicates the notion that allegiances are automatically formed among individuals of particular racial or ethnic groups; yet, by planting Bird firmly on a “side,” some of the fruitful possibility of this negotiation is lost as his representation as “right in the middle” is reduced to a fixed position. Without offering the reader more evidence of a philosophic or ideological “side,” the implication stands that the “side” Jock himself identifies with is his Indigenous side, and that his acts of deception and defection are intended to damage the British fur trade.

Hugh Munro's characterization further demonstrates the simultaneous fixity and flexibility of identity categories – fixed in the sense that others interpret appearance and assign categories, and flexible in the sense that individuals may dress or perform in ways that complicate such an interpretation. Hugh Munro, “no more Indian than Harriott” (34), decides he has little potential to rise in the company and so marries a Blackfoot woman, learns her language and establishes a place for himself in the Company as a translator. Harriott notes that Munro “wore his hair in two long braids . . . his coat was dense with

beadwork . . . he was careful nowadays not to disrobe in front of other whites, but rumour had it he wore a two-holed scar in each breast where bone skewers had been inserted. The chests of so many Plains Indian warriors bore the same” (34). The importance of these bodily markers extends beyond their revelation of Munro's supposedly divided loyalties, as they reinforce the construction and attribution of identity based on bodily form and performance. Munro's body is marked by a confluence of signs: his white skin ensures he will be read by the Company as loyal; the hair, clothing and scars allow his body to be read as a site of negotiated identity. The way his body performs, again demonstrates the tension between how the Company and how individuals imagine loyalty to be determined and the hierarchy of appearance which renders these individual acts of cloaked resistance moot. Munro “act[s] different[ly] when the Piegan arrive” (45), but “The Company believed it had every white man's allegiance, no matter who they married or fathered” even though “Many ideas like this one, born in the old country, did not work here” (45).

The specific location “here” deserves attention.<sup>67</sup> Recalling the tension described in the first chapter between the settler and invader positions explored by Alan Lawson, the performance of identity in *The Trade* can be read as a reification of the fraught identity of the colonial settler-invader: the subject who is at one and the same time a representative of the British Empire and estranged from this Empire, sent to the colonies to exercise the authority of the Crown over the Indigenous populations. Hugh Munro's

---

<sup>67</sup> “Here” could also be read through Northrop Frye's infamous “Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*” in which he interrogates the Canadian literary landscape by asking “Where is here?” and by concluding that “here” exists in the Canadian imagination as a space to be defended and still to be developed.

adoption of Indigenous clothing and customs resonates with the settler-invader's desire to subsume indigeneity so as to erase the violence attached to “invasion.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the ability of the other white traders to overlook Munro's obvious displays of fraught identification speaks to the insistence among the colonial authorities that white skin remain the priority in determining affiliation, so there would be no challenge to their authority by an admission of the arbitrary and constructed nature of the hierarchy that sees their white skin as the most important characteristic.

**“Who is it that sheds the blood?”: Finding Fault with the Trade<sup>69</sup>**

Rather than a performance, a ploy for power, or an act of revenge, Jimmy Jock Bird trades on the Governor's assumption that Bird is loyal to the Company because he is white in order to damage the Company and aid the Piegan. In order to help them, he plans to rid “Blackfoot country of white men and everything they built” (247). Arguably the novel's most explicit acknowledgement of both colonialism's pervasiveness and its intractability, Bird's commitment to “freeing” the land is undone by his penultimate naming as “Jimmy Jug,” so named for either “selling whisky or drinking it” (342). Bird's association with alcohol ties both of his “sides” to the two “accidental” causes of Indigenous people's death the novel acknowledges: alcohol and disease.

Like the Tetsot'ine of *A Discovery of Strangers*, the Piegan, after trading with the

---

<sup>68</sup> Munroe's identification with the Piegan also draws attention to the problematic inattention to Indigenous desire or intention in Lawson's configuration. Munroe, like many other white traders, marries an Indigenous woman not coercively, but as part of a negotiation that, as Van Kirk argues, benefited both sides. While “marrying up” undoubtedly favoured the socio-economic expectations of the white traders, that these marriages were viewed as exchanges should not be forgotten.

<sup>69</sup> Stenson, Fred. *The Trade*. 251.

British and Americans, fall ill with smallpox and “Before it was done it killed more than half of them . . . The Indians were weak and so full of sadness they couldn't bother to more than feed themselves” (248). Jimmy Jock “caught the smallpox” too, and it “*half* killed him” (248 – my emphasis). The narrator explains that “when [the Piegan] saw how they were killed but the white man wasn't, it [*sic*] said they were chosen out of the human race to die. God Himself sided with the whites, and that turned them against their own ideas” (248). If this characterization of the smallpox infection shifts individual responsibility for the decimation of Indigenous populations to “colonization,” it also forgets the years that follow this – and similar – smallpox epidemics that see Indigenous peoples coerced onto reserves with the promise of food, education and farming implements. More perniciously, the description of the Piegan as “weak and sad” casts the little measure of meted responsibility onto the Piegan themselves for not actively resisting or combating the disease. Jimmy Jock Bird’s “half” death serves as a reminder of the way in which the narrative constructs him as existing between two binary identities. In this instance it is easy enough to imagine that because every other Piegan has fallen ill with smallpox, Jimmy Jock's “Indian half” must also have been infected.

Renamed “Jimmy Jug,” Jimmy Jock Bird participates in the trade in rum, which figures in the text as just as deadly as smallpox. The Indigenous traders and their families are represented as dependent on alcohol and, according to the Wesleyan Methodist missionary Mr. Rundle, as willing to trade “for cheap rum instead of for worthwhile goods” (265). Harriott defends the trade in alcohol by arguing that “without rum . . . there

is no trade. The Indians would take their meat and hides to the Americans, and all here would be lost” (269). By representing rum as the essential trade item and the Indigenous traders as dictating what will be traded (but not the terms of the trade), this argument shifts responsibility for alcohol dependence and alcohol-related violence from the individual trader, and indeed from the Hudson's Bay Company, to the Indigenous traders themselves. Thus the narrative quashes Bird's subversive potential by incorporating him into the machinations of colonial power through his trade in alcohol and by assimilating him into a community of “weak Indians” who suffer and die from smallpox.

When Mr. Rundle arrives at Fort Edmonton his first conversation is with One-Pound-One. During this conversation Mr. Rundle asks the narrative's most critical question: “Who...who is it that sheds the blood?” (251 – ellipses in original). One-Pound-One takes offence at the suggestion that the “fur traders were somehow to blame” (251) and dismisses Rundle's question by drawing an analogy between the fur trade and a farm and asks “Does a farmer kill his milk cow? Would there be a Hudson's Bay Company here at all if we went around killing our milk cows?” (251) Putting aside the offensive metaphor of Indigenous people as milk cows, One-Pound-One concludes by arguing that “[Killing] had gone on forever, before a single beaver or piece of dried meat was traded to a white man” (251). This exchange sees One-Pound-One rationalizing for himself his role in the imperial bloodshed. He recognizes the injustice perpetuated, but in an effort to ameliorate individual guilt he puts forward this hyperbolic rationalization that indicates his awareness of his individual role and his desire to forget or refuse the responsibility

attached to his actions within the trade.

In a similar argument, Mr. Rundle and Harriott discuss “the matter,” which is not specified, and so might read as the abuse of alcohol, or violence, or colonialism generally. Mr. Rundle says “The Company acts as if it has no responsibility in the matter. Because the Indians will trade skins for cheap rum instead of for worthwhile goods, the Company makes the trade and takes advantage of their ignorance. You, sir, take advantage” (265). On the question of responsibility for the violences of the fur trade the novel equivocates. On the one hand, it presents Mr. Rundle's position that the trade, more specifically, the Company, bears responsibility for “the matter”; on the other it presents the potential for individual agency and the responsibility of Indigenous people for their own decisions and well-being. In this configuration of individual responsibility all individual actions and choices are imagined as possible, that is to say, every individual is granted the same potential for agency. The problem with this position of unfettered individual potential is clear: individuals exist within hierarchies and systems of power that constrain what actions are available to them. While Indigenous traders have choice of trading partners, when the choice is among trading with the British or trading with the Americans or not trading at all, the Indigenous traders are still subject to the trade. Likewise, the novel allows Margaret the opportunity to broker a trade, but the only trade object she has available to her is her body, granting her agency, but from a limited position.

In the same way Harriott, One-Pound-One, and even Simpson are limited in their assumptions and actions by the ideological and authoritative positions they hold. One-

Pound-One realizes – and so hyperbolically rationalizes – his participation in an oppressive and violent system, as does Harriott (if we read his self-destruction as calculated). Yet the two take no action to counter the trade, just as the Indigenous characters appear to willingly accept their eventual and inevitable disempowerment in the face of colonial and trade authorities. *The Trade* thus asks both whether individuals can or should be held to account for their participation in such systems *and* how such systems continue to operate without censure, how they rely on willing participation, how the system itself might be held to account.

However, representing individual agency as limited perpetuates the acceptance of individual innocence by virtue of investment in ideologies that are so large, so encompassing, that no one person can resist or challenge the inequities carried out in their names. The narrator describes One-Pound-One as “a great believer in blame. By blaming, you at least proclaim that effects have causes. Behind most deaths and maimings, there is a human blunder, and if he could just find it in this case, isolate it, he hoped to free himself of the notion that a cloud of bad luck had blown over his territory” (155).<sup>70</sup> While the causes fingered in *The Trade* for the inequities of the fur trade and the continued colonial relationship – the trade, and more obliquely, colonialism – mark a revision of historical narratives that unilaterally celebrate the fur trade, this revision is complicated by the troubling impotence of individual action and responsibility within those systems.

---

<sup>70</sup> One-Pound-One often attributes events to “fate.” The novel’s attention to superstition and fated events again distances the individual from intentional action, because “fate” will always trump individual choice or determination.

Where *The Trade* succeeds is in making perceptible the limitations of individual agency imposed and enforced by ideological structures. The nuanced attention to the ways characters might negotiate for power reminds the reader of the ability of the individual to flex the limits of particular identity categories and makes the failure to extend this individual agency to an outright admission of individual responsibility or an earnest attempt at unsettling colonial authority all the more frustrating. For if characters are not held to account, or are absolved of their actions because systemic structures are too large or too powerful, the reader might rightly question whether she or he too is not justified in imagining historic and present innocence both because racist or sexist hierarchies precede them and because there is no expectation that such hierarchies might themselves be traded in for something of greater worth.

**“A story is never told for its own sake”: Just(ice and) Stories in *River Thieves*<sup>71</sup>**

Like Stenson's *The Trade*, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* asks who holds responsibility for the violences of colonialism, but unlike Stenson's novel, *River Thieves* also asks how those who are held responsible might be made to account for their actions (or inaction). Three forms of justice circulate in the novel: the formal legal justice of the British Crown; a community-based system of retributive and corporeal justice; and a conception of justice as reparation-through-story, stories which are told without the expectation of absolution.

---

<sup>71</sup> Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. 361.

Stories hold complex meanings in *River Thieves*: they reveal the “truth” behind deceptive appearances; they complicate the notion of “truth” itself as discernable or inherently valuable; and they fill plot gaps where, before the story was told, there was nothing. With respect to this last function, these stories also serve the metatextual function of signalling the gaps in the factual historical record that must be imaginatively filled. To the question of how justice might best be worked toward, this novel – one preoccupied with colonial guilt – proposes that when stories give the fullest account of wrong-doing they come closer to historical justice than either Crown punishment or personal revenge because they imagine an open-ended dialogue with the story-teller and the listener or reader. In other words, stories invite a relationship between story-teller and reader whereby an account is given with no demand to change the listener.

*River Thieves* advances the position that justice might better be achieved by attending to “truth-to-meaning” in history. That is to say, the novel represents justice as located not in the facts of a case, but rather in the circumstances and stories that surround those facts and their sometimes necessary revision. Stories thus offer a space to complicate the “truth” of a historical event while expanding the limits of justice from state punishment or material and corporeal retaliation and revenge to include personal confession and remorse.

**“The Red Indians are under the protection of the Crown”: The Limits of Crown**

**Justice**<sup>72</sup>

*River Thieves* considers Crown justice through the characterization and activity of three characters: Joseph O'Reilly, Lieutenant David Buchan and Governor John Duckworth.<sup>73</sup> Each of these characters has a different relationship with the Crown and Crown justice: O'Reilly is subjected to the justice system; Buchan enforces Crown justice; and the Governor sets the terms for Crown justice in the Newfoundland colony. A consideration of each character and his relationship to Crown justice demonstrates how, as in Stenson's *The Trade*, authority and power consists of the ability to determine the value and worth of individuals based on their appearance.

Joseph O'Reilly tells the story of his involvement with the British justice system to John Peyton Junior after John Peyton asks about a scar on O'Reilly's hand. O'Reilly relates his experiences as a boy in London working as a “river thief” and a “pickpocket” (66-7), noting that “the clandestine nature of his family's enterprises troubled him” (67). This is the reader's first indication that while O'Reilly may have been raised as a thief and criminal he felt conflicted about his activities; this passage also raises a recurring question in the novel, and in the novels in Chapter Three, of whether a son must inherit the crimes of his father or whether he has the potential to choose a different path. O'Reilly then describes how his family frequently attended public hangings in order to “relieve the spectators of their valuables” in what he calls “a down payment on future attractions”

---

<sup>72</sup> Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. Toronto: Random House, 2001. 32.

<sup>73</sup> Approximately halfway through the narrative Buchan is promoted from Lieutenant to Captain, but in the interest of clarity I have referred to him as “Lieutenant” Buchan throughout.

(68). The Crown demonstrates its authority over the bodies of its subjects by displaying their deaths. While O'Reilly observes that “the condemned men were presented with a pair of spotless white gloves to wear” and that “Some of them spent every shilling they had to their names on their hanging clothes and they were ferried through the streets in linen waistcoats and breeches trimmed with black ferret, in white cloth coats and silver-laced hats, in white stockings, in silk breeches” (64), the criminals' decisions to “dress-up” for their hangings are impotent acts of resistance that the Crown can safely indulge because its authority over the life of the body, and its ability to display it as an abject, criminal site, is so complete.

O'Reilly makes this observation before explaining that his own bodily performance caused him to be caught and punished by the authorities. When a man “hear[s] [O'Reilly] speaking Gaelic” the man demands the police search O'Reilly because Gaelic “is evidence enough in the eyes of some” (69). “Gaelic” does not visibly mark the body, and yet O'Reilly sees it as “evidence in the *eyes*,” which is to say, appearance is not restricted to what a body wears, but includes how a body behaves and speaks. In this sense an individual has only limited control over how their bodies will be read – even if they are clothed “properly” the Crown holds the authority to read bodies and act on assumptions drawn from how these bodies look and perform.

The contrast between the condemned men who “dress-up” their bodies to (futilely) resist the Crown's authority and the capture and the detainment of O'Reilly principally because his body is thought to reveal his criminality requires some

elucidation. In a passage much later in the book, John Peyton Senior says, “You can't dress up that kind on the inside” (293), and while his comment is made in a different context altogether, its sentiment applies in this instance. Peyton Senior's comment distils in an adage the reach of colonial authority in determining what the value of someone is “on the inside” and the attendant claim to the authority to “see through” a disguised appearance and to assess worth based on tertiary markers: language, ethnic heritage, choice in partners, and clothing. While the condemned men may clothe their bodies as civil citizens, and while other individual manipulations of appearance occur, the colonial hierarchy of physical markers which sees authorities dictate and enforce skin colour, language and gender as irrefutable markers of value remain. Although individuals may manipulate their appearance as innocent or guilty, the authority of the Crown ultimately rules what their character is “on the inside” (293) based on bodily performance and on assumptions about the relative worth of a particular kind of body.

Perhaps for this reason O'Reilly has his sentence “commuted to branding and deportation to the colonies out of consideration for [his] age and [his] obvious display of contrition” (70). If it is the case that Crown authorities have immeasurable insight into the character of the individual beneath their clothing, then the Crown makes a just decision in sparing O'Reilly's life, as the rest of the narrative proves his good nature and generosity. It is, however, dubious whether Crown authorities can see into the inner nature of individuals, and as we shall see with Lieutenant Buchan, it is entirely possible for Crown authorities to be persuaded to act against this insight into truth and justice.

Furthermore, O'Reilly tells John Peyton Junior that after his arrival in Newfoundland he struggled to find work because the branded "T" on his hand that marked him as a "thief" prevented him from finding employment. O'Reilly explains that John Peyton's father, John Senior, told O'Reilly that "there's no one going to let you live an honest life as long as there's a story that says otherwise" (72). In this case John Senior rewrites the story the branded "T" tells by rebranding O'Reilly's hand to produce a "wild copse of scars" (73). In disguising the "T" on his hand O'Reilly seizes the same opportunity as the "dressed up" men in London to determine for himself the story his body will tell, all the while risking that the Crown will see through his disguise. When John Peyton asks why O'Reilly is telling him all this, O'Reilly claims "It's just a story is all" (73). As is the case elsewhere in *River Thieves*, this "just a story" draws attention to the critical issue of what can be read from a person's appearance, what an individual might try to disguise and what the story might be to link the two.

Lieutenant David Buchan personifies colonial authority and believes this authority allows him the right to determine guilt and innocence, and through his determination to deliver justice. By considering Lieutenant Buchan and his exercise of justice based on unadulterated "truth," we can see the flaws not only in Crown perceptions of guilt based on appearance, but Crown justice, which far too rigidly adheres to "truth-to-actuality," rather than "truth-to-meaning" and in so doing ultimately fails to deliver justice.

Buchan repeatedly equates "justice" with "truth," an equation that requires some exploration of what both "truth" and "justice" might mean. "Truth," according to Buchan

might more readily be understood as “facts.” He explains to Cassie Jure – the housekeeper for the Peytons and John Peyton's romantic interest – that in John Peyton Junior's report that followed the 1817-8 expedition to Winter Lake “lies have been presented as fact” (298) and that these lies must be corrected. The logic underpinning this statement is that facts are true, truth is facts. “Justice” for Buchan involves not only the correction of incomplete reports and outright lies, but also requires an admission of guilt and a punishment. Cassie views Buchan's understanding of justice as “evangelical” (299) and Governor Hamilton considers it filled with “fervour” (375). Uncompromising and unambiguous might be another way to think of Buchan's conception of justice (such unambiguity has clear resonance with the unambiguity of colonial assessments of appearance). For Buchan views justice as truth, and truth as discernable simply by viewing the facts; once the facts are known justice must be served.

In practical terms, Buchan's view of justice falls apart. In the extended scenes of his investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of the Beothuk men on Winter Lake, context complicates factual “truth” and bribery forces Buchan's fervour to give way. In his mission to discover the whole story of what took place on Winter Lake Buchan interviews all of the men who participated in the expedition and records their testimony in his notebook. He does this with the belief that by attending to all the stated facts he will uncover the true events that will enable him to find justice in the prosecution of those who committed crimes. Buchan's confusion of factual truth with justice means that when he discovers that O'Reilly killed the second Beothuk man, Buchan cannot

conceive, let alone admit, that because O'Reilly acted out of compassion – John Senior severely wounded the man and he was suffering – he might not need to be punished. For Buchan, the equivalence of British law, truth and justice requires that acts of mercy or compassion are irrelevant distinctions: in the eyes of the law “someone [must] pay for that” (315).

Buchan's conflation of British law, truth and justice highlights the extent to which judicial law, practiced in this instance, requires a myopic focus on the crime itself and a wilful ignorance of the circumstances that led to the crime. His conflation also draws attention to the repeated colonial confusion of “facts” with “truth.” In this particular example, it is factually correct that O'Reilly killed the Beothuk man, but it is perhaps more “true” to say that John Peyton Senior killed him – the initial gunshot eventually would have killed him – and indeed “truer” still to suggest that the Beothuk man died not because of any one individual's action, but also because of the colonial presence in the Bay which drove the Beothuk from their traditional lands and fostered a system of land and resource possession and defence.

Buchan's “evangelical” approach to justice cannot withstand the practical complications of the context of a crime, nor the resistance of those he deems “criminals” who refuse to acquiesce in his view of justice. John Peyton Junior, a criminal according to Buchan because he lied, trades his knowledge that Buchan and Cassie had an affair for Buchan's promise not to prosecute O'Reilly. The narrative presents this outcome as more “just”: O'Reilly consistently figures in the text as kind and generous, whereas Buchan

figures as a hypocrite who preaches absolute adherence to truth while engaging in extra-marital affairs. For Buchan the desired outcome of justice – the prosecution and punishment of the individual most directly responsible for the crime – does not occur because he can not live up to his own standard of absolute and uncompromising factual truth. His capitulation is an admission that such an “evangelical” attachment to factual truth in the pursuit of justice not only obscures or forgets the context in which the crime was committed, but also surpasses the ability of any one individual to mete it out. In the place of Buchan's fervent belief in factual truth, the novel proposes that justice may be found in a “truth-to-meaning” that allows a space for context, as well as the opportunity for individuals to give their own account of events. In this scene, as elsewhere, John Peyton Junior figures as the more sympathetic and balanced character – the one able to appreciate the nuance and complexity of context, and to make decisions from this more balanced position. “Mary's” fondness for Peyton Junior, and his acceptance and openness to O'Reilly are two other signals of Peyton Junior's “enlightened” inhabitation of his colonial position. The frequent use of third person limited narration invites the reader to identify with Peyton Junior and share in his critical view of colonial (in)justice.

Added to Lieutenant Buchan's evangelical attachment to “truth-to-actuality” is the supposedly benevolent (and inappropriate) intervention of the colonial Governors who imagine they can use their positions of authority to “better” those they deem less fortunate (i.e. the Beothuk). In *River Thieves* two Governors serve at the Bay of Exploits colony: the first, Governor John Duckworth and the second, Governor Charles Hamilton. Before

arriving at the colony, Governor Duckworth completes “a meticulous review of the literature” on the “Red Indians” (20). He finds they are “a shadowy presence in the colonial literature as they were on the island itself” (21). Duckworth's investigation has clear metafictional resonance, as the reader imagines Crummey, engaged in this kind of research and too, finding little evidence of the “presence” of the Beothuk. Duckworth proceeds to tell Buchan (and the reader) what little he has found out: “there had been “several pivotal misunderstandings” and then “the displacement of the Beothuk took place with a curious lack of concerted resistance. The Red Indians seemed almost to dissipate” (21). Read metatextually Duckworth's investigation stands as the narrative Crummey means to correct. This story of “dissipation” ignores “truth-to-meaning” and must be amended to more accurately reflect history as Crummey understands and imagines it.

Whether their dissipation, “like a dream that resists articulation” (21) is historically accurate or not is less important here than the *context* for Duckworth's history lesson on disappearance; the context is represented as incidental to the participation of colonial traders and settlers. Duckworth explains what he knows of the history to Buchan before explaining that he “wanted some action taken to protect the Indians” and so appealed to the Privy Council, which resulted in a “series of ineffectual proclamations” (22). Duckworth complains that any suggestions he made to the Privy Council they “proceeded to ignore, unwilling to risk alienating the growing population of settlers by appearing to side with local natives” (22). Duckworth describes the disappearance of the

Beothuk as a tragedy and reads to Buchan the prediction “Before the lapse of another century . . . the English nation, like the Spanish, may have affixed to its character the indelible reproach of having extirpated a whole race of people” (24). While the narrative is commendable for drawing attention to the “extirpation” (or genocide) of the Beothuk, the “extirpation,” as understood by Duckworth, like the violence in *The Trade*, occurs because the Privy Council fails to respond to the recommendation of individuals, thus distancing the individual characters from responsibility; rather, the Beothuk simply “disappear.” The bulk of the narrative works to unsettle this assumption by describing the hostile interactions between colonial and Indigenous characters and, in a limited way, by attending to the effect of European disease on the Indigenous population; however, there is the sense, here from Duckworth and later from Buchan, and in *The Trade*, that larger structures thwart earnest and well-meaning intentions. That is to say, both Duckworth and Buchan figure as benevolent colonials who intend to “do the right thing” by establishing a formal relationship with the Beothuk, but find that the Privy Council prevents them from doing what they believe to be right. In effect, the individuals represented in the novel as holding the most colonial power abdicate any personal responsibility for the “disappearance” of the Beothuk and shift responsibility to the locus of colonial authority: the Privy Council.

**“We’ll give them fair play”: Retributive Justice and Originary Violence<sup>74</sup>**

Duckworth and Buchan's discussion of the “dissipation” of the Beothuk ignores

---

<sup>74</sup> Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. 31.

what Buchan knows – and what we might assume Duckworth (and Crummey) in his “meticulous research” discovered – and that is the involvement of the British settler and traders in perpetuating violence against the Beothuk. The representation of the colonial settlers emphasizes the active and retributive relationship between the Beothuk and the colonials and suggests that the innocence assumed by Duckworth – and to a lesser extent Buchan – in the passive “disappearance” of the Beothuk is without foundation.

Of the three main stories of retributive justice in *River Thieves* the story Noel Young tells Lieutenant Buchan is the only one that does not directly consider retributive justice between the Beothuk and the British. Young's story is worth repeating at length so that the important discussion about blame he has with Buchan is understood in context.

Young tells Buchan,

The Reds are a jealous people . . . although it hadn't always been so. There was a time when the Mi'kmaq shared the land with the Reds and there was peace between them. But years ago the French had placed a bounty on the Reds in retaliation for the thieving and other depredations suffered on the west coast. In that same year a small party of Mi'kmaq had come upon two Red Indians alone on a river and they killed these men and took their heads to claim the bounty. On their way back to the coast they encountered a great camp of Red Indians who . . . invited them to join a meal . . . The heads of their murdered people were discovered . . . and after darkness had fallen fully, at a signal unknown to the visitors, each Red Indian turned to the Mi'kmaq beside him and plunged a knife into his breast. (349-50)

In the conversation that follows Young's story Lieutenant Buchan concludes that the Mi'kmaq “were mostly to blame” (351), apparently because they started the cycle of retribution by killing the two Beothuks. Young makes the pithy comment that he “would have expected an officer in the British navy to lay the blame on the French who posted

the bounty in the first place” (351). Here Young complicates Buchan's assumption about the origins of violence by suggesting that the first physical act of violence does not constitute the beginning of a relationship of enmity, but rather the context and conditions that precede the relationship create both the opportunity and likelihood for such violence.

Again, the novel makes a self-conscious gesture to colonialism as the source for violence. However the double standard that sees Duckworth and Buchan castigated for not taking individual responsibility in the face of a colonial system that regulates their actions (and beliefs), while representing the individual Beothuk and Mi'kmaq as victims to French colonial policies, muddies any easy conclusion about how the novel imagines individual responsibility. Instead the novel raises the possibility that individual responsibility might depend more on the individual's position within hierarchies of colonial power than it does on the character or morality of the individual him or herself. At the end of Young and Buchan's conversation, Young reveals that Joseph O'Reilly shot the second Beothuk man on Winter Lake and suggests that the reason O'Reilly did so is because “His wife Micmac” (353). Young thus ends his conversation with Buchan with a confirmation of the continuation of a cycle of retributive justice between the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq, and with an indirect admission of his own (mistaken) investment in viewing violence as *quid pro quo* acts of revenge. However, the reader knows O'Reilly did not shoot the Beothuk man because he felt an allegiance with the Mi'kmaq; he shot the man because he was fatally wounded and suffering. A system of justice that concentrates only on patterns of behaviour and predicted motivations obscures the “truth-to-meaning” of the

events on the ice.

By way of another story the narrative deepens its concern with the source of retributive justice and its perpetuation. In this story, John Peyton Senior tells Cassie about a massacre he participated in and the subsequent murder of Harry Miller. He describes how in the winter of 1781 some Beothuk men burned down Harry Miller's house and how the following summer he and Miller decided to “light into the bastards” (324). John Senior narrates the massacre in some detail, but says he “refuse[d] to estimate the number they'd killed, to guess at their ages” (327-8). At the end of his story he reflects that “He'd never told this story to anyone . . . it surprised him how *complete* his rendition was, how little he'd censored it in Cassie's presence, as if he'd composed it in his head years ago and was merely waiting for this opportunity to recount it” (329 – my emphasis). John Senior's assessment of his story as “complete” resonates with Buchan's search for the “truth” of events; neither John Senior nor Buchan questions the integrity of memory and story (or stories told from memory) as legitimate sites of (judicial) investigation. This runs contrary to most contemporary understandings of both historical and judicial “evidence,” which demands material substantiation of any individual claim. By posing “story” as a “complete” account, John Senior indicates the alternative conception of historical evidence raised in *River Thieves*: that perhaps stories can be, on their own, evidence of “truth” – or “truth-to-meaning.”

Both John Senior and the Beothuk tell stories of their history: John Senior tells Cassie, and John Peyton Junior surmises that the Beothuk must have told one another the

history of retribution because when the first expedition goes to Winter Lake the Beothuk kill two British marines because “they might have had suspicions about some of [them]” (157). While it can be extrapolated from this that the Beothuk tell their own stories about the violent history of their relationship with the colonial settlers, Mary's description of the events on the ice mark the only story told from a Beothuk perspective. Mary responds “yes” or “no,” but does not describe her experiences in her own words, gestures or drawings. In part the brevity of Mary's speech and story may be attributed to Crummey's characterization of her as wilfully refusing English as a means of resisting her captors; it also draws attention to the uncomfortable position of Crummey having to imagine and ventriloquize a Beothuk perspective because the extinction of Beothuk, wrought by colonial intervention and violence, means they can no longer speak for themselves.

John Senior's story, on the other hand, receives considerable narrative attention. It is set off from the main vein of the narrative by double-spaced line breaks and because Cassie does not enter the story either in dialogue or by description of her reaction to what she is hearing, Peyton's story stands as a narrative confession. Much in the way of a confessional, Cassie “lets him go on until he finished” not “stop[ping] him or “say[ing] she'd heard enough” (329). Unlike a priest, however, Cassie does not offer any penance or absolution. A feeling of having been heard may be the only consolation available for John Senior, if it is, in fact, consolation that he seeks.

The nuance that John Senior's story offers to the portrait of retributive justice is in the difference between this story and his other statements about responsibility and blame.

In several other places in the narrative John Senior describes his sense that “They are a shameless lot of thieves altogether” (28) or “Reds is not to be trusted” (29) and that the violence that has taken place occurs because “We had to deal with the savages” (247). The story he tells Cassie hardly qualifies as a conscious gesture of remorse, but it does complicate the representation of John Senior as a “hard man” (157) that circulates in the narrative to that point. Peyton's story suggests that the beginning – the very first step – in interrupting the cycle of retributive justice may come not from “forming relationships,” as Governor Duckworth suggests, but from individuals admitting to themselves and to others that their actions constitute crimes. Thus the story reveals not only John Peyton's history of violence and the apparent intractability of retributive justice between the Beothuk and settler communities, but it also raises the possibility of story itself as a means of temporarily breaking the succession of violence by allowing individuals a space to consider their complicity without the threat of punishment or the expectation of absolution. The cycle of retributive justice is broken in a more obvious way with Buchan's insistence that “Mary” be returned to her people.

**“She looks like a proper lady in that getup”: Addressing and Dressing English<sup>75</sup>**

During the expedition to Winter Lake in 1817-18, the settlers capture “Mary,” kill her husband and brother, and bring her back to the Peyton settlement at the Bay of Exploits. Like the Beothuk girl whom John Peyton Junior sees displayed in Poole, Mary's body and its performances signify the tension in the novel between the appearance of

---

<sup>75</sup> Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. 293.

civility and an intrinsic civility, the performance of belonging and the recognition that performance must always be inadequate under the scrutiny of colonial assessments of how a body signifies.

These ideas can be clarified by considering a few examples of the way Mary is made to perform civility and the way she resists that inscription. When Mary first arrives at the Peyton household, Cassie sees her as a “half-wild animal – as something that might be tamed, taught a few manners” (290) and so she begins a process of rendering Mary recognizable first as human, and then as civil: first, Cassie bathes Mary, washing away the red ochre used by the Beothuk to dye their skin; then Cassie asks Mary for her name: “What is your name?’ she asked. ‘Your. Name.’ Without hesitation the Indian woman said, ‘Mary’” (292); finally Cassie dresses Mary in “a white dress” and “stockings” (292). Cassie’s process of (literally) stripping Mary of the physical markers of her Beothuk identity and dressing her again in Cassie’s own clothes aligns with what Homi Bhabha famously describes as colonial “mimicry,” in which the colonized subject is made to imitate the colonizer but in such a way as to be similar, but not quite the same (*The Location of Culture*). The “not quite” aspect of mimicry emphasizes that the colonized subject may imitate the colonizer, but can never *be* the colonizer. While this seems like an obvious point, it highlights the tension in the scenes of Mary’s transformation between her appearance as “a proper lady in that getup” (293) and John Peyton Senior’s forceful assertion that “You can’t dress that kind up on the inside” (293). Mimicry thus maintains a distinction between colonizers and colonized as a means of securing the power

differential between the two groups. In order to be in control and to hold power, the colonizers must have someone recognizable over whom to exercise power and must retain the authority to determine how that person will be recognized.

These scenes of Mary's integration into the Peyton household also reveal a common criticism of mimicry: that it does not address the extent to which mimicked appearance and behaviour is consciously or unconsciously assumed by the colonized subject. For Mary does not passively accept Cassie and the Peyton's civilizing efforts. In terms of her appearance, Mary cooperates with Cassie in that she wears the white dress and stockings proffered her, but Mary refuses to fully dress the part of the “proper lady.” She keeps “the leather clothes she'd been wearing when she was taken from the lake with her at all times, carrying them around in a cloth bundle tying it across her back while she worked or sitting it on her lap” (256). Mary's insistence on saving her clothing can be read both as a desire to protect what is familiar and safe for her and as a refusal to passively adopt the clothing – and so the appearance – of the white settlers. The settlers appreciate the importance of her clothing; in a gesture of contrition or respect they place the bundle of clothing in the coffin with Mary when they return her to Winter Lake.

Taken alone, Mary's attachment to her leather clothing might be read as a reflection of her fear and discomfort in an unfamiliar environment or an idiosyncratic character trait, but when coupled with her refusal to learn English, her bundle of clothing figures as a mode of resistance. Cassie observes,

Mary was naturally curious and retained the names of everything after the first

hearing . . . but she seemed uninterested or unable to progress much beyond the noun in her own speech, managing only the simplest declarations . . . Cassie thought of this as a limitation of the Red Indian mind and language. But there were moments when it seemed a deliberate strategy, a protest of some sort. A refusal to enter their world any further than was necessary for her survival. (255)

Two narrative voices are detectable in this passage: Cassie's who views Mary's refusal to speak English as a "limitation," and the voice in the final two sentences. By raising the possibility that Mary "refuses" English as a "strategy," the passage self-consciously addresses the ways Mary actively limits her "entry" into "their world" and restores to her some measure of agency.

Consistent with colonial authority that maintains the integrity of appearance as a measure of value, John Peyton Senior believes that Mary's intrinsic "savagery" cannot be disguised by the donning of a white dress. Meanwhile, Mary's concerted efforts to refuse the imposition of colonial authority, by way of imposed clothing, exemplifies the tensions in the text between how a body *appears* and how that body identifies itself, or is made to signify by others.<sup>76</sup>

To these examples of mimicry or self-consciously produced and performed

---

<sup>76</sup> Another striking – and entirely different – example of this motif in the novel can be seen in the scenes of John Peyton Junior laying traps for a fox. He sets one trap – well hidden and disguised by leaves – and then lays another trap – out in the open and poorly disguised. The fox, fooled into believing he has sprung the hunter's trap does not pay sufficient attention and is caught by the second – hidden – trap. The story of the fox might be read as a parable for the Indigenous experience with the settlers in the novel. In each case of Indigenous and settler interactions benign appearances belie underlying traps: John Peyton Junior waves a white flag before the two Beothuk men are murdered; Mary wears English clothing and speaks the English language before succumbing to an English disease – consumption; and perhaps the meaning of the parable "do not trust appearances" equally applies to the Governor's mission to "establish a relationship with the Beothuk," whereby what appears to be a gesture of friendship and civility disguises the far more pernicious outcomes of such a relationship familiar to the reader of historical fiction.

identity, might be added many scenes of deception, evasion and lies. Cassie's repeated refrain that “A man *should* be what he seems” (43 – my emphasis) stands in marked contrast with the many instances of purposeful (or unintentional) manipulation of appearance. Cassie's dictum stands as an imperative rather than a statement of fact. The novel thus assesses appearance as something assumed: both in the sense of being put on and in the sense of taken for granted; something deceptive; and something the individual can negotiate. In the novel it is only by knowing the story behind what a character wears or how a character behaves that the “be” of what a man “seems” clarifies, a knowledge that gestures to the reader's responsibility to contextualize their interpretation and judgement.

**“He's going down the river . . . to make amends”: Justice in Stories<sup>77</sup>**

While the novel advances a fairly straightforward representation of the attribution of responsibility to the settlers for the violence directed at the Beothuk – whether that violence is read as Mary's infection with tuberculosis or the murder of the men or the systemic effects of colonialism more generally – the novel's approach to a just response for these violences is more complicated.

Crown justice, as represented by Lieutenant Buchan's investigation into the murder of the Beothuk men at Winter Lake, as discussed, is represented as hypocritical and defunct; retributive justice, as represented by the cycle of violence between both the Beothuk and the Mi'kmaq and the Beothuk and the British settlers, is shown as

---

<sup>77</sup> Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. 212.

intensifying as a result of colonization and as a form of justice that itself perpetuates violence. John Peyton's confession of his involvement in a Beothuk massacre indicates one possibility for the disruption of cycles of retributive justice, but it also gestures to the third form of justice circulating in *River Thieves* and that is storied justice.

As I have noted in the introduction to this section, stories hold a variety of meanings in the novel. From the intertextual inclusion of Shakespearian passages to memories recounted as stories, stories function in *River Thieves* as ways of distilling complex thematic questions into quotations, parables or fairy tales. Stories are also notable for what they do *not* include. Cassie's story of her experience of childhood sexual abuse, for instance, notably omits the actual scene of abuse, confirming the abuse only after she finishes telling John Peyton Senior the story.

Beyond Cassie's inadmission of sexual abuse into the story of her childhood, there are several notable gaps in the chronology of *River Thieves*. Gaps include: Richmond's capture of the Beothuk girl whom he sells to a couple from Poole (and the presumable murder of her family); the murder of the marines; the capture and kidnapping of Mary; and finally the murder of Mary's brother and husband. At first these excised narratives troubled me a great deal. I felt concerned that the moments of greatest violence were not described chronologically. What, I wondered, did the narrative segregation of the most violent and exploitative scenes suggest about the novel's approach to history? What did these omissions from a chronological narrative mean?

At first glance the narrative gaps suggest *River Thieves* may not be up to the task

of representing the darker aspects of Canadian colonial history. The reader grapples with a narrative that presents a fraught representation of colonial settlers who are estranged from Britain and are forcefully asserting their authority over the “new” land and the Indigenous people, but a narrative that nevertheless withholds narrating the moments of greatest violence, the moments in which the settlers express the barbarity of colonial ideology. With respect to the constitutive crime in the narrative of who killed the two Beothuk men, *River Thieves* is structured like a murder mystery; it leaves open the question of who committed these crimes – much in the same way it leaves open the question of who the titular “thief” is – in order to build tension before the climax of the narrative when Buchan amasses enough facts to reveal the “real murderer,” Joseph O’Reilly. While Buchan and his notion of absolute truth and Crown justice are satisfied with this climactic revelation, the reader understands that guilt and responsibility are not so easily attributed. So when Cassie declares “I want to know what happened on the lake” (357), the reader anticipates a narrative of the events that more clearly, or more justly, explains who to blame for the murders.

When John Peyton Junior finishes telling Cassie the story of how Richmond fatally shot the first man and how John Senior wounded the second before O’Reilly ended the second man’s suffering by shooting him again, Cassie says “All along you’ve been lying” (361). She believes that all of the men have been lying to protect John Senior, not realizing that O’Reilly’s history of theft means that he will hang if Buchan finds out what really happened. So John Peyton replies, “A story is never told for its own sake . . . True

or false” (361). This line repeats an earlier statement made by Cassie when she gave John Peyton lessons in textual analysis. To her question “A story is never told for its own sake – True or False?” John Peyton responds with equivocation, saying “True? False?” Cynthia Sugars reads Peyton's hesitation as an indication that truth is ambiguous in the novel, or subject to individual interpretation (Sugars 2005). But this analysis forgets John Peyton's later repetition of the line in which he reminds Cassie her lesson about stories: every story ever told has been told with intention and for a listener.

With this lesson in mind, I returned to the gaps in the narrative and re-evaluated my earlier frustration with the chronological disruption that makes the gaps at first feel like absences. Richmond never finishes his story of capturing the young Beothuk girl and he reaches the conclusion of the narrative as an unsympathetic and reprehensible character. The reader gleans enough from the story he does tell to know that he murdered the Beothuk girl's family and his failure to tell the whole story is consistent with his representation as a brutish man.

The story of the marines' murder at the hands of the Beothuk is never narrated. This exclusion is part of a much larger problem in the novel. The novel opens with a short chapter titled “The Lake,” which is narrated from the perspective of a Beothuk woman – the woman, the reader later learns, is “Mary.” By limiting the inclusion of this perspective to two pages, the chapter “The Lake” has the effect of marginalizing this perspective rather than doing the intended work of drawing the Beothuk perspective and voice into the novel's story of their history. Sugars wonders whether the inclusion is ethical at all,

given the extinction of the Beothuk or whether, if this voice is to be imagined, Crummey's is a suitable voice (Sugars 2005). I am less taken with this argument as it repeats similar criticisms made of Rudy Wiebe that a white author cannot ethically represent the voice of the Indigenous other. This kind of blanket criticism of appropriation does not do justice to the differences manifest in various works of historical fiction. To his credit, in the chapter "The Lake" Crummey does not imagine the words of the Beothuk woman, or her feelings or thoughts, and elsewhere in the novel (in epigraphs from dictionaries and conversations about translation) references the lost language of the Beothuk. That said, the problem is not the perspective presented in "The Lake" itself; it is rather that this perspective enters the narrative only as a frame for what follows. If stories are represented in *River Thieves* as the means of accessing truth and one approach to seeking justice, the exclusion of the Beothuk perspective and stories from the narrative proper (that is, the narrative that begins with "Part One") cannot avoid being read as an act of silencing in the story of history that repeats the violent silence of the Beothuk in the present.

So this leaves John Peyton Junior's story of what happened on Winter Lake as the model for justice in *River Thieves*. As John Peyton gives the account of the men's actions, he makes a confession, and whether Cassie hears his story as an act of conciliation or not, he delivers it in this spirit. The character, rather than the omniscient narrator, gives an account of his actions, and in doing so John Peyton discloses his crime without interference, imposition or expectation. If John Peyton Junior is the character with whom

the narrative most sympathizes – by way of his nuanced understandings of “truth-to-meaning,” his sympathy for the injustices suffered by the Beothuk, his attentive relationship with “Mary” – what does it mean that he comes closest to “just” action? And what does it suggest that “just” action requires only a confession, with no indication of a change in behaviour or belief? What responsibility does this extend to the reader, or more to the point, what motivation does this extend to readers to take action themselves?

Writ large, the representation of stories as a means of accessing truth and approaching justice, describes the historical project of *River Thieves*. The novel describes the events at the Bay of Exploits between 1819-20 with the expectation that the story might tell the reader something about the past that traditional history cannot, and something about the first step if justice to be achieved: an admission of guilt, a confession, a story. Unlike *The Trade*, individuals take responsibility in *River Thieves*, but like *The Trade*, individual action is impotent in the context of the narrative and requires nothing of the reader. To this end, the last novel in this chapter, *The Book of Negroes*, considers how a story of historic injustice might involve and implicate the contemporary reader.

### **Witness History: Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes***

Lawrence Hill's 2007 novel *The Book of Negroes* imagines the first-person account of Aminata Diallo, a “freeborn Muslim” (25) from West Africa whom slave traders capture and transport to South Carolina to be sold for “one pound or two at the

most” (424). The “trade” in *The Book of Negroes* quite obviously differs from that found in both *The Trade* and *River Thieves* in that rather than trading in beaver pelts and fish or guns and alcohol, people are currency.

*The Book of Negroes* considers how agency and action function in the oppressive systems of slavery and colonialism. Aminata's narrative recounts numerous and varied scenes of violence perpetrated under the authority of the slave traders, slave owners, and colonial officials, or as she describes them: “big white men with a purpose” (6). Amid the scenes of dehumanizing brutality and colonial injustice, Aminata draws attention to the physical body and its adornment as a site of contestation within these systems that are preoccupied with the regulation of how bodies signify. Her narrative likewise describes the possibilities that exist for individuals to negotiate with authority in terms of what labour is performed and for what compensation. Finally, her narrative considers the function of stories as resistance: resistance to violence and silence, and ultimately, resistance to a version of history indifferent to the stories of (ordinary) individuals.

In examining how a body dresses, what a body does, what a body is called and what a body says, *The Book of Negroes* allows that individual resistance does take place within systems designed to quash such action. Aminata's narrative may, however, risk positioning the “exceptional” story – the slave with exceptional beauty; the slave who learned to read and write; who escaped slavery with few physical injuries; who, like Michael Mountain Horse, appears at pivotal moments in the history of the slave trade; who unrealistically finds first her husband and daughter after years of separation – as the

one who can exercise such agency and action. Although Aminata does not achieve unfettered freedom for either her body or her story – indeed, while *The Book of Negroes* imagines possibilities for individual resistance, the narrative acknowledges that the contexts of slavery and colonialism limit what actions the individual might take – her representation as an exceptional individual who has led an exceptional life does raise concerns about available possibilities for the less exceptional.

Told from the perspective of a character repeatedly used and abused, the questions of historic responsibility and justice that preoccupy Stenson's and Crummey's texts unfold here as questions about the significance of historical witnessing and testimony. Aminata imagines that her story “will outlive [her]”, that someone “will find [her] story and pass it along” and in this transmission of her story she will “have lived for a reason” (103). Stories function in the novel as evidence not only of instances of historic injustice and responsibility, but also as evidence of the voice of the individual story-teller. In the context of a first-person narrator who claims the story as her own, the narrative figures self-representation as a meaningful act for the speaker only when a listener or reader attends to both the story and its teller. Without an attentive listener or reader, Aminata and her story, her testimony, her account of her history, are without effect. To return to Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Aminata's account requires the “other” to hear her story; the form of *The Book of Negroes* – first person confessional – conceives of this “other” as the reader: one bound to hear the testimony and in this scene of address, respond.

**“It's just a body”: Fixing and Measuring the Value of Bodies<sup>78</sup>**

Clothing and bodily adornment figure as rich sites of self-representation and expression in *The Book of Negroes*. The freedom to adorn one's body in a self-determined colour or fabric stands in marked contrast to the way in which the slave traders and slave owners, much like the Peytons' dressing-up of “Mary”<sup>79</sup> in *River Thieves*, exercise their authority by determining what can be worn, or if clothing will be permitted at all. Indeed the ability to strip a body of its clothing stands as one of the clearest expressions of authority in *The Book of Negroes*. Naked bodies figure in the text as an abject sites: the naked body can be unrecognizable as a human individual – as when Fanta tells Aminata that a naked, dead man is “just a body” (42) – or it can be a representation of the absolute powerlessness of the enslaved body. When Aminata is first captured she fears that she will be beaten or that her captors will “boil us and eat us” (29), but they do neither. Instead “they began with humiliation: they tore the clothes off our backs. We had no head scarves or wraps for our body, or anything to cover our private parts. We had not even sandals for our feet. We had no more clothing than goats, and nakedness marked us as captives wherever we went” (29).

Together with the powerlessness of her naked body, Aminata identifies the captors' refusal to *see* her as a reduction of her “self” to pure, physical body. She says, “Never

---

<sup>78</sup> Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 42.

<sup>79</sup> Aminata, too, is named by white men as “Mary” at several points in the narrative. She tells the reader “Buckra men called Negro women 'Mary' when they didn't know their names, but I hated it. I kept my eyes down and my mouth shut” (169). The use of “Mary” as way of identifying the particular Negro women, contrary to the typical use of a name in distinguishing the individual, diminishes their individuality.

have I met a person doing terrible things who would meet my own eyes peacefully. To gaze into another person's face is to do two things: to recognize their humanity and to assert your own” (29). The captors literally capture Aminata's body, but by stripping her of her clothing they also capture her humanity, reducing her to nothing but body, or “just a body” (42), as Fanta might say. In an example of the way the novel attends to the complexity of the slave trade and the necessary complicity of Africans themselves, this passage acknowledges the inhumanity of the slave traders, while simultaneously refusing their complete condemnation: they too are unable to assert their humanity, caught up as they are in a system that disallows mutual recognition or reciprocity.

When Aminata does meet the gaze of one of her captors, “a boy, perhaps just four rains older than [she]” (31), she first reacts with discomfort because she does not want “to be noticed, seen or known by anybody, in [her] present state” (31). Aminata also objectifies her naked and displayed body such that she cannot imagine entering into a relation – a relation of a self recognizing an other – while she is naked. She “nearly makes [herself] crazy, wondering how to escape [her] own nakedness” (31), conflating her enslavement with her nakedness: to escape one would be to escape the other. When Aminata begins to menstruate, the boy, named Chekura, offers to help her and arranges for her to go see some women in a village. The women provide her with “a blue cloth” which she puts on and immediately feels “so much better, and safer, with [her] privates covered” (40). Clothing makes an appreciable difference not only for how Aminata feels about her body – she no longer feels estranged from it – but it also transforms her

interactions with Chekura in that she now welcomes a relationship because with her donning of clothing she regains interest in relating to an other.

The novel represents the violence of these opening scenes of Aminata's capture and march to the slave ships as principally located in the assumption that one person can – without meeting organized resistance – capture, claim, own and sell another person; but the violence of these scenes also emerges in the descriptions of how the bodies of the captured people are treated: deprivations of food and water, physical abuse, and as discussed, their forced nakedness. In her review of *The Book of Negroes*, Sarah Churchwell of *The Guardian* observes that “Hill ensures Aminata's greatest suffering is emotional, rather than physical. He is excellent on the psychic trauma of slavery, its losses and grief, but it is hard not to conclude that he became so fond of his charming heroine that he spared her most of slavery's physical violence” (6). Putting aside the question of authorial motivation and measures of physical violence (how much, you might ask, is “*most of slavery's physical violence*”?), Churchwell identifies the complex portrait of emotional and “psychic trauma” rendered in *The Book of Negroes*. Had she given examples of this emotional violence, Churchwell might well have drawn on Aminata's repeated experience of being stripped and displayed in her naked body.

In the scene on Appleby's indigo plantation, clothing and nakedness are again used as symbols of authority and subjugation.<sup>80</sup> When Chekura – now Aminata's husband –

---

<sup>80</sup> The scene on Appleby's indigo plantation similarly exposes not only Aminata's bare body, but also the femininity of that bare body: whereas on the forced march Aminata menstruated – a clear indication of

gives her “a red and gold headscarf, and a beautiful blue wrapper made of soft, smooth cotton – the same material that [she] saw on bukra visitors” (174) Aminata wears the new clothes every day. Appleby notices her new clothing, telling her “You and your head scarves. Fancied up like white folks, you put the nigger women in Charles Town to shame” (177). The particular source of Appleby's anger is complex. There are suggestions that he is angry because Aminata resists his sexual advances or because she has married Chekura. Whatever the precise reason for his anger, Appleby punishes Aminata by exposing and abusing her naked body. The scene begins with Appleby stripping Aminata and burning her clothes:

Georgia was ordered to bring every shred of my clothing to Appleby, who was standing there by the fire. . . . 'Your clothes,' he said to me. When I hesitated he tore them off and threw them down into the pile that Georgia had brought. 'We have a law in the Province of South Carolina,' he said. 'Niggers don't dress grand.' I made a decision then. He would do whatever he wanted, anyway. I was from Bayo and I had a child growing inside me and I would stand proud. 'Throw them in the fire,' Appleby said to me, motioning to my clothes on the ground. I did not move . . . [Georgia] bent over, picked up my clothes and threw them in the fire. Privately, I thanked her. She had burned my clothes to save my dignity. (176-7)

The scene continues with Appleby shaving Aminata's head and then holding a mirror up to her face. Aminata says “I screamed as I have never screamed before. *I didn't recognize myself*. I had no clothes, no hair, no beauty, no womanhood” (178 – my emphasis).

Aminata's attempt to “stand proud” cannot withstand the violence of having both her clothes and her hair stripped. Appleby placates her, saying that he “let [her] off without a

---

fertility – in the scene on the plantation Aminata's body displays a pregnancy – signalling her body's fecundity.

beating this time” (179), making the same error as Churchwell in imagining that physical violence is necessarily worse than psychic violence.<sup>81</sup> For Aminata has not merely been stripped of her clothing and had her head shaved; rather, this scene dramatizes the extent of Appleby's authority: he can not only revoke her basic freedom to choose her own clothing and wear it unhindered, but in doing so he also claims ownership over the integrity of her sense of self. Without her clothing and without her hair Aminata cannot recognize her “self” because in the context of this narrative, to be stripped naked is to have one's humanity revoked; it is to be reduced to a body without a recognizable sense of selfhood.

**“I am not dressed to see anybody this evening”: Wearing Freedom<sup>82</sup>**

If nakedness stands as the symbol of Aminata's entry into slavery and the continued subjugation of her body to the authority of slave owners, her relative ability to make decisions about what to wear indicates her distance from such subjugation and her (sometimes tentative) claims to freedom of self and self expression.<sup>83</sup> When Solomon Lindo buys Aminata she moves to his house in Charles Town to work for him and his wife with another slave woman named Dolly. Lindo gives both women cloth that Aminata

---

<sup>81</sup> In a much later scene in New York Aminata is attacked by a white man. Before a British officer arrives to interrupt the attack Aminata feels “[her] own clothes ripping” (270) and when the officer offers to help her she “wished he would leave [her] alone” perhaps because “skin was showing through [her] torn clothing” (270). Once again stripping clothing is not simply the precursor to physical violence but is itself a violent act that reduces Aminata's sense of self and agency.

<sup>82</sup> Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 465.

<sup>83</sup> Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* also uses clothing, and the production of clothing, as a signal of the protagonist's distance from slavery. In Walker's novel, Celie designs, sews, and sells pants as way to make money and as a way to fashion her sense of self post-slavery.

favourably compares to the “rough cloth that had scratched [her] skin in St. Helena” because it is “a finer grade of cotton, frequently dyed in blue or red” (193). On their trips to the market the two women dress well – Dolly “wouldn't be caught dead out in the street without a red scarf around her hair, an orange scarf over her shoulders and a pair of red shoes with big brass buckles” (193) – and “point out to each other shoes of all colours, petticoats, silk scarves and white gloves” (193). White gloves are of particular interest to Aminata. When she meets Mrs. Lindo she notices her gloves: “Her hands were white as bones. No. Not bones. Not possible. Her hands were the colour of scrubbed elephant teeth. I looked again. That wasn't skin. It was something else, covering her hands. It looked soft and delicate. How I longed for that material” (110). In symbolic terms Aminata's declaration of “longing” for the white material reads as a desire not just for the fine cloth, but also for the constellation of power and privilege connoted by “white” and white material. Aminata's eventual freedom and the decisions she makes about what to wear do, I will argue shortly, reveal Aminata's investment in discourses of white privilege and propriety that at once inform and limit her (sartorial) choices.

The “finer grade of cotton” that the Lindos give Aminata parallels her improved living and working conditions: she no longer works in indigo vats, but instead spends mornings keeping books and afternoons delivering babies on a “self-hire” system. However, Aminata is not free, and she notes that even though Lindo “preferred the term *servant* to *slave*, he owned me and he owned Dolly” (209). While she may wear finer cotton, Aminata's “longing” for the white gloves and her constant appraisal of what other

women wear symbolize the continued restrictions on her freedom and the imagined agency she attaches to fine fabrics and the opportunity to wear them.

Consistent with this symbolism, Aminata's acquisition of freedom to wear what she likes and her ability to purchase the clothing she desires maps against her found freedom of movement and self-determination. When she goes to meet the Bance Island slave traders to negotiate an escort back to her home village, she describes how she

put on [her] best clothes for that trip – a yellow hat with a peacock feather, an English dress instead of [her] usual African wrap, and [her] red shoes with gleaming silver buckles. The clothing helped [her] feel as far removed as possible from the skinny, naked girl who had been penned and branded in the Bance Island slave pen some forty years earlier . . . [She] made a point of extending [her] hand, onto which [she] had slipped one of the gloves. (412-3)

Aminata not only asserts her independence and authority to the slave traders (and to herself) by displaying herself in British clothing, but her clothing also physically marks the distance between herself as enslaved and herself as free. The white gloves she once coveted for the delicacy of their material and for their symbolism of power are now hers to wear.

While Aminata's donning of "white" clothing allows her to be recognized by the Bance Island traders, and the British abolitionists and their British audiences – and so in some sense suggests her recognition of the power of "white" clothing – her character lacks self-reflection about her rationale for her sartorial choices beyond the commentary that "white" clothes make her feel "removed" from her experiences as a slave. That Aminata might wear white gloves so as to manipulate her audiences for her own ends

does not emerge in the text as a realistic possibility; rather, Aminata's ignorance of her motivations for donning these clothes suggests the limitations of her freedom and points to a problematic reassertion of "white" clothing as desirable and metaphorically representative of agency.

Once Aminata moves to England she continues to wear British dresses (and, we might imagine, white gloves). By symbolically relating these clothing items to Aminata's emancipation, the narrative raises the troubling question of whether or not Aminata's freedom requires her wholesale adoption of British clothing and culture. Why, we might well wonder, do white gloves symbolize freedom? I am hesitant to suggest that for Aminata to be "truly" free she must wear her African wrap and continue her life in Africa; after all, I am arguing that it is Aminata's freedom to choose what to wear that symbolizes her (total) freedom, and not *what* she chooses to wear. However, I am troubled that a British dress and white gloves signal the "furthest remove" from a naked slave body and that this rationale underpins the novel's justification for why Aminata chooses to dress in British clothing. One way to connect Aminata's decision to "dress British" with her rejection of colonial power is to recognize her position within discourses of propriety and prestige that demand certain attire in order to reflect liberty and self-importance. Just as in *The Trade* when the Governor adorns himself with a white wife, or in *River Thieves* when Mary "transforms" her signification through the donning of a dress, these scenes of clothing address the limitations placed on agency by structural and ideological power. However, as in the other novels, the recognition of power and the corresponding

awareness of limitations on agency does not guarantee, nor should it, an absolution of responsibility for the actions or beliefs that result from such investment; rather, the extent to which characters recognize, admit and question their involvement in these structures offers a possibility for responsibility even when agency is limited.

**“He owned my labour, but now he was bursting to own all of me”: Labouring Bodies<sup>84</sup>**

A similar trajectory from slavery to freedom marks what Aminata *does* over the course of the narrative. Aminata begins her narrative by describing the work she does for the abolitionist movement, noting that “that abolitionists say they have brought me to England to help them change the course of history” (2-3) and so she imagines telling her story as a form of work aimed at bringing about an end to slavery. The extremely physically demanding work Aminata does while enslaved on the indigo plantation contrasts sharply with the disembodied labour of rhetoric and testimony that Aminata performs while free. Significantly, the work Aminata does cleaning the indigo vats has “something to do with dye for buckra clothing” (132); Georgia later clarifies that “fifty niggers pull piss out of mud for Master Apbee's shirt” (150). Aminata's work on the plantation immediately raises questions of why she not only wears the clothing produced on such plantations, but why she might want to wear it. One possible response to this problematic representation of the intersection between Aminata's enslaved labour and her individual consumer desire might be to point out that while her work on the plantation is

---

<sup>84</sup> Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 161.

both physically demanding and exhausting, it is also fundamentally dissociative. Far from deriving any significance or satisfaction from the work she performs, she exhibits no conscious awareness of her own desire for the products she is enslaved in order to produce. Aminata's work on the indigo plantation thus physically and psychically binds her and marks the literal and symbolic point of least control over the labour she performs.

Labour takes on a double meaning here as both the work her body does on the plantation and the labour of her female body in producing a child. When Aminata gives birth to her child, Mamadu – fathered by Chekura – Georgia reminds her that “If you're old enough to have a baby, you old enough to know that Master Apbee owns you from head to toe. And anything you make” (166). Indeed, Appleby soon exercises his authority over the “product” of Aminata's female labour by selling Mamadu for “only . . . five pounds” (184). This example highlights the extent of Appleby's authority and the limits on Aminata's agency in the most basic of human relationships.

Given the scope of Appleby's authority, when Aminata first arrives on the plantation and asks Georgia “What is a slave?” Georgia interprets the question as “foolish,” not realizing Aminata means it sincerely. Aminata asks again “How exactly does that man own us,” to which Georgia finally replies “In every way” (134). In light of the examples so far considered, one might readily accept Georgia's assessment; however, Aminata's narrative admits several points of contestation to this totalizing view of ownership. In a fairly straightforward way, Aminata and Georgia's work as midwives and their freedom to trade this expertise for “rum, tobacco or bright-coloured cloth” as well as

“Peruvian bark” (144), which could be used as an inoculation against fever, disrupt the representation of Appleby's wholesale ownership of Aminata and “anything [she] make[s]” (166). Indeed, throughout Aminata's narrative, her work as a midwife and healer provides her not only with access to trade goods otherwise prohibited to slaves, but *meaningful* labour. She explains that “When you catch a baby, you are not yourself. You forget yourself and you help the other” (86). Aminata's conception of her role as midwife as meaningful because the work requires attention to the other reasserts the importance of relationships in the novel. Her role as a midwife offers an example of an opportunity for Aminata to exercise limited agency in terms of her labour even while slave owners and traders claim absolute authority over her body and what it (can) produce(s).

**“Use me if you must, but I will use you too”: Keeping Accounts<sup>85</sup>**

Similar to the symbolic mapping of freedom to dress upon freedom of person, Aminata's freedom to labour likewise corresponds closely to her freedom of person. When she works for Solomon Lindo – the slave owner who presents himself as liberal in his conception of slavery – she is employed in a “self-hire” capacity in the afternoons as a midwife. Lindo explains that when Aminata is done working for him “keeping accounts” she will “start catching babies” and that with what she earns from her midwifery work she will “start paying [him] ten shillings a week” (200). The cost of her room and board, itself a symbol of her “freedom,” is thus given a quantitative measure: her freedom to labour is worth ten shillings a week.

---

<sup>85</sup> Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 205.

It is not surprising that the labour Aminata performs on the indigo plantation sustains the economy of the slave trade; the work she does for Lindo, however, similarly supports the perpetuation of slavery. By “keeping accounts” for Lindo, Aminata learns the fundamentals of the economic system on which the slave trade is predicated. She learns that “a ledger was a record of what you had. Keeping books meant writing down what you spent and what you earned” (201) and realizes as Margaret does in *The Trade* that “I could either barter for an object, or pay with copper, silver or gold coins” (202). Aminata struggles to understand the utility of currency, observing that coins might “become useless” and that “people will always want a chicken” (202). Lindo ignores her questions about the relative value of currency, telling her “this is not a debate. It is a lesson” (202). Aminata learns the lessons Lindo teaches about “arithmetic and coins,” but she also learns about the reach of slavery beyond the physical plantation; she recognizes how the economy of South Carolina, and indeed all of British North America, depends on the slave trade for its growth and prosperity. Her labour in “keeping accounts” can be read as her participation in the maintenance of the secondary economy (where indigo production is the primary economy and the secondary economies are the manufacturing, surveying, distribution, etc.) of slavery. Understood as an economic object of exchange herself, part of what Aminata “keeps account” of is herself and her story and in so doing she disrupts the total capture of her labour for the purposes of perpetuating slavery. She works for Lindo in a capacity that maintains the economic underpinnings of the slave trade, but she does so with a canny awareness of her value to him and the value of her story for herself.

While Aminata continues to work when she arrives in Shelburne and later when she moves to Freetown, it is her experience “keeping accounts” during the Revolutionary War that signifies her conceptual and employment transition from slavery to freedom. She agrees to help the British in the production of “The Book of Negroes,” a ledger with the names, ages and physical descriptions of Negro Loyalists and says she “loved [her] new work” because she “felt [she] was giving something special to the Negroes seeking asylum in Nova Scotia, and that they were giving something special to [her]. They were telling [her] that [she] was not alone” (291). If Aminata's narrative can be imagined as following a trajectory from enslavement to emancipation, it also charts a movement from invisibility to recognition. An individual's name stands as one of the most important markers of identification in the novel, with repeated references to naming as a site of both resistance and healing (28, 48, 66, 80, 112, 127, 155, 182, 297).<sup>86</sup> In her work on the Book of Negroes Aminata participates in the naming of fellow slaves, she “showed them their tickets, read out their names and made sure they saw that their names had been recorded” (291). She “loves” her work because she feels a sense of kindred connection – “each person who stood before [her] had a story every bit as unbelievable as [hers]” (291) – and because the work is fulfilling in its register not only of the existence of the person, but their individuality. In recording their names Aminata helps to move the slaves from a position where “your past didn't matter; in the present you were invisible and you had no

---

<sup>86</sup> The American title for the novel, *Someone Knows My Name*, also indicates the thematic significance of names and naming.

claim on the future” (189) to a point of conceivable freedom through formal recognition. I specify “formal” recognition because the earlier acts of naming – for example when Aminata says “Chekura” and he responds “Someone knows my name. Seeing you makes me want to live” (66) – mark important moments of interpersonal recognition in the Butlerian sense, but do not correspond to changes in relationships of ownership or autonomy. The record of names in the *Book of Negroes*, however, does signify this very important transition from invisibility to recognition in the eyes of the British authorities: emancipation is signalled in the state record of the individual name.

**“Sometimes I imagine the first reader to come upon my story”: Witness Stories<sup>87</sup>**

Aminata's work recording the names and identities of the Black Loyalists participates in an institutional recognition of their lives as existent, if not meaningful; this is the same work her written narrative performs. In recording her story, she answers the question she raises on the first page: “There must be a reason why I have lived in all these lands, survived all those water crossings, while others fell from bullets or shut their eyes and simply willed their lives to end” (1) and that is because her story “will outlive [her]” and “people will find [her] story and pass it along. And then,” Aminata says, “I believe, I will have lived for a reason” (103). Aminata's decision to move to London to work with the Abolitionist movement raises questions about why she abandons her commitment to “go home” in favour of working once again with white people. I'd like to suggest that the political potential of witnessing and testimony in the narrative ensures that Aminata's

---

<sup>87</sup> Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. 103.

decision is read as deliberate and agential, as well as being an ethical choice. The record of her story promises that her testimony will influence her present generation and that she has a “claim on the future” (the present) reader as well.

Aminata is aware of the limitations of the abolitionist agenda. She expresses frustration when the abolitionists try to dictate who she can associate with and their offer of “guidance” in writing her story.<sup>88</sup> She refuses “guidance” saying, “My life. My words. My pen. I am capable of writing” (455). Aminata's forceful declaration of ownership of her story contrasts with her previous experiences of being owned; the repetition of the first person possessive “My” reminds the reader of the claim of self-narration as a fundamental act of personal authority. In her declaration that “If I give my account, you will have all of it. But it will be on my terms and my terms only” (456), Aminata connects individual authority to narrate an account with the language of economies and trade. She negotiates terms with the abolitionists that she will write her own account, which can then be used by the abolitionists in a parliamentary hearing. Unlike the many other transactions Aminata brokers, here she does not request or receive payment; she simply demands the authority to narrate her own story and receives by way of payment the entry of this narrative as evidence against the “humane institution” (457) of slavery.

Putting aside for a moment the fictionality of Aminata's narrative, let us consider the narrative she presents in the parliamentary hearing as *testimony*. Shoshana Felman

---

<sup>88</sup> These passages gesture to the “Prefaces” and “Letters of Introduction” that commonly accompany slave narratives as statements of the veracity of the account and the reliability of the writer. Aminata's ability to refuse such a “preface” or the involvement of the abolitionists in ensuring the “purity” (545) of her narrative is an exceptional quality not found in other slave narratives.

explains in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* that “A ‘life testimony’ is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which *can penetrate us like an actual life*” (2 – emphasis in original). Consider the similarities between “penetrating us” and the suggestion Butler makes that in giving an account one must necessarily be “altered” by the “address.” Felman draws connections between textual testimony – as Aminata's narrative and the narrated version of her “spoken” testimony most certainly are – and the “actual life,” that is to say in reading textual testimony the reader, or the “other” in an I-other binary, is “penetrated,” or altered, as Butler might put it. In this sense testimony invokes two witnesses: the speaker, in this case Aminata, who tells the story of what she experienced and saw, explicitly identifying her position as a witness by noting “I sought comfort by imagining that I had been made a *djeli*, and was required to see and remember everything. My purpose would be to witness, and to prepare to testify” (55-6); and the reader, who attends to the given narrative, witnessing the history it contains, and being altered in some way by the received account. *The Book of Negroes* thus complicates the ethics of historical representation as presented in either *The Trade*, *River Thieves*, or indeed in *A Discovery of Strangers*, by demanding the participation of the reader as a witness to the narrated events. A case could be made that each novel so far considered likewise assumes a reader and requires that reader to attend to the narrative, but it is only in the *Book of Negroes* that the ethical potential of readers witnessing history through historical fiction is explicitly evoked. Aminata states,

The abolitionists may well call me their equal, but their lips do not yet say my name and their ears do not yet hear my story. Not the way I want to tell it. But I have long loved the written word, and come to see in it the power of the sleeping lion. *This is my name. This is who I am. This is how I got here.* In the absence of an audience, I will write down my story so that it waits like a restful beat with lungs breathing and heart beating. (101 – emphasis in original)

The “power of the sleeping lion” echoes the Biblical passages in which “a people rises like a lioness” and “he crouched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up?” (Num. 23.24, 24.9)<sup>89</sup> These passages from Numbers relate to the exile of the Jewish people and in the Biblical context can be interpreted as a commentary on the way a body may be constrained, but the soul may be free to “rise up.” For Aminata the power of the sleeping lion originates in the promise of strength and authority that waits for a chance to be wakened, or in the case of her story, heard. Because the “abolitionists” “do not yet hear [her] story,” the story, like the lion, sleeps, to be awakened by an attentive listener ready to hear the story the way Aminata “wants to tell it.” Metatextually, Aminata's indictment of the abolitionists reads as a parallel indictment of readers who would ignore or dismiss her narrative. Similarly, her assertion that her story “waits” imagines that the story has been waiting until the moment the – attentive and open – “first reader” reads it; the suggestion being that the story waits no longer because the reader is the “audience” she waited for and that the strength of the tale will be appreciated by the reader who hears her story and recognizes the power of “her name” and her journey.

---

<sup>89</sup> “Sleeping Lion” is also a popular children's game in which all but one player - “the hunter” - lie on the ground with their eyes closed, immobile, pretending to be asleep while the “hunter” moves around the group attempting to rouse the “sleeping lions” without touching them.

For all of Aminata's insistence that she is telling *her* story – the repeated references to “my” and the powerful assertions of the truth of what she has experienced – she understands that “In telling my story, I remember all those who never made it through the musket balls and the sharks and the nightmares, all those who never found a group of listeners, and all those who never touched a quill and an inkpot” (56-7). And this is the same work Lawrence Hill performs in writing *The Book of Negroes*. Aminata is fictional and her story – for all its truth and power – has been distilled by imagination from many slave narratives. But its imagining is necessary in order to give voice to “all those who never found a group of listeners.” It is the work of historical fiction to tell stories when the historical record has been silent, incomplete, or imbalanced. Considered in this light, historic responsibility and justice become questions not of who might best be blamed for the injustices of the past or how justice might best be exacted, but more questions of the responsibilities of contemporary subjects to witness the uncomfortable and violent stories of the past, and the concomitant silences, and in witnessing, remain open to change.

**Chapter Three: (Un)Settling Past and Present: Using and Inheriting History in Settler Narratives**

During the Vancouver 2010 Olympics the Hudson Bay Company aired a television commercial advertising their company called “We Were Made For This.” The commercial depicted two “explorers” riding dogsleds through a – presumably Canadian – snow-covered forest. The commercial describes the hardships early explorers and settlers encountered in making the Canadian wilderness liveable and ends with the pithy phrase, “we didn't just survive the elements, together we thrived in them.” The commercial created some controversy as at the end of the advertisement two people stand beneath the Hudson's Bay Company logo wearing Cowichan sweaters, sweaters which the Cowichan Nation own the right to. After the public raised questions about the sweaters, the Company paid the Cowichan for the rights to use the sweater design, and contracted them to produce some “authentic” sweaters, which were then given to dignitaries attending the Olympics (“Cowichan Sweaters”).

The Hudson's Bay Commercial, while fascinating for the way it distorts the historical relationship between the Company and Indigenous people, and manipulates the historical experience of explorers and settlers who did not immediately “thrive” in the wilderness that became Canada, is of interest here for the way it frames chronology in the commercial. The ad begins with early footage of winter sport and as the ad unfolds “speeds up” chronology – evident in the changing fashions of the actors – until it reaches the present. This compressed chronology implicitly suggests the longevity of Canadian (conflated with the Hudson Bay Company) claims to this land, but the repetition of

figures thriving and surviving also gestures to the necessity to repeat the history of settlement. The novels considered in this chapter each represent the maxim that “history repeats,” but their different engagements with this repetition raise questions about what might motivate such repetitions of settler history; as such, this chapter will consider novels that use histories of settlers to understand and interpret Canadians in the present and will ask what function chronological ordering plays in responsible historical fiction.

The chapter begins with Marilyn Simonds's treatment of settler history in *The Holding*, and then addresses Aimée Laberge's representation of the founding and development of Québec in *Where the River Narrows*. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Jane Urquhart's engagement with memory, history and place in her narration of settler history in *A Map of Glass*. Questions of inheritance and genealogy preoccupy all three novels as characters discover the histories of their families and use these histories to explain or justify their present circumstances. Given their interest in exploring the effects of history on present generations and the use present generations make of history, the novels narrate both the temporal past – in all of the novels the “past” is principally the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and the temporal present – a period that ranges from 1990 to 2000. While the division of chronological periods varies considerably among these novels, the repetition of thematic questions, character traits, symbols and plot sequences across chronological periods argues for a repetition of history in the present.

For Simonds, the maintenance of discrete temporal frames, with the 19<sup>th</sup> century past sequestered from the 1990s present in distinct chapters each titled with the respective

protagonist's name and the dates of the years narrated (e.g. Margaret, 1856-9) belies Alyson's necessary, and seemingly obsessive, repetition of Margaret's settler-invader possession of place. For Laberge, who adopts by far the longest temporal scope (beginning in 1534 and ending in the late 1990s), chronology is ordered by the contemporary protagonist, Lucie, as she conducts her research in the British Library. Lucie introduces and frames the historical episodes as they relate either to her research or to her family history; she serves as something of a chronological guide, alerting readers to the many shifts in temporality. Further, Lucie's focalization allows the reader to consider how her unsuccessful attempts to separate herself from her history suggest the cyclical repetition of history in the present. In *A Map of Glass* Urquhart includes the historical in an embedded narrative, "The Bog Commissioners," and describes how the contemporary protagonists interpret and respond to this historical narrative; in this way the past in *A Map of Glass* suffuses the entire narrative, even while the specific narration of the past remains limited to the "Commissioners" document. These differences in approach to temporality are important because they reveal not simply how the authors structure their novels, but how the authors imagine history to operate in the present, either as something unrecognized and sequestered from the present, as an object of intentional study, as an inescapable repetition, or as something so ubiquitous and omnipresent as to suffuse every aspect of the contemporary moment.

The focus on personal and individual history in these novels marks another difference from the novels studied in Chapters One and Two. Rather than including major

historical figures – whether political, economic or military – these novels engage with the unknown, obscure or invented personalities who contributed to the settlement of Canada. Similar to the work done by social historians, these particular novels take the lives of settler women as valid subjects for historical inquiry and, in so doing, present these subjects as those that “count” in history. The attention to ordinary individuals who grapple with family history and inheritance expands the borders of the “historical,” to include not simply political or military events or figures, but every individual who endeavours to understand and interact with the past. Significantly, this focus on the ordinary subjects of history allows readers the space to consider how their own, relatively “unexceptional” existence, contributes to the ongoing history of the nation. In other words, the “ordinary” protagonists disrupt notions of either history or nation-making as the exclusive domain of “extraordinary” Canadians, such as the explorer and trader, and suggest that each individual contributes to history and nation making. Moreover, the questions posed among the texts about why these settler stories repeat, cycle, and echo, respectively, prompt the reader to consider how repetition suggests both history's utility and its uncertainty, and how their own sense of personal histories might rely on such re-tellings.

Characters in these novels engage with history in novel ways, but consistently frame their interaction with the past as a personal relationship and one that fills some need for them in the present. This chapter is concerned with how individuals frame history as either an indisputable, incorruptible “fact,” that can be discovered and put to

use, or as a ubiquitous presence, that might be disguised or forgotten in the present, but is nevertheless accessible to those who seek or imagine its presence.

The content of history is entirely fixed in *The Holding*, as the contemporary protagonist, Alyson, discovers evidence of the autonomous past and uses it for personal gain. *Where the River Narrows* limits historical “discovery” to that which can be found in archives or personal memory. The novel attempts to deal with gaps in the historical record through the use of imagination, but ultimately finds the authority of material history supersedes the imaginary. *A Map of Glass* understands historical discovery as a recognition of the historical that always surrounds and permeates the present. Historical discovery in Urquhart's novel is not an invention of something new or a “find”; rather it is cast as recognition: seizing upon the past that has always been present, but has gone unrecognized. Where the past is unrecognizable, the novel suggests fiction to be a suitable and admirable response in order to help the present subject appreciate her heritage and the history that must necessarily surround them. Thus *A Map of Glass* advances an understanding of history as a necessary fiction.

Ultimately the novels studied in this chapter question whether history is finished and closed or open to change. And, if it is open to change, what changes does the present introduce to the past whenever it is examined? Furthermore, how is history used by the present? If history is used by and for individuals, what differences are there between history and memory? Between gaps in the historical record and forgetting? Is it anxiety about forgetting that impels the repetition of history in these novels? Or does settler

history repeat because it is never really finished?

### **Ghost Given Rights: Inheriting Time and Place in *The Holding***

Merilyn Simonds's 2004 novel, *The Holding*, narrates the lives of two women in two time periods: Margaret MacBayne in the mid- and late- 1860s and Alyson Thomson in the early 1990s. Both women occupy the same physical place, as Alyson's home, a “quaint settlement,” is a “century homestead,” built on the same land Margaret's cabin once occupied (42). Further parallels between the two women's narratives include their shared employment as gardeners and their similar experiences of the land as moving from difficult and empty to productive and peopled.

Both characters typify the settler-invader experience of settlement. They each arrive in an ostensibly empty land and labour to make the land commercially productive. While working at creating a productive home, both characters suffer traumatic losses: the death of a fiancé, for Margaret, and the death of a child, for Alyson. These traumatic events interrupt the impetus for progress and future movement that characterizes their labour, and results in a radical reassessment of their physical and temporal surroundings. What, both characters ask, does it mean to be present?

As part of their reassessments of the land and the time they occupy, both characters begin to explore the forest that surrounds and constitutes their settlement. In moving away from the contained space of their homesteads and into the “wild” of the forest, the two uncover the “ancestors,” or “ghosts,” of the place they occupy. For

Margaret this means an encounter and relationship with an Indigenous woman, Zahgahseega, whose relationship with Margaret allows Margaret to claim an “indigenous” relationship with the land; for Alyson this means the discovery of the cabin, garden and writing of Margaret, cast now as an “indigenous” ancestor in her own right. The ancestral figures function as benevolent guides who help Margaret and Alyson feel settled again: settled both in the present time and settled in their physical place. Once these spectral figures have succeeded in reintegrating the present characters into a temporal stream of progress, they disappear. In effect, the ancestors play a limited and one-dimensional role of aiding their contemporary progeny, connoting a sense of the past – and the people of the past – as important only insofar as they are *useful* to the present.

While working to heal Margaret and Alyson, the spectral ancestors serve the simultaneous function of legitimating the women's settlements. The settlers feel – unproblematically in the text – entitled to the land they occupy by virtue of their connection to the past and because the figures of the past have bequeathed them the land to own and steward. Questions emerge as to when the land is settled? (When) did settlement stop? What, precisely, does it mean to be “settled” – finished? Resolved? At home?

Before tracing the trajectory of empty space to productive place, these ancestors or specters and their function require further consideration. While it may at first seem contradictory to pose Margaret as both a full and complex protagonist and a one-dimensional specter conjured only to serve the present, the discrete temporal and

narrative sectioning of the text makes this simultaneous positioning quite clear. In the narrative sections titled “Margaret,” Margaret acts as a complex protagonist with third person limited narration and changing motives and reactions; however, in the narrative sections titled “Alyson,” Margaret functions exclusively as a tool for Alyson's emotional and commercial use. Depending on the temporal frame, Margaret is either a character of purpose or a character put to use for the purposes of an other.

This shift raises the question of whether the transition from complex character to single-purpose trace does not, in some fundamental way, aptly capture the temporality of the historical and the present. In other words, the narrative present can be represented in all its living complexity, while the past, in its inscrutability, can only be interpreted through subjects in the present, and in this way, be useful. Yet, this novel is a work of historical fiction, which by virtue of its imaginative interpretation of the complexity of the past has, in its form and content, contested the representation of the historical as limited to the factual, the flat, and the narrative-dead. Why, then, does this novel so stringently adhere to temporal and formal boundaries, sequestering Margaret and Alyson's narratives in discrete formal sections and foreclosing on the vitality of the past in the present?

An explanation can be found in the novel's preoccupation with ancestry and inheritance. Both Margaret and Alyson find themselves estranged from their parents: Margaret's parents die early in her story and Alyson's parents are so emotionally distant as to be unrelated. Their parents must be removed from their lives so that the women can recognize ancestors in the place they inhabit, and from these ancestors inherit

custodianship of the land. Once they have claimed their inherited entitlement to the land, the ancestral inhabitants cannot remain and compete for claims to the land. Zahgahseega's ghostly role exemplifies this tension, as her disappearance must remain finished, complete, irrecoverable in order for Margaret to feel, and to be, authentically, legitimately and unquestionably at home. Alyson repeats Margaret's settler-invader assumption of the land, but significantly she inherits her understanding of the land from spectral and material traces of *Margaret*, who in this posthumous transfer becomes firmly ensconced as a historical and native founder and progenitor. In the novel the historical cannot enter the present in a disruptive way because the discourse of belonging attached to the settler-invader requires the forgetting of either a violent or a vital past; however, history does repeat – quite explicitly – in Margaret and Alyson's narratives, but the repeated story is one of a benevolent and inheritable settler belonging. The insistent partitioning of temporal periods denies the legacy of violence in settler-invader history, and erases the history and presence of Indigenous peoples by casting Margaret's narrative as the history of the present.

**“The truth was she didn't care, then, who else had lived on that land. They'd abandoned it”: Production, Labour and 'Finders Keepers' in Settler Success<sup>90</sup>**

*The Holding* opens with Margaret's simultaneous decision to tell her story and her expression of concern about how to begin a history. She admits she knows “how [her story] ended” but wonders “where does it begin?” (3) Margaret's conflation of the

---

<sup>90</sup> Simonds, Merilyn. *The Holding*. 39.

location of a story – where – with the temporality of her story – endings and beginnings – gives the first indication of the intertwining of time and place in the novel. Thus as Margaret begins her story of her family's journey from Scotland to Canada and her arrival at Grosse Isle, her account also overlaps place and time. She describes the ship as it “drifts between Newfoundland and the island of Cape Breton, sliding toward the unseen continent, then into the cleft of the St. Lawrence River, the foghorn now and then sounding its plaintive bellow, the ship's bell clanging anxiously like the tap-tap-tapping of blind man's stick searching to give shape to what lies ahead” (17).<sup>91</sup> Margaret expresses anxiety not only about the “unseen,” and hence unknown, continent, but about the unknown of “what lies ahead,” a phrase with connotations of both the shape of geographic space and the future. In her decision to begin her narrative in a place and time of uncertain bearings, Margaret positions her arrival and subsequent settlement of the land as inaugurating the epistemology of both place and time.

The descriptions of the MacBaynes' wilderness settlement and the labour necessary to make the settlement productive consolidate the representation of Margaret and her brothers as original inhabitants and initiators of productivity. In Margaret's written account of her time in the “Bush” she describes how “William Wallace and Robert Bruce purchased a Holding in the Bush, a place of Trees run through with Rivers where no Man had walked before” (74). As Alan Lawson reminds us, “Empty land can be

---

<sup>91</sup> The “tap-tap-tapping” also recalls the sounds of a séance or fortune teller who uses tapping sounds as a tool in foretelling the future. Fear or uncertainty is likewise attached to the future when Alyson visits a fortune teller and flees the room before being told what her future holds, suggesting as this “tap-tap-tapping” does that the future is best left a mystery or “unseen” until it arrives.

settled, but occupied land can only be invaded” (24); settlers require an empty land to settle in order to understand themselves as settlers and not invaders bent on the displacement of Indigenous peoples. Yet the erasure of an Indigenous presence is not so easily affected. Margaret's narrative declares her Holding as free of prior inhabitants, but simultaneously represents the place as claustrophobic, threatening and seductive. In effect, the dangerous land stands in as metonym for the erased Indigenous peoples. The threat to the settler is effected both in the personification of the forest through its “eerie cries of creatures too hideous to show themselves” (138) and the “flickering light, the tantalizing scent, the beckoning leaves” of the “forest's wiles” (79). That is to say, the “forest” threatens harm to the physical body, but also to the psychology of the settler who may become so enchanted with the Indigenous as to be absorbed by it. In a settler-invader configuration, Margaret's fear might be understood as both discursively and violently erasing the Indigenous people – hence her need to figuratively displace and replace them with forest creatures and the forest itself – and becoming them: “the forest's wiles” seduce so as to entice and capture. One way of quelling her fears, Margaret discovers, like Alyson, and like many of the settler narratives of Canadian literature, is through the cultivation and the making productive of the once threatening forest.<sup>92</sup>

Alyson, in many ways Margaret's double, repeats Margaret's identification of the land as her entitled possession. She replaces prior inhabitants of the settlement with the empty space of the forest, she expresses fascination with the seductive qualities of the

---

<sup>92</sup> See: Susanna Moodie; Oliver Goldsmith; Isabella Valancy Crawford.

wild, and she views herself as the first settler on the land. Alyson echoes Margaret's declaration that "No Man had walked there before" in her own admission that in her community "everyone . . . conspired to perpetuate the fiction that no one lived there at all" (62). Alyson realizes this as a "fiction," but does not dismiss the real appeal such a fiction of original belonging holds, nor her desire to claim the fiction as her own. She explains:

A wilderness! . . . Not a wilderness, really – the land had been logged, the forest was second-growth, maybe third, not a virgin tree among the lanky conifers and scrubby hardwoods . . . yet she'd clung to the word, for the wildness in it, she supposed, but also the wilder, as in bewilder, for that was what enthralled her, the way the landscape after all those years still refused to deliver all its mysteries. (42)

Unlike Margaret, Alyson recognizes that to settle the place "*as if* for the first time" (42 – my emphasis) she must first forget – or ignore – the evidence of the land's previous use and inhabitation, but like Margaret, Alyson wants to make the forest known despite its best attempt to remain mysterious. While for Margaret this knowledge suggests an alleviation of her particular fears, for both women, familiarity with the land also promises a feeling of belonging and entitlement. For Alyson realizes she is not the first settler – she only sees the place "as if" for the first time – and yet, despite this recognition, she continues to insist on the captivating mystery of the land and the priority of her settler experience.

The women repeat the transformation of the wilderness from empty, unknown, and potentially hostile, to known and comforting by way of cultivation and production. At first it is the possibility of female independence through labour that appeals to Margaret;

the narrator remarks that after she sees her “first bush-settler” that the “vision of this woman alone, at home in the forest, sufficient unto herself, sustains Margaret” (80). Notably the woman is “at home” in the forest because she is self-sufficient. It is not, therefore, surprising that when Margaret finds herself similarly alone in the forest, “an orphan in the wilderness,” (136) as her mother dies in childbirth and her brothers leave the settlement to work on a road development, she replicates the self-sufficiency of the settler-woman in an effort to make her Holding home. Self-sufficiency, for Margaret, is achieved through male-gendered industry, such that

each morning she . . . choos[es] the tree she will fell that day. At first she selects only young, thin growth, but as her swing improves and the muscles in her arms strengthen, she plants herself before more formidable specimens, never one of the soaring pines, but others whose leaves have fallen, thick waisted, gnarled trees or staunch, straight-backed trunks that tremble as she deepens the cut and waver in their death throes, moaning, sometimes shrieking as they lay their heads at her feet. (137)

Margaret understands her labour in the forest as distinct from the domestic labour she performs for her brothers, because in chopping down trees she is helping the family to fulfill the requirements of the Homesteading Act; the legal requirement to clear the land infuses her actions with an added layer of signification whereby she is not only productive for her own feeling of self-sufficiency, but because in “clearing an acre” she “mak[es] the land hers just as they [her brothers] have done” (138). In this instance the possession of the land is achieved through violence to the environment and to the people of an “empty land,” represented in the personification of the trees, their “death throes,” and their necessary “murder.” This scene of Margaret’s butchering of the trees stands as

the only acknowledgement of the violence of settlement with respect to the natural environment. Using the butchering of the trees as a metaphor for the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples alerts the reader to the failure of *The Holding* to directly confront the violence of colonialism, but perhaps more perniciously, the metaphor reinforces a clichéd connection between Indigenous people and the natural environment that reduces the complexity and vitality of their individual and community lives to a generic and over-determined symbol of trees.

Alyson, too, views the wilderness as an obstacle to be overcome in “their quest for a home” (126). Both Alyson and Walker, her partner, are artists, though of different kinds. Walker produces pottery, and Alyson works at gardening with the intention of creating symmetry in her plants and a “perfect marriage of Walker's art and hers” (124). In forming their art, the couple both use the earth: Walker digs his clay and Alyson “gather[s] from the wild” because it is “a ramshackle outdoor pantry that never had to be restocked” (127). Circular reasoning proves for Alyson that the very manipulation of the land and its reflection of her inhabitation confirm her right to be there. She says “It *was* a settlement, the buildings bound together now with paths she'd made and walked a thousand times . . . she felt well-positioned there, like an alpine herb transplanted . . . it wasn't where she'd started out, . . . but it was where she belonged” (42 – emphasis in original). Much in the same way Margaret believes labour proves belonging, Alyson identifies her manipulation of the landscape as evidence of her entitlement to the settlement.

Both women begin their narratives intent on establishing their land as both familiar and *theirs* by way of their labour and their transformation of the empty space into a personal place. Their labour not only allows them to recognize the wild as home, but takes the wilderness out of an empty and timeless existence and transforms it through the repeated insistence that their arrival marks a beginning. In the logic of finder's keepers, both women believe themselves at home on the land because it was empty before they arrived and because their labour claimed it as their rightful possession.

### **'Losers Weepers': Trauma, Loss and "Smiling Ghosts"**

If the temporal scope of the first half of the novel can be described as one which draws on a discourse of settler progress, the traumas – Margaret's fiancé's and Alyson's baby's deaths – interrupt the productive labour of both women and their sense of where they are in time. In Margaret's story, Ewan's death marks the final paragraph of one of her narrative sections; in effect, the formal partitioning of Ewan's death literally severs the reader's ability to follow Margaret in either the present tense or in narrative. Moreover, when the reader returns to Margaret, sufficient time has passed since Ewan's body has been buried, but Margaret remains "stuck" in time. As "the earth holds its breath," (191) so too does she wait in anticipation of something – or someone – who will unstick her from her grief.

Pathetic fallacy marks Alyson's traumatic break with time and settler progress. The night she gives birth to her baby, Sorrel, a violent ice storm hits her settlement. The strength of the storm is sufficient to destroy trees on the property; one is "cleaved down

the middle” (168). The “cleaving” of the tree aptly symbolizes the cleaving of time as Alyson experiences it before and after the death of her baby and the cleaving of her body in labour; however, during the protracted moment of her baby's birth and death, time literally stops, “She looked at the clock – the hands were stopped at ten to four” (165). Both women eventually return to “normal” chronology, but the traumatic events result in a permanent break in their commercial productivity.

While Alyson previously gardened with the goal of sustaining her and Walker on their property, “she laid out the tea garden, then a sachet garden, and when that wasn't enough [to pay bills] she'd sowed bed after bed of culinary herbs, which she bundled fresh for grocery stores in summer, drying what was left and packaging it in muslin bags tied with labels,” (57) after the traumatic loss of her baby she gardens haphazardly, “let[ting] them [the gardens] die” (178). After her loss, Margaret's labour changes focus, too. Her interest in clearing the land takes a decisive turn; her axe still, she turns her attention to planting and growing a garden, writing in her notebook that, “As the Bush fell before the Settlers, I would keep my Forest whole and make my living from the Herbes [*sic*] I found there and from what I could Cultivate” (198). Unstuck from the timeless moment of the trauma itself, neither woman remains unproductive; rather, their traumatic experiences shift the focus of their labour, and they reorient their relationship with the land such that it ceases to be viewed as something to be manipulated for commercial use and comes to be seen as a possibility for emotional and spiritual sustenance.

Neither Margaret nor Alyson undertakes this reorientation on her own. In fact,

they both receive help from spiritual guides, or the “faintly smiling ghosts” (7) whom Margaret initially dismisses as irrelevant to her story. Crucially, these guides – Zahgahseega, and the textual Margaret, respectively – not only instruct Margaret and Alyson in the “ways of the woods,” but imbue each woman with the responsibility to act as custodians for the land. So when Margaret describes her shift from a “settler” to a gardener, she makes a significant rhetorical distinction between the “Settlers” who “fell” the forest, and herself who will “make a living from the Herbs” she finds and cultivates. Similarly, Alyson's renewed interest in gardening sees her recreating Margaret's garden not with commercial intentions, but as a spiritual endeavour with the aim of restoring the earth and helping herself heal. These choices are represented as more ethical engagements with the land, for when Margaret's brothers and Alyson's husband threaten to sell parts of the land, both women react with extreme hostility and act swiftly to ensure that no such sale will take place. Their commitment to protecting the land, rather than profiting from it or exploiting it, contributes to their representation as stewards.

A process of indigenization coincides with, and facilitates, this shift to a more ethical engagement with the land. Margaret claims to fall in love with Ewan because “he names the wildwood for her” (148) and writes in her notebook that “He knew no Home save Canada. With him, I learned to make it Mine” (150). Here Margaret identifies the possibility that by *learning* about a place she can feel at home there, a subtle, but important shift from her earlier understanding of home as something that must be produced through the manipulation of the land. It is significant, therefore, that after

Ewan's death his didactic role is replaced by Zahgahseega.

Before Margaret is ready to learn about the woods from Zahgahseega, she requires emotional and physical care to work through her grief. This care comes in the form of a maternal nursing: Zahgahseega feeds Margaret, keeps her warm and dry, and cares for Margaret's livestock while Margaret is outside the regular flow of time: “She [Margaret] takes a step toward them [the family graves], but her foot has scarcely creased the snow when she pulls it back. She stands, unable to move in one direction or the other, until the woman takes her hand and leads her into the trees, the way they came” (193).

Zahgahseega “leads [Margaret] into the trees” and in so doing effects a change in both Margaret's inability to move forward and in her identity: she is no longer a settler, but a woman of the trees. To this end, when Zahgahseega's cousin, Peter Constant, arrives in the woods he recognizes her as a friend, and at Zahgahseega's suggestion, gives Margaret “a name,” in their language: “Omiskabugo, the red leaf” (195).<sup>93</sup> That neither Zahgahseega or Peter is identified as belonging to a particular language or cultural group, but are represented as universal “Natives,” reveals Zahgahseega's character as not only literally in the service of Margaret, but of the narrative, too, as a symbol of authentic Indigenous knowledge and spirituality, rather than a character in her own right.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Naming Margaret “red leaf” symbolically ties her to Canadian identity more broadly through the repetition of the iconic image of Canadian nationalism: the red leaf on the Canadian flag. Margaret's moniker thus simultaneously establishes her as quintessentially Canadian, and connects Canadian nationalism to Margaret's originary experience of sanctioned settlement.

<sup>94</sup> That Simond's fails to identify the particular Indigenous Nation to which Zahgahseega and Peter belong cannot be easily dismissed. Alyson and Margaret live in the Madawaska Valley and so Zahgahseega could reasonably belong to the Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation, the Nation that claimed the

The problematic relationship between Margaret and Zahgahseega extends beyond Zahgahseega's universalized and essentialized indigenous character. While the two characters share some scenes of mutual exchange – the two tell one another stories and share words for the plants in the forest – their relationship is overwhelmingly one of Zahgahseega giving and Margaret taking. Indeed, Zahgahseega “disappears” once Margaret acquires all the knowledge of the forest she needs to sell herbs as “SIMPLES FOR ALL AFFLICTIONS” (252). What then, does Zahgahseega give and what does Margaret take? Clearly Margaret takes the knowledge Zahgahseega shares about the medicinal properties of the plants, but how might we see Margaret's absorption of this knowledge as a concomitant reduction in the *usefulness* of Zahgahseega, such that once Margaret knows enough about the woods to survive, profit and feel “at home,” Zahgahseega is no longer necessary to the narrative and can simply “disappear”? In what way does Margaret assume an Indigenous priority on the land?

Margaret's feeling of being “at home” bears further consideration, for there is a clear sense in which it is not only Margaret's knowledge that displaces Zahgahseega, but also her feeling of knowing the woods as instrumental to being “at home” on the land. Margaret and Zahgahseega cannot share the same “home.” Zahgahseega explains that “the places where she made her camps are open fields now. Her people are being settled onto land that has been surveyed and fenced” (250) and this explanation reveals the

---

Madawaska Valley before it became the Golden Lake First Nation in 1873 after its traditional lands were put up for sale and settlement (Magill). Simond's omission of particular information about Zahgahseega once again suggests that Zahgahseega is to be understood as a “universal” Indigenous person and not a character with a unique identity and particular concerns.

violent underpinnings of settlement that are only too readily ignored elsewhere in the novel. With the declaration that “She’ll veer to the north and disappear among the trees” (250), Zahgahseega does just that. The narrative forecloses on the possibility of Zahgahseega and Margaret sharing the land as they have, or the possibility of Margaret and her brothers leaving, or the likelihood that Zahgahseega might go to the newly established reserve. Margaret describes her reaction to the loss of her friend in her journal: “I found use only for Subtraction, one Parting after another, Loss upon Loss upon Loss” (250). Margaret’s description of “loss” is striking for what it reveals about the settler’s affective response to the displacement and effacement of Indigenous people: Zahgahseega’s disappearance is *Margaret’s* loss. It is something that happens *to* Margaret, not something she has played a leading role in effecting. Loss implies an incidental violence, not something the subject intended to take place, but an accident or slip in attention.

This characterization of loss as an “inattention” plays itself out in the death – or loss – of Alyson’s baby, too. In her description of the night of the birth she explains “the tug of her nightgown over her head, that split second of disconnection, would forever fill her with regret” (174), as if it were this moment of inattention that caused the baby to die. Even after the doctor explains the real cause of death, Alyson “knew better than anybody whose fault it was, it was hers” (175). In this assumption of guilt the narrative makes clear that while the action resulting in death or displacement may have been unintentional, a “loss” rather than a “murder,” there must still be guilt and responsibility.

When Alyson discovers evidence of Margaret's inhabitation of the land she begins an investigation in the county archives in an effort to understand who Margaret was and what happened to her. She uncovers a newspaper article, "The Mystery of Lost Nation," written on the fiftieth anniversary of the disappearance of Margaret MacBayne. The article notes the MacBaynes "were among the area's first settlers" in "the region known locally as Lost Nation" and that after Margaret "disappeared, the property was abandoned and fell into ruin" (307). This (fictional) article is significant for a number of reasons. First, the narrative symbolically repeats Zahgahseega's disappearance, but replaces Zahgahseega with Margaret; both of the women of the woods "disappear" at the end of their time and haunt the wilderness they once made "home." The article points out, "many said [the forest] was haunted" (307). However, in the narrative symmetry of Margaret's disappearance, Margaret replaces Zahgahseega, thus confusing for the reader who might be said to belong to the "Lost Nation" and who might be haunting the forest. Is the "Lost Nation" the Indigenous peoples rhetorically and physically displaced from this settled land? Or, is the "Lost Nation" the disappeared settlers who once occupied and cultivated the land which Alyson now owns and initially views as "A wilderness!" (42)?

In the novel the answer to these questions might simply be that *both* the Indigenous people and the earliest settler constitute the citizenry of "Lost Nation." The novel shows no evidence of an understanding of Indigenous peoples as belonging to individual nations, and in this example makes no ready association between Zahgahseega's people and their displacement and the "Lost Nation," but the reader might

infer that the disappearance of Zahgahseega contributes to the “Lost Nation” because of the echo of “First Nations” in the term. The same reader might question how the continued presence and vitality of Indigenous people in the present stand as a striking rebuttal to this representation of Indigenous nations as “Lost.” Indeed, the rhetorical displacement of an undifferentiated and essentialized Indigenous “nation” violates both historical and contemporary Indigenous communities and culture and clarifies the intended reader of the novel as decidedly non-Indigenous. Instead the novel poses Margaret as the citizen of the “Lost Nation,” because it is her history and presence that haunts Alyson in the present, and it is Margaret's history that Alyson eagerly investigates once her search for settler ancestors begins.

The novel makes sense of Zahgahseega's disappearance by way of Margaret's *inheritance* of Zahgahseega's land, Zahgahseega's knowledge of the land, and her way of interacting with it. Zahgahseega has taught Margaret “details of each leaf and root and flower . . . where it grows, its identifying marks, when it should be gathered, the part to be used, how it is prepared, the ailments it relieves” (201) and also how to “appease [spirits] in every orifice that opens in the wilderness” (202). Margaret's description of her brother's interaction with the land marks a crucial moment in understanding the shift that has taken place for Margaret from a settler who “penetrates” the undifferentiated, threatening forest to a Indigenous inhabitant who understands and appreciates the forest in all its detail and complexity. She describes how the names settlers gave to the “wildwood” made it “serviceable,” and how “where the Indian names were kept, it seems to her to be because

it made men like her brothers feel brave to penetrate a place so alien, not because they believed it has a story to tell” (202). By differentiating her relationship with the land from her brothers', Margaret effects more than an epistemological difference; she simultaneously aligns herself with an Indigenous identity that sees the forest not as an “alien” place, but as a place with stories that she understands and with a knowledge that she holds: stories and knowledge that make her at once familiar with, and protective of, the land. Crucially, it is only after bequeathing Margaret not just the land, but the duty to protect and nurture the land, that Zahgahseega disappears. In effect, Zahgahseega may disappear because Margaret has grown from a settler bent on making the land commercially productive to a native inhabitant who will protect and nurture the land.

Alyson repeats Margaret's protective and nurturing approach to the land when Walker, motivated by economic concern, plans to sell part of their land to “Sauvage.”<sup>95</sup> Alyson refuses the plan, saying, “I don't want any damn road, I don't care how little land it takes” (295). Alyson's feeling of maternal guardianship echoes Margaret's feelings, and is similarly tied to a developed sense of maternal care for the land. She describes feeling that “there was no place for her, he'd [Walker] made no place for her, she'd made no place for herself” (218-9). Indeed, Alyson had always imagined the home she worked to create – with an emphasis on the labour underpinning “creation” – as an entitled place “for her child, a birthplace, a birthright,” in a way that “the place could never be for her” (42). In

---

<sup>95</sup> The reorientation of “savage” in the novel casts the land developer “Sauvage” - here described, curiously, in the French - as the savage because he exploits the land, rather than the traditionally racist representation of Indigenous peoples as “savages,” who are, in the novel, essentialized in the romantic “noble savage” tradition as dedicated curators of the land.

order to heal, the narrative suggests, Alyson must learn to see her house as a home, and her place in the forest as a “birthright,” too. As part of the trajectory of her healing, Alyson restores Margaret's homestead, and though she claims “she didn't set out to recreate what she would come to think of as Margaret MacBayne's garden,” she does reproduce Margaret's garden. Alyson is described as “revived by what she conjured, by the strength and resilience of the young woman” (229). While Alyson's involvement with the garden begins without apparent purpose, it soon becomes a project of healing. She learns, like Margaret did, the medicinal properties of the herbs and plants and as she organizes the seedlings “more or less at random . . . giving herself up to the hidden pattern of things – to her instincts and to what she'd come to think of as Margaret's guiding hand” (274). Alyson comes to see the healing properties of the plants as telling “not Margaret's story, then. Her own” (276). The re-narration of the land as telling *her* story effects for Alyson the feeling of permanence and entitlement on the land that she imagined as only possible for her children and perpetuates the notion of inheritable belonging.

Language of maternity and guardianship associated with Margaret and Alyson contrast with that of commercial profit tied to the MacBayne brothers and Walker. While the gendered division of relationships with the land relies on a notion of essentialized maternal women and essentialized rapacious men, the triumph of custodianship, rather than ownership, resonates with contemporary debates about conservation and exploitation of natural resources and argues for greater care and less profit in the human relationship

with the natural world. A remaining difficulty with this position, however, arises not from the politics of ecological maternity, but rather from its derivation from clichéd Indigenous environmental sensibilities – it is Zahgahseega's knowledge and practice that both Margaret and Alyson adopt – that go unquestioned and unacknowledged in the text. Moreover, Zahgahseega's lessons conclude with her disappearance, as if her sole plot function is to teach Margaret an appropriate (and nevertheless profitable) engagement with the land. By simultaneously adopting Zahgahseega's environmental knowledge and ethics, and erasing her and her Nation's continued presence on the land, the novel effectively appropriates Indigenous knowledge and ethical principles for the settler while disguising that any such appropriation occurred.

**“There was no one in the woods but her”: In (a) Place of Possibility<sup>96</sup>**

Alyson's return to a temporal trajectory of progress coincides with her adoption of the land as a place where she feels “at home”; once Alyson breaks with the temporal void of trauma and begins the work of healing, she simultaneously discovers her feelings of connection with place, again indicating the intimate twinning in this novel between space and time. She sits in her garden and watches the plants while thinking “there was no one in the woods but her” (309-10) and before she leaves the woods she looks again at the garden and sees:

A different story altogether. It would shift again when the sun rose, become something else in the spring. Alter with the years in spite of her, in ways of its own determining. Nothing fixed, nothing certain. Once she would have pushed

---

<sup>96</sup> Simonds, Merylyn. *The Holding*. 310.

such a thought from her mind, cast about for something rooted to take its place, but now she let herself see the truth in it. The possibility. (311)

Alyson remarks on the physical garden, but her comments resonate with the complicated and shifting perspective on history in *The Holding*. While the narrative shows the ways in which a repeated history can be put to use for the purposes of the present – to make subjects in the present feel comfortable and familiar with the space and time they occupy – it also enforces a radical separation of past from present. The subjects of the past are not only formally confined to their narrative sections, but the unacknowledged cyclical characteristics and experiences of the two female protagonists are meaningful because the repetitions asserts the legitimacy of the settler in the present – Alyson – because she has a settler-become-Indigenous ancestor in the past.

Alyson's rigid attachment to the fixed and the certain that dominates the narrative until this point alludes to the similar preoccupation in the novel with enforcing the temporal boundaries separating past and present. That she concludes with an embrace of “possibility” does not unsettle this separation; rather it returns the reader to the temporal trajectory of future orientation and progress that characterizes the narrative pre-trauma. “The possibility” indicates that Alyson may again be considering a future for her family. Her discovery of Margaret's garden and subsequent labour in the garden to recreate it and to heal conclude with her reintegration of time (311-12) and with her allusion, in “the possibility,” to another baby who could inherit the space of their settlement. This return to inheritance justifies the settler's labour as a project for the future generation and

reinforces the repetition of the past as important only insofar as it is useful to the subjects in the present. *The Holding* brings to life a period of settler history for the use of the present, while it simultaneously, and problematically, overwrites the violence inherent in the settler experience. The reader must work to challenge the formal separation of past and present and recognize that the failure to write a history conscious of both the violence of the settler past and the continuation of those violences into the present jeopardizes “the possibility” presented in *The Holding* of the past healing the present and inaugurating a generative future.

**Against Authority: Feisty Imagination and Filling Historical Gaps in *Where the River Narrows***

As *The Holding* explores the usefulness of ancestral history in providing Alyson with justification for her inhabitation and use of the land, Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* considers the restrictions ancestral history places on the contemporary subject, Lucie Malenfant, née Beauregard, as she explores the history of Québec and her Québécois family in an attempt to understand her experiences in the present. *Where the River Narrows* differs from *The Holding* in that Laberge questions not how to authenticate the present through the historical, but how (imaginative) history might provide opportunities to form different social, political and personal relationships in the present, and in the future. *Where the River Narrows* sees Lucie ostensibly probing the archives of the British Library for the purposes of academics living in Canada on topics

related to French exploration and settlement in what became British North America and eventually Canada; Lucie's individual research interests, however, lie in the “unsolved cases” (7) that pepper the Humanities Reading Room, and in particular, the gaps in her own familial history. The novel identifies two critical problems with historical study and personal history: one, that the effects of history cannot be denied; and, two, that despite the recognition of historical patterns, history cannot be fully known. Though Lucie's attempts to resolve both problems by *not* repeating the history of her foremothers and by trying to imagine the histories left out of the material archives are unsuccessful, her failure does not undermine the poignancy of her effort. Her narrative engagement with her known and unknown heritage raises the question of how, if history – both personal and national – is on the one hand inscrutable, and on the other hand affective and consequential, the repetition of history might be interrupted and inheritance disavowed.

The novel opens with a family tree and builds on this formal emphasis on the genealogy of the Tremblay family by using Lucie's role as an archivist as an organizational tool – like Michael Mountain Horse in *Kanata* – to stitch together disparate historical moments in a tapestry of familial and provincial history. Lucie's research addresses foundational moments in the history of Québec, including: Cartier's arrival on the continent in 1534 and his subsequent kidnapping of Donnaconna and Donnaconna's sons; the arrival of Marie de l'Incarnation and les filles du roi following the ascension of the Royal Government in 1663; the Seven Years' War and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759; and the impact of smallpox and disease on Indigenous

populations. Within the temporal scope of the contemporary narrative, the pivotal events of the Quiet Revolution, the election of Pierre Elliot Trudeau and the October Crisis are included.

As her attention to Indigenous and women's histories suggest, Lucie is not strictly interested in the “great” moments that characterize traditional Whig historiography. Indeed, Lucie makes repeated claims to be frustrated by the apparent absences in the historical record that she believes speak in silence to the experiences, in particular, of women. She focuses, and through her narrative perspective the novel focuses, on finding evidence of women's history, and, where evidence is lacking, hypothesizing their roles within the family and community. However, the supposed celebration of women's history that such an investigation presupposes is complicated in the novel by a repetition of women's subjugation to and dependence on the authoritative structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Though the women in the novel variously struggle against this authority and in many cases temporarily circumvent it, to do so they must abjure the legacies of their mothers. The narrative is thus driven by simultaneous, and at times contradictory, questions of how to find the histories of women and whether or not maternal heredity can be circumvented, whether women can escape repeating their mothers' histories.

Cynthia Sugars's article, “Past Lives: Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* and the Transgenerational Gene Pool,” is, at the moment, the only scholarly article on this popular and well-reviewed novel. Sugars suggests that Lucie “seeks to establish the authenticity, and indeed, allure, of her family history by appealing to some notion of

genetic inheritance of national icons” (23-4). This analysis, I argue, reduces the questions about inheritance in the narrative to a desire for ancestors, rather than exploring the complicated representation of inheritance in the novel that considers both the desire for, and *refusal* of, ancestors, and mothers in particular. Sugars argues the novel “is in search of the inheritable within history” (24) and that “national icons” are the ostensible objects of this search, more specifically “national icons . . . authenticated through their own reconciling of French and Aboriginal relations” (24). Certainly, the novel's interest in the great moments of military and political history in New France and Québec attest to this interpretation; however, by focusing on the “invented tradition” (25) to satisfy a “genealogical fetish” (28), Sugars misses both the difference between how familial and provincial/national histories are portrayed, and, significantly, the difference between the characters' hereditary desire for fathers or for mothers.

Sugars draws attention to the position of Antonio Tremblay as the founding father and “emblem of an authentically Québécois bloodline” (26), and the inheritance of his traits – a reckless personality, a certain sexual promiscuity, and I would add, a penchant for the colour red – as contributing to the novel's “parallel comparison of her family with the trajectory of the history of Québec” (30). Sugars's focus, however, on Antonio's genetic and symbolic influence obfuscates the novel's thematic and historical interest in the role of mothers in shaping future generations of the nation, and overlooks the novel's preoccupation with posing alternatives to the strictures of patriarchal institutions that govern and guide the generations of women who form the majority of ancestors in this

novel.

**“I know he's not dead, as you have wished all these years . . . My father will come and save me, in spite of your treachery. He will get me out of here”: Inheriting the Indigenous Father<sup>97</sup>**

The members of the Tremblay family both serve as models for subsequent generations to compare themselves and generate the character traits which affect, and are responded to by, future generations. Antonio Tremblay returns home to Marie-Ange and his daughters in 1918, sick with the Spanish influenza. The reader never learns for certain whether Antonio succumbs to his illness, but does know that Marie-Joseph “*rolled her father's sick body out of the house and through the mud to his dogsled. She had lifted his axe to sever the lead tied to a tree and brought it down with all her might to excise his memory*” (xiv – emphasis in original). This event which prefigures the narrative proper, establishes the fundamental plot preoccupation of the first generation of Tremblays – what happened to Antonio? Did he die? Will he return? – and introduces the thematic concern in the novel with the persistence of memory. Forgetting is, in this example, tied both to the pain of excision and to the doubt as to whether memory can be completely removed. On her deathbed Marie-Ange instructs Marie-Joseph to “remember me, forget him” (xiv) and reinforces for the reader the understanding of memory as an *active* process in the novel, whereby characters must make decisions about who, and how, to forget and remember, and then work to either excise the memory or maintain it.

---

<sup>97</sup> Laberge, Aimee. *Where the River Narrows*. 45.

Antonio's characterization as possessing a “wild-streak” because of his hybrid racial identity – he is “half-heathen, half-Christian,” the child of a “Montagnaise mother” and a *courers de bois* (22) – forms only one half of the foundational ancestry that organizes the novel. Antonio has two wives, a country wife, Marie Kapesch, and the devotee Marie-Ange. Marie-Ange fervently desires to enter the cloister, become a nun and serve God; however, Marie-Ange's devotion to God does not serve the needs of the Church; indeed her pastor preaches that “the family is God's divine institution. Where there is no family, there is nothing” (20). Marie-Ange is summarily “married against her will” (22) to Antonio and produces two children despite taking a “foul-smelling potion . . . to purify her body after each intercourse with her husband” (26). Marie-Ange functions in the novel as a progenitor of generations of women devotees, and generations of women who despite their dedication to the Catholic Church conceive various strategies to prevent pregnancy, fearing child-birth and maternity.

Marie Kapesch enters the narrative only once, but one of her children, Catherine Dubois, returns in later years as material evidence in Lucie's investigation of her familial past. Catherine figures only as a potential site of inquiry, and does not receive sufficient narrative attention to determine whether she has inherited her father's “wild-streak,” though the brief description of her – including her clothing – suggests that she may have.

The dismissal of Catherine as only of interest as she relates to Antonio introduces the problematic portrayal of Métis and Indigenous peoples in the text more generally. Lilianne notes “[e]veryone has some sort of mixed blood in Québec. There were no

women on the boats coming from France in the early days. You think the men kept their tackle tucked in their trousers for one hundred years? Nobody talked about it, that's all” (104-5). Lilianne's assessment of “everyone” in Québec notably overwrites those individuals who lack either Québécois genealogical lineage or knowledge of their ancestry. Further, her assessment that “everyone has some mixed blood,” quietly effaces Indigenous nations from the population of Québec, while reinstating the priority of blood in determining belonging and identity. The identification of blood inheritance as a primary contributor to belonging recalls the attention in Don Gillmor's *Kanata* to a “good” and “bad” Métis identity, as Michael Mountain Horse seamlessly assimilates into dominant white Canadian culture and history, while Stanford, unable or unwilling to similarly assimilate, dies a vicious murderer. Here the Métis identity that marks Antonio and his progeny as “wild,” follows the same pattern as Michael in that his Métis identity is not particularly threatening and can comfortably be subsumed into a national-provincial history that understands “all” Québécois people to be Métis, effectively nullifying any significant differences from a white-settler identity and history a Métis heritage might imply.

In contrast to Catherine, Antonio and Marie-Ange's children, Marie-Reine and Marie-Joseph, are presented as complex characters who align in personality and predilection with their mother and father, respectively. Marie-Reine's desire to remember Antonio opposes Marie-Joseph's decision to forget him – to excise him – and this difference in approach to Antonio underpins the caricatured contrast of the two characters

and their respective tendencies toward religious and domestic rebellion and conformity. Such is their difference that “no two sisters could be so unlike each other. While Marie-Joseph is thin as a rail, her voice dry and her manner brisk, Marie-Reine is in full bloom, like a yeasty dough left to rise on the open oven door” (73). The description contrasting Marie-Joseph and Marie-Reine draws clear parallels to Marie-Ange and Antonio. Marie-Joseph's lack of interest in forming personal or sexual connections – her dry and brisk frigidity – and her devotion to God and Church mirror her mother's similar fascination. Marie-Reine, on the other hand, has a feisty personality, or a “wild streak,” as she calls it, that “comes straight down the line from Antonio Tremblay” (153).

The selective inheritance of traits continues in subsequent generations with characters like Lilianne and Lucie evincing similar passion to Marie-Reine and Antonio, and characters like Henri and Hugette as mirroring Marie-Joseph and Marie-Ange. The perpetuation of these personality traits and their consistent division – i.e. no one character is both “wild” and a devotee – reinforces a binary between rebellion and conformity in subsequent generations and allows a consideration of how female characters respond to authority and control. That is to say, by establishing a pattern of inheritance that ascribes fixed characteristics to each subsequent generation, the particularities of each character become less important – they are each to some extent replicas of one another – than observing how the alternately “wild” and religious characters respond to the changing structures of authority that dominate them.

**“Sweet comfort of this crimson and gold world”: Religious Authority<sup>98</sup>**

Just as the novel pays more attention to the “Métis” history of Québec through the Tremblay family, the inclusion of women focuses entirely on the role and influence of white women in the colony in the early history of Québec. The contributions of Héléne de Champlain, the filles du roi and Marie de l'Incarnation speak to the interest in the novel in reexamining the histories of women, but they also identify a curious blind spot in the telling of women's history by excluding the experiences of Indigenous or Métis women. This is not to say that an author must attend to all groups in a history, only that, far from filling a gap, the emphasis on white women in the colony raises concerns about the omission of the relationship between French settler men and Indigenous women, especially since intermarriage between these groups was both common and a mandate of the Royal Government.<sup>99</sup>

In terms of historical chronology, the first fervently religious white woman in the text is Marie de l'Incarnation (though in diegesis it is Marie-Ange). Marie de l'Incarnation received a calling from God instructing her to go to the New World to educate and civilize the Indigenous population, a calling she undertook with the financial and political support of Queen Anne of Austria (182). Her mission required her to leave her son, Claude, “in the care of her brother's family” (185), a sacrifice she willingly makes in order to fulfill “her spiritual calling” (182). One aspect of her calling, the education of Indigenous

---

<sup>98</sup> Laberge, Aimée. *Where the River Narrows*. 125.

<sup>99</sup> Greer, Alan. *The People of New France*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. 82.

children, is particularly troubling in this work of historical fiction. Marie establishes convent schools in New France, a system of education only implicitly connected in the novel to residential schools policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The work Marie does at the school is described here:

The girl has then been given bread made by Marie de Saint-Joseph, and has received her first catechism lesson, conducted by Marie de l'Incarnation herself. The girl now has a Christian name, Agnes, to use with her Huron name, Negaskoumat, and is assigned a bed in the dormitory. She has been pliant and docile, smiling and repeating the words after the good mother. But in the morning, the floor of the dormitory is as cold . . . Anges Negaskoumat's bed is empty, her black dress torn to pieces. She has escaped, naked. (184)

For the contemporary reader this scene cannot help but recall the dominant narrative of residential school experience: children receiving both food and religious education under the supervision of white religious instructors, being assigned “new” Christian names, being clothed in Western clothing, and the children attempting to resist such assimilative measures often at the expense of their health or safety. The residential schools history evoked in this scene remains an unacknowledged intertext in the contemporary narrative of Lucie's research and the novel does not include residential schools in its teleological narrative of Québec's founding and maturation. This scene gestures to that history, and depends heavily on the reader to connect these moments of force and resistance to the more recent history. Marie de l'Incarnation establishes the framework for future generations of pious women in the Tremblay family, but she is the simultaneous – though here unacknowledged – mother of assimilation policies.

The reader, free to assess the moral authority of Marie's mission and to consider

her position as vaunted mother of the colony against the known legacy of both missionary and residential school ventures, might consider religion as a tool for economic and political manipulation, as evidenced by Jean-Baptiste de La Brosse's statement: “Why would a Protestant encourage the spread of the Catholic faith? Well, money already talked louder than God. 'Tourner le pays,' or 'to turn the country around' in fur trade jargon: that is what happened when converted natives could be counted on as allies” (232).

Manipulation by the Church for political and economic ends preoccupies successive generations of Tremblay women as female characters grapple with simultaneous feelings of spiritual devotion and concern about the power of the Catholic Church over their bodies, maternity, and imagination.

Marie-Reine provides an instructive example of the repeated pattern whereby female characters find themselves bound by the patriarchal institution of the Church, resisting its structure and strictures, only to be returned to its moral and spiritual authority when confronted by the limitations of imagination. Marie Reine's uncle, Rodolphe Tremblay, sends her to Convent school after her father dies, in the hope that the nuns will “dull the edge” of the “wild streak [that] runs deep in his niece” (43). Meanwhile at the school Marie Reine writes to her sister and asks to come home because, as she writes, “I don't like it here at all. It makes me sick because I can't breathe and I can't move. I spend the whole day sitting and silent, and there are so many rules I'm sure I'm breaking one right now” (36). Marie-Reine resists the authority of the Church, represented by the Convent school and the nuns: she imagines her liberation from the school by pretending

to be “a frozen martyr whose bones will never yellow, whose body will be kept intact in a casket of ice” (40). She plays this imaginative game knowing full-well “not for her, martyrdom” (40), but her desire for any kind of escape from the stifling environment and rules of the Convent school invites her to use her imagination to resist. Similarly, she imagines being rescued, “Not [by] God, with his cohort of crowned angels,” but by “her father, in his flying dogsled” (41). Imagination allows Marie-Reine a space to escape the confines of the Convent school and its rules and a way to maintain the “wild streak” supposedly responsible for her sequestered existence at the school.

She leaves the school with “the impish streak that seven years spent in the company of nuns has not tamed” (60), but finds that what the Church could not quell, marriage does. Her feisty personality cannot withstand the sacred institution of marriage, and so “marriage not only tamed but completely transformed [her]” (71). She “learn[s] to cook” and “bears her husband a new child every two or three years” (70). That several years pass between the birth of each child causes Marie-Joseph some concern, and the reader learns Marie-Reine monitors her ovulation as a form of birth control. Her efforts at controlling her reproduction are no small act of defiance to Church doctrine; however, the secrecy of this practice contrasts with the open and flagrant rejection of Church doctrine that both precedes and follows her marriage.<sup>100</sup> While married to Leandre, Marie-Reine's

---

<sup>100</sup> Indeed the repetition of Marie-Ange's attempts at birth control through the consumption of a “foul potion,” meant to trigger early menstruation and Marie-Reine's ovulation monitoring suggest that the Tremblay women could simultaneously express religious devotion and negotiate for control over their reproductive bodies. The conflict between these positions – religious devotee and self-determining woman – escalates with successive generations, but with each woman the reader encounters the struggle

only open act of defiance is to regularly run-up the grocery bill (76), and appears content in her marriage. It is only after Leandre's death that she regains some of her “impish” behaviour: she stops attending mass and confession, and begins reading – furtively, at first – books banned by the Church in small acts of rebellion that do not go unnoticed by the parish priest.

Reading figures as a significant choice for rebellion against authoritative structures as it is an activity repeated by subsequent generations of Tremblay women, all of whom use any time not devoted to Church or family obligations to read. Lilianne describes reading with “a sigh of relief coming straight from the past” (299), an allusion to the way Marie-Reine “devours the words” (125) of forbidden books. In conversation with her parish priest, Marie-Reine argues that “It must be a fragile God to be so afraid of thin fonts on flimsy sheets of paper, pigments and pulp, and it must be a servile Church to listen to this fragile God's instructions to expurgate or burn the books” (125). She recognizes that she could keep reading, secretly, and continue to attend mass and receive the “sweet comfort of this crimson and gold world” (125), but Marie-Reine decides to stop attending Church because she cannot reconcile the limitations on her imaginative world that the Church demands with the tangible comfort the space and rituals of the Church convey.

After Marie-Reine suffers a stroke she reclaims her faith and dies “with an insatiable desire for a miracle” (221): the miracle of returning to the domestic space of

---

to balance religious doctrine against personal freedom.

her boarding-house home. It is not for the reader to judge the merits of Catholic doctrine, or to scrutinize the legitimacy of Marie-Reine's faith; rather, Marie-Reine's changing positions of resistance and conformity to Church doctrine through the use of her imagination asks the reader to consider the scope of the imagination within powerful institutions. Marie-Reine never imagines a world without God (though her granddaughter Lucie will), but she attempts, albeit unsuccessfully in the final analysis, to imagine a world outside of Church authority.

**“[She] won't end up like her mother”: The Promise of a Progressive Nation<sup>101</sup>**

The tentative steps Marie-Reine takes to imagine a world outside the Church are extended by her progeny, as future generations of Tremblay women stretch the boundaries of Church authority through the use of birth control and eventually to Lucie's total renunciation of God. This trajectory aligns with the historic movement from the absolute authority of the Church in the social and political life of Québec to the Quiet Revolution. Marie-Reine's children question the legitimacy of the Church, but they do not renounce it altogether; moreover, the limits to the authority of the Church that they do perceive are discursively filled by the authority of the nation-state, as Lilianne, in particular, comes to see the nation-state as the critical site for emancipation from the servitude and drudgery of female labour under the Catholic Church. She explains that she “won't end up like her mother, breaking her back eighteen hours a day and seven days a week for years on end to feed her family. No way. Lili's children will go to university, and Lili's daughters will

---

<sup>101</sup> Laberge, Aimée. *Where the River Narrows*. 213.

have jobs and financial independence. Nobody will have to sacrifice their life for the sake of their children ever again. Not in Pierre Elliott Trudeau's Canada” (213). For Lilianne, the opportunity to “do more than change diapers and load the washing machine and be pecked on the cheek at five o'clock” (215) has both religious and national implications. She ties her desire to “do more” to the idea that “she can actually take part in the making of this country, just like [Paul]” (215). The apparent markers of political progress require Lilianne to refuse not simply the Church and its conspiracy with the government, but the generations of mothers that precede her: she won't end up like her mother. Lilianne fails to recognize the ways in which Marie-Reine resisted the authority of the Church to govern her life, and believes both that her mother was a victim of patriarchal authority and that in disavowing her maternal inheritance and embracing the promise of the Canadian nation-state (and its promised Charter of Rights and Freedoms) she will achieve independence and opportunity.

But like Marie-Reine before her, the imagined freedoms are not realized. Lilianne sets up a basement sandwich business, hoping to contribute to the family economy, but her business fails, she abandons any political participation and returns to worrying obsessively about whether or not she is a “good mother” (291). Lucie assures Lilianne she has been a good mother in the final pages of the novel by telling Lilianne of her “intense longing” for Lilianne's love and approval (299). Lucie's late admission that she needs her mother attempts to counter the motif of mothers as symbols of servitude. The trajectory of women's progress that encouraged the disinheritance of conformist mothers in a supposed

pursuit of independence and opportunity (and a corollary celebration of feisty, oppositional fathers) meets with a final reconciliation of mother and daughter and the reassertion of home and maternity as principle values for Lucie.

**“Mislaid, Missing, and Unsolved Cases Abound”: Lucie and Material History<sup>102</sup>**

The novel represents Lucie as an explorer of history, searching for the true history of her family and Québec; she is also a repository of familial and historical knowledge. She seeks factual, material evidence for answers to questions about her family's past with the same fervent devotion as Marie-Ange desired God, or Marie-Reine and Lilianne longed for independence. But Lucie occupies a similar position to many writers of historical fiction in that she simultaneously questions the authority of the archive to offer a reliable or complete version of the past, and yet longs for historical narrative, for the possibility of either finding or inventing a history that will satisfy her desire to know her ancestral and national pasts. In a metatextual sense, Lucie struggles with the same question faced by Laberge: how to write a history while calling the very possibility of history into question?

Lucie recognizes two fundamental problems with using archival research: one, the archive is never complete. She points out that “Naturally, this being the Humanities Reading Room, mislaid, missing and unsolved cases abound. Keyword: Exploration, Canada” (7). The ironic attachment of “exploration” to the “mislaid, missing and unsolved” draws attention to the seeming paradox of Lucie's work. She notes that “The

---

<sup>102</sup> Laberge, Aimée. *Where the River Narrows*. 7.

British Library is where [she] comes to summon the unremembered and the unwritten,” (11) but also recognizes “the past is not contained within the library's subterranean stacks, frozen in an immovable alphabetical order. History is rewritten every day, and the more I read, the more voices I hear whispering between the lines” (10). Lucie imagines “exploring” the library through the use of key word searches may yield discoveries, but she also questions at least, whether history is not contained – or containable – in the textual artifacts of the archives.

Given the perceived inadequacies of the archives, Lucie undertakes family interviews as the second methodological approach in the pursuit of history presented in the novel. But in asking questions about her great-grandfather, Antonio, she discovers that “it's hard to honour the memory of someone so elusive” (103) and so personal recollections reveal as many gaps as the “missing and mislaid” of the archives. Indeed, it is only when Lucie asks her mother, Lilianne, about Antonio that she learns Antonio's “own mother was a full-blooded Montagnaise from Lake Nicabua, up the Chamouchouane River” (104). Both Lucie and her father, Paul, are surprised. Paul replies, “What? . . . You have native blood in your family, Lili, and you never told me?” To which Lilianne replies, “You never asked” (104). Lilianne's defense – that she never revealed her lineage because she had never been asked – parallels the structure of the archives in that the archive only yields the information researchers ask of it. By casting both the archives and personal memory as vaults of information accessible only through active search, the novel suggests the past might only be known by those willing to look

for it. Further, the similarities between the representation of archival research and personal recollection collapse the perceived distinctions between history and memory that imagine history to be public and objective and memory to be personal and subjective, and suggest instead that both history and memory are subject to the vagaries of forgetfulness, omission and purposeful silence.

However, even while Lucie questions whether history can be properly contained by textual, material or mnemonic traces, the narrative's emphasis on the materiality of history insists on further consideration. For instance, Marie-Reine's life is so bound up with the material objects that surround her that when she dies, her house and the objects in it die, too. "Once her house is empty, the builders move in and the bugs move out. More than thirty years of bugs, tucked behind the walls and under the floors . . . carrying out with them the smells, the sounds, the busy heartbeat of Madame Beauregard's old rooming house" (223). The bugs have eaten away at the house and the builders find "small white worms infesting the house's weakened wooden structure" (233). The personification of the house as something that can be "infested" and something that holds a "heartbeat" connects the physical, material structure of the house to the body and life of Marie-Reine. The decline in her fortunes is mirrored in the decline in the house, and the end of her life is paralleled in the decay of the building. The paralleled death of body and building means "everything goes, even the ghosts" (224), for without material objects to anchor memory, the narrative suggests, it cannot exist.

This attachment to the material in history plays out elsewhere in the text, most

obviously in the documents of the archive and the British Library itself, but also in the source letters exchanged between Marie-Reine and Marie-Joseph and the fur coat supposedly bequeathed to Marie-Reine by Antonio. In her search for her family history Lucie must confront not only her reliance on the material traces of history, but the reliance on this kind of history shared by all the people in her life. Thus her decision to imagine the parts of her history that she cannot find material evidence for stands as a brave attempt at challenging a structure of historiography that not only provides her with professional employment, but underpins the understanding of history supported by the other characters in the novel.

Just as Marie-Reine and Lilianne use their imaginations to flex the strictures of patriarchal authority through imaginative play and reading, Lucie uses her imagination to pose an alternative to historiographic “evidence” in solving the mysteries of the historical record, and as a response to the critique of history – whether familial or national, archival or remembered – as incomplete or subjective. Lucie considers that she might imagine the absent voices of the archival and personal historic-mnemonic record. In an example that resonates with much historiographic metafiction, Lucie describes herself

as [she] whisper[s] the jumble of letters under [her] breath in the low light of the Rare Books department, . . . [she] hear[s] other voices joining in, chanting these words on long walks through snowbanks, ice plains, and forests, in joy and in despair. This book is like a door [she] slip[s] through, a little door, only eight by five inches of leather and paper, but much more than just leather and paper. When [she] step[s] over its threshold, [her] heart opens to other hearts, the ones turned to ice in the middle of a forest or eaten warm at a feast, still haunting this catechism. (233)

What Lucie's imagined history forgets, or perhaps what the voices she hears distorts, is the effective replacement of one incomplete history with another. That is to say, that writers of historical fiction, and in this instance, fictional historians of historical fiction, produce histories no less incomplete than the historical texts they critique. Lucie fails to recognize the apparent irony that she writes her Québécois history from the ideological center of the British Empire: London and the British Library, an irony that reminds the reader of the omnipresent limitations and biases of archival sources preserved for, written by, and focused on, historical victors. Lucie should not quit her job or stop listening to the voices she imagines speaking in the gaps of the historical record; rather, her work is a necessary fiction and should be acknowledged as equally riddled with gaps and biases as the historical record it seeks to challenge. Readers, too, might read in this passage a model of reading practice that requires the imaginative interpretation of what is narrated and the imaginative questioning of what is not. What we must question then, are not the gaps in her history, but the gaps in her fiction. The omissions in her diligent work to discover and uncover the genealogy of her family, and allegory for Québécois history, privilege white settlers and white fathers, at the expense of Indigenous peoples and Métis and French mothers.

The narrative does use gaps, but not to acknowledge missing or biased parts of the imagined, history; rather, white ancestors die in the gaps between chapters. The narrative leaves to each reader the task of imagining what and who belongs in the “missing” or “misaid” gaps; however, these narrative gaps make their content clear – a character is

alive at the end of one chapter and dead at the beginning of the next – and differ from the gap of Métis history in the novel in that they are unnarrated traumatic events that are nevertheless *known* to the reader by virtue of plot chronology and consistency. Unlike these plot hiccups, the gaps that riddle the narrative with respect to Métis histories, depend on the reader for identification and imagination. Thus a responsibility to imagine gaps falls to the reader because this book is “much more than just leather and paper”; we are readers who can question the possibilities posed for, and the limitations placed on, women in the novel, and readers who can take issue with the assertion of a secular “catechism” that privileges the written and recorded history in its necessary fiction of Canadian settler-invaders.

**“What is the difference, really, between touch and collision?”: Dissolving Borders Between Settler Past and Present in *A Map of Glass*<sup>103</sup>**

Jane Urquhart's 2005 novel, *A Map of Glass*, narrates the experiences of Sylvia Bradley as she attempts to reconcile her fascination and fixation with the permanence of the geographic and settler histories of Essex county and notions of personal and historical change. Sylvia's devotion to the permanence of the past is understood as pathological by her husband and family, but finds understanding and empathy in the character of Andrew Woodman, a man similarly invested in the preservation of personal and familial memory. The two share a conviction that material objects and physical geography are repositories

---

<sup>103</sup> Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. 70.

for the historical that need only be viewed “in a particular light,” (117) for their inherent histories to be recognized. After Jerome McNaughton finds Andrew's petrified body frozen in an ice floe, Sylvia makes the difficult journey to meet Jerome, wanting, she explains to him, “to be able to talk to you” (50), to talk specifically about her memories of Andrew. As their conversations unfold, Sylvia shares a manuscript, written by Andrew, that chronicles Andrew's familial history of settlers and traders on Timber Island, an island situated where Lake Ontario meets the St. Lawrence River. Even though the manuscript is formally separated from Sylvia and Jerome's plot in both point of view and temporal frame, it shares thematic concerns with history, memory and individual responsibility to remember the past.

In the interaction between Sylvia and Jerome the novel grapples with an anxiety about reproducing history exactly as it is/was – represented by Sylvia – and a desire to forget painful histories – represented by Jerome. Their relationship results in a contentious sharing of perspectives on historical engagement, whereby Sylvia accepts the need for imagination and change in dealings with the past, and Jerome acknowledges the past's ubiquity and affective power. Read as models for historical engagement, their relationship characterizes the change in binary positions of either obsessive memorialization or parasitic forgetting that a responsible historical engagement requires: the recognition both of the vitality of the past and its unavoidable, indeed its laudable, alteration over time and in perspective.

In the novel much is made of “whether the surrounding water [around Timber

Island] belonged to the lake or the river” (153), as French and English merchants debate the ownership of the waterway. The question of the source and kind of water around Timber Island functions as an apt metaphor for the permeability of borders between past and present at work in the narrative. As characters seek to separate past from present, they are represented as either invested too much in the preservation of the past or completely refusing its influence. In place of these binary positions, the novel offers an understanding of past and present as mixed and blended in the same fashion as the water around the island: no boundary can divide the water, just as no boundary is suitable to separate past from present. Instead, the water, like chronology, will be understood differently by individuals who seek to use it for their own purposes.

As Sylvia grapples with questions of history and memory's permanence in her conversations with Jerome, he struggles to maintain his conviction that the past can be separated from the present and subsequently forgotten. The two characters are foils for one another: Sylvia too much devoted to the permanence of the past; Jerome too much invested in its banishment. Together, the two challenge their beliefs about history as they come to an understanding that history must be shared or it disappears into the background, unrecognized and unrecognizable, all the while continuing to surround the places and people of the present. Through their conversations the two realize that in sharing the burden of personal histories, the histories themselves change to suit the purposes and contingencies of the listener/reader. They further realize that the change that occurs when sharing narratives of the past is not only inevitable, it is necessary. The

changes made in the telling of history make the past recognizable and meaningful to each successive audience for its telling. We might question the proposed value of connection and remembrance, but to this question the novel emphatically responds with the idea that vulnerability and openness to the other and her/his history are what make individual lives meaningful and shared futures possible, if not predictable. Through discovering and sharing – through touch, collision, and fracture – individual and familial histories, we create liveable worlds.

**“These are safe . . . because everything that was going to happen to them, in them, has already happened. There will be no more changes”:** **Sylvia as Local and Material History**<sup>104</sup>

What does it mean to be “too much” devoted to the past? An unnamed disorder afflicts Sylvia that “no one had been able to identify” (81); therefore, a pathological definition or explanation of what is “wrong” with Sylvia is never offered in the novel, nor is such an explanation desirable.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, Sylvia's poignant and persistent struggles with forming connections and relating to other people are precisely what allow her to function simultaneously as a symbol for an over-investment in the materiality of history and a round character interested in the continuance of the historical.

Sylvia borrows Andrew's explanation of her devotion to the past by relating how

---

<sup>104</sup> Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. 88.

<sup>105</sup> When Jerome describes his father's accident to Sylvia his description makes Sylvia think, “alcoholism . . . It occurred to her that like so many things that can go wrong, the word started with the letter *a*” (335). Her statement when considered together with her “odd” behaviour might suggest she suffers from asperger's syndrome or autism.

she has been “emplaced,” a neologism that counters the “displacement” of immigration or refugee status with an overwhelming, and perhaps destructive, permanence. Sylvia explains that

those who are emplaced are made that way by generations of their people remaining in the same location . . . eating food grown from the same plot of earth, burying their dead nearby, passing useful objects down from father to son, mother to daughter. [Andrew] said that I was like that to such a degree I was almost like an anthropological discovery. Or perhaps an archaeological discovery; something more or less preserved, more or less intact. I was so emplaced, you see, that it was an adventure – almost an act of heroism – for me to leave the County. (325-6)

Sylvia's comparison between herself and an “archaeological discovery,” reminds the reader of her function as something of a symbolic object. Her devotion to and obsession with the historical render *her* the kind of preserved object she labels while at work as a “volunteer at the village museum” (129). She claims she is “an extinct species mysteriously catapulted into the beginning of the twentieth-first [*sic*] century” (127) who is “at home in museums” (298). This characterization does not reduce Sylvia to a symbolic object of history in a pejorative sense, for to be “at home” suggests comfort and familiarity; however, her description of emplaced people as “made that way,” gestures to the apparent passivity of this subject/object position. Far from occurring naturally, or resulting from a deliberate choice, Sylvia's unusual positioning as both a character interested in material history and a symbol of that history is the product of generations of over-attachment to a particular place and to permanence. There is also a tacit critique of settler society through her representation of “emplaced” people, as her acknowledgment of the danger of being too invested in maintaining an artificial relationship between

genealogy and belonging echoes, and cautions against, the settler fixation with establishing an authentic and commercial connection to the occupied land as evidenced in *The Holding*.

Sylvia's obsession with permanence finds particular focus in material history, as she sees in objects the kind of rigid fixity she values in all aspects of her life. In particular, she values the historical when it can be associated with unchanging narratives. As a young girl, Sylvia's father tells her about a set of "Staffordshire china that had been in the house for as long as she could remember" (87). Once she knows the narrative of how the china pieces came to the family, they become her "first things," a term she explains "had nothing to do with ownership, rather it concerned the connection she believed existed between her and the shape such a thing would hold on to, unchangingly, forever" (87). Sylvia's attachment to the safety of unchanging material objects – what we might think about as the textual and material sources for the "factual" in historical methodology – warns of the danger of both attributing to an object an unchangeable narrative and of investing too much in the object itself as a repository for the historical.

Not all objects are created equal for Sylvia, as she understands only the objects that surround her in her family home, and the houses in Essex County that border her home, as "safe," believing that "everything around me was connected to history: a knowable and therefore safe history" (108). The emphasis on the local relates to Sylvia's "affliction," because her symptomatic obsession with intimately knowing the features and narrative of every object and place prevent her, according to her parents and then her

husband, from leaving the town. Sylvia's pathological attachment to the local also implicitly critiques local (academic?) history that so narrowly focuses in time, place and subject as to overlook or dismiss the connections between the local and the national or international. While Sylvia certainly sees value in local history, and so the reader is invited to appreciate the importance of this history, her characterization as someone paralyzed in place, and, as we shall see, simultaneously paralyzed in time, alerts the reader to the danger of focusing only on the historically specific at the expense of a longer and larger narrative of history.

Sylvia believes herself to be of a different time. On a visit to a museum she views dioramas “depicting life in certain ages,” that show “her own age, or at least the age that had encased her life, seemed never to have been inhabited, and was illustrated here by a series of roped-off rooms containing too much furniture. *A Victorian Parlour*, a sign in front of such a room read. *Do not enter. Do not touch*” (305 – emphasis in original). One consequence for Sylvia of being “emplaced” in local and material history, or perhaps *as* this history, is her psychic removal from the contemporary world to the extent that she abhors physical touch, seeing little difference “between touch and collision” (70). The physical world of the age her body occupies – the early twenty-first century – holds risk because “the world is just too crowded, too full of people rearranging things, touching each other, making changes” (70). Touch, connection and collision are risky for Sylvia because they are accompanied by change. Given her predilection for the permanent, or that which can be roped off in a room, touch or connection risk *inflicting* change on that

which should, to her mind, properly remain unchanging. Sylvia sees herself as someone occupying another age, but thrust into situations in the present. The only way for her to endure such a disorienting temporal shift is to ensure that no one comes in contact with her, thus protecting the integrity of her (historic) self.

When Sylvia meets Andrew Woodman she recognizes him as “so much a part of the same vanishing species with our pioneer ancestors,” and as a man who “shared [a] focus that drifted to the past” (128). She can touch Andrew and be touched by him – physically, emotionally and spiritually – precisely because she believes he shares her psychological-temporal “pioneer,” “Victorian,” age. That Andrew shares this displaced chronological era with Sylvia means he can safely connect with her: neither risks changing the other in the way the contemporary world risks “fracturing” (87) these people displaced from the past.

In contrast to the “awkward disruption of Malcolm's sad, brief attempts to establish a physical relationship with her,” with Andrew there is “nothing foreign or invasive about [his] lovemaking, just the comfort, the consolation of full embrace” (101). Malcolm believes Sylvia cannot be touched by anyone, and refuses to accept her story of meeting Andrew and falling in love with him. Part of Malcolm's proof that Andrew can only be Sylvia's invention is his certainty that Sylvia “has no real physical . . . life” (357). What Malcolm discounts, or perhaps cannot imagine in the first place, is that in Andrew, Sylvia finds not simply a physical companion, but a temporal one. The two share, according to Sylvia, emplacement in location and displacement in time. That Andrew will

not change any more than the china figurines of her childhood – and will not change her either – makes him safe and makes his touch a “comfort” and a “consolation.” In describing her physical involvement with Andrew as “comfort” and “consolation,” Sylvia reminds the reader of the loneliness and isolation she feels as a result of feeling dislocated from the temporality of the world around her. Her physical attachment to Andrew ends first when he ends their relationship, and then again when he dies, but like all the objects and places Sylvia encounters in her life, she carries a permanent memory of him with her. When Jerome hesitates to talk about Andrew's death, Sylvia reassures him saying, “It's all right . . . it's with me all the time, his death, the knowledge of it is always with me. It is impossible for anyone, anything to remind me of it” (107). Sylvia is here, as she is at every moment, a repository of the objects, places and people of the past – her own kind of museum – holding that which she believes to be permanent and unchangeable.

Beyond refusing the possibility of a physical relationship between Sylvia and Andrew, Malcolm rejects her narrative of a relationship with Andrew entirely. He explains to Jerome that “[Andrew] wasn't her lover. He would never have known her, never have met her. She read about him, about the discovery of his body, last year at the same time she read about you” (354). Her “condition,” he explains, “sometimes manifests itself this way in a kind of hallucinogenic imagination . . . she has trouble, you see, separating reality from what happens in books” (354). In addition to characterizing Malcolm as paternalistic, his insistence that all of Sylvia's narrative has been fabricated provides a fascinating commentary on history writing and the factuality of history. With

one dismissive statement he invalidates her experiences, her beliefs about the past, as invented, fictional, and therefore categorically untrue.

Sylvia's response when Jerome tells her that “[Malcolm] thinks you're inventing everything” is to say, “Yes, it's just like that. Nothing harmful really, just the way it is” (358). Sylvia at one and the same time embodies an absolute attachment to the permanence and factuality of history and the “hallucinogenic” invention of history in a way that suggests that every instance of a supposedly factual history contains within it “hallucinogenic” invention, or in other words, that this potentially and necessarily fictional element of the past is “just the way it is.” There can be no certainty for Jerome that the narrative Sylvia has told him is true, just as there can be no certainty for the reader that any history they encounter – however absolutely it declares its permanence and totality, however grounded in material objects and specific location – does not hold within it the same pathological element of obsession with truth and a related necessity for invention. As if to guarantee the reader grasps this symbiotic relationship between the factual and the inventive in approaching history, Sylvia ends her time with Jerome by giving him an envelope that holds “The answer to what happened to Branwell and Ghost . . . or at least the way I imagine it. It's not long, but still a kind of final chapter” (359). That Sylvia can write this fictional ending to Andrew's familial story indicates not only the symbiosis of fiction and history, but also the change her character undergoes as a result of her journey out of the isolation of the past and into a relationship of sharing and connection with Jerome, a man emphatically situated in the present.

**“It's all over. It's finished”': Jerome and the Banishment of History<sup>106</sup>**

Against the dangers of Sylvia's obsession with preserving the historical, and indeed symbolizing and embodying the historical, the narrative poses Jerome's commitment to forgetting the past because of his traumatic relationship with his father. Unlike Sylvia who, whatever the consequences, effortlessly and indeed, naturally embodies the historical, for Jerome *forgetting* requires work and vigilance. He must not only actively suppress memories as they emerge, but also strategically avoid situations that stimulate his memory in the first place. He tells Sylvia that “Sometimes . . . it's best just to let them go, family things. Otherwise... well, what's the point? There's nothing you can do anyway” (99 – ellipses in original). Jerome ties futility to his refusal of the past by acknowledging that in his view memory has no practical or tangible outcome. In direct contrast to Sylvia's understanding of the past as unchanging, Jerome expects that remembrance should be accompanied by change. The subjective ambiguity of “what's the point” asks the reader to consider exactly what *is* the point: is “the point” that memory itself is a concrete (however, abstract) noun that resists change? Or, is “the point” that the act of remembering is itself impotent? Jerome's insistence that Sylvia “just let go” of the past reads ironically, as the reader – altogether aware that Jerome fails to meet his own injunction and instead returns, constantly, to the past as “the place he couldn't stop revisiting” (321) – questions whether the construction of memory as a permanent, forceful structure is thus stronger than the individual agency to forget, and implicitly

---

<sup>106</sup> Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. 356.

figures remembering as the natural process and forgetting as unnatural and forced.

While Jerome struggles to forget, his partner, Mira, demands access to his memories, a physical place, in her estimation, where Jerome visits. Mira asks him, “What are you thinking about?” and then “Where have you gone,” to which Jerome replies, “Nothing, 'Nowhere.' But he knew exactly where he had gone: back to the disappeared world of his childhood” (321). This construction of the past as a place that can be visited augments the narrative's representation of the permanence of memory that resists either the vagaries of time in diluting or altering the memory, and the changes to the individual that could affect how the memory is experienced or “visited.” Housing memory in a place, as in “the past is a foreign country,” aligns Jerome's and Sylvia's perspectives on memory, however dissimilar their approaches to valuing or caring for the past. Both characters view the past as a permanent condition, something that demands attention and engagement, even if only to be forgotten.

### **“I have lost everything”: Forgetfulness and the Utility of Stories<sup>107</sup>**

Against the permanence of memory as an experience – something the characters must engage in, regardless of their desire to (re)visit the past – the narrative poses two challenges to the integrity of the recallable past: one, the recognition individuals *do* forget; two, the awareness that if stories, memories, and histories are not conveyed to the younger generation they likewise cease to be recognized. However, this second challenge is something of an answer to the first: if histories are conveyed to younger generations,

---

<sup>107</sup> Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. 5, 289.

older generations can forget and can die, while knowing the integrity of their personal histories had been inherited by the next generation.

The novel opens with Andrew's struggle to remember where he is in the present. He is lost outside in the winter because he suffers from Alzheimer's, and cannot remember how to return home. His death from exposure functions as a poignant metaphor for the (mortal) danger attached to forgetfulness. Paralleling Jerome's understanding of the past as a location, Andrew struggles to articulate his feeling that he is “walking toward a known place” (1). Literally Andrew tries to return to Timber Island and the warmth of his home, while metaphorically he grasps for memory, the “known place,” of safety. He falls in the snow and sleeps. He awakens to the realization that his body is covered in snow, and “The palms of his gloved hands are open to the sky as if he were silently requesting that the world come back to him, that the broken connections of heart and mind be mended, that language and the knowledge of a cherished place re-enter his consciousness” (4-5). Before Andrew dies he utters one final sentence, “his first full sentence in more than a month . . . his last spoken words” and they are: “I have lost everything” (5). The pain of this opening scene derives both from the futility of Andrew's death – the reader recognizes he is close to his home and to warmth and safety – but more poignantly the pain also stems from the isolation of his death. Andrew expresses a terrifying reality of loneliness within his own mind. He is physically isolated in a winter landscape, just as he is emotionally isolated from other people by virtue of his inability to remember how others are connected to him. “I have lost everything” registers both as a

loss of memory, a loss of life, and a loss of connection: *he* is lost. The opening chapter ends with the declaration that, “There is nobody there to hear his voice, nobody at all” (5). Andrew's isolation from other characters and his death by forgetting calls on the reader to assume a memorializing position. Except for the reader, there is no one present to hear Andrew's voice. The reader is called upon to attend to the rest of his story, and in so doing to counter the gross fear of absolute isolation and the vulnerability conjured by forgetting in this scene. By posing a listener as redemption, the novel establishes in this first chapter a pattern repeated throughout the text, whereby listeners become “responsible” for a past that can be transferred from one generation to the next through story-telling (75) and must be passed on in order to counter the danger of forgetting history.

The plot of *A Map of Glass* follows Sylvia on her trip to meet Jerome, and then deviates from this present-day narrative to chronicle Andrew's written history of his family in the sequestered section, “The Bog Commissioners,” which Jerome reads to Mira. The narrative then returns to Sylvia and Jerome as they reflect on Andrew's narrative and the unlikely connection with one another that his narrative effects. “The Bog Commissioners” chronicles the Woodman family ship-building industry and through the familial history, offers an engaging history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century shipping industry, complete with commentary on the role of French-Canadian shippers, the position of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century settler societies, and the impact of industrialization on resource economies. Thematically, “The Bog Commissioners” takes up the same concerns as the

frame narrative, and explores the generative and destructive possibilities of memory and forgetting. Characters explicitly echo one another and in this repetition remind the reader of the importance of historical inheritance in the novel: histories are vital only insofar as they are remembered and shared.

Annabelle, for instance, repeats Sylvia's fascination with the material objects of history. Annabelle “had long been intrigued by the idea of relics” (205) and so begins to keep a “book of relics” which she fills with “samples from any number of wooden constructions” (205). Annabelle's focus on wood relics resonates with the trajectory of her family's wooden ship building enterprise, her family's enterprise displays first the vitality of the industry, and then the effect of the development and prosperity of steel ships, which render their business inefficient and a relic itself. Sylvia repeats the language of relics, describing how “the physicality of the past was mostly brought toward her by objects stored like *relics* inside her family home” (117 – my emphasis). In addition to their shared preoccupation with material history the two also share a sense of being immobilized by the weight of the history they curate. Annabelle reports that “nothing was going to happen to her,” (185) an echo of Sylvia's immobilized experience of place and time. That Sylvia is not genetically related to Annabelle, and is instead related to her through repeated character traits and thematic interests suggests that the inheritance of history is not dependent on genetic relationship. Blood ties, like those in *Where the River Narrows* – to explorers, traders, or settlers – are less important here than is the ability to see connections between the historic and the contemporary, to recognize affinities between

characters from the past with those in the present, or rather, the present in the past.

This is not to say the novel abandons genetic influence entirely. Andrew's history is, after all, one of genealogy. Indeed Andrew's dying words "I have lost everything," (5) echo Branwell's conclusion, on reflecting on his life and the death of his wife that, "I've lost everything" (289). It is a curious kind of echoing, wherein Andrew's statement appears earlier in the structure of the narrative – on page 5 – but echoes Branwell in the chronology of the narrative: an echo that reverberates both forward and backward in time. From the repetition of character traits in Sylvia and Annabelle and here the repetition in phrasing and philosophy, the narrative overlaps temporal periods so as to obscure differences between past and present. The characteristics and preoccupations of the past thus appear to be seamlessly and inevitably bequeathed and inherited.

**“Broken by the shock of connection”: Unsettling the Permanence of the Past<sup>108</sup>**

While Sylvia begins the novel with a belief in the possibility of a complete and unadulterated memorialization of the past, through her conversations with Jerome she changes her view and accepts memory as partial – both in bias and incompleteness; similarly, through his conversations with Sylvia, Jerome shifts from viewing the past as determining the present to seeing it as a story open to reinterpretation “in a particular kind of light” (117). Neither character abandons the belief in the permanent presence of the past, but both come to challenge their accepted views of what kind of history can be recognized and made meaningful, and how that history can be shared.

---

<sup>108</sup> Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. 56.

For Jerome the significance of the past derives from its forward momentum, or put another way, from the presence within the past of a germinating seed that will lead, inevitably and teleologically, to the present. His work as a photographer and visual artist focuses on the processes of change that occur in natural landscapes as one physical place or environmental space transforms. He believes “he himself would never be a painter, considered himself instead a sort of chronicler. He wanted to document a series of natural environments changed by the moods of the long winter. He wanted to mark the moment of metamorphosis, when something changed from what it had been in the past” (11). Jerome's expressed interest in the artistic rendering of the metamorphosis of past matter into something new in the present is consistent with his interest in sequestering his personal past from the present: Jerome wants to believe that change – radical and total change – is possible, and yet he mourns the loss implied by such radical alteration.

Fences are of particular interest in Jerome's art and metaphorically capture the struggle in the text for Jerome to separate the past from the present. Early in the novel he describes the inspiration for his latest art project,

He became obsessed by the ruined fences . . . he began to think of fences as situations rather than structures. Like an act of God or a political uprising, they seemed to him to mark the boundaries of events rather than territories. And like events, he felt that these fences had come into being as a result of a great deal of energy, flourishing on the edges of labour for a few hard decades, then collapsing onto a ground whose only group was now an acre of windblown weeds. (17)

He then describes the specific art project that he creates out of this fascination with the temporality of physical structures and space: “He attempted to reconstruct the frail,

disappearing remnant of the fences on the indoor/outdoor carpeting of a city arts gallery, had lugged boulders and fence wire, branches and decaying rails into the space,” (17) but expresses frustration when “The sense of loss that he felt in the face of decay, of disappearance had gone unnoticed, unmentioned upon by the critics. But it was this loss that he had taken with him . . . to the shores of Timber Island” (18). I quote this section at length because it exemplifies the tension in his character between curating the physical (and psychological) reality of the past and accepting its inevitable decay and disappearance. Fences ironically symbolize not permanence and separation but transience and penetrability. Jerome's project also exemplifies the work of historical reconstruction (or historical fiction) in taking the remnants or the relics of the past that might otherwise disappear into the background out of their decaying state and into the public sphere and public awareness. That the intention behind this transposition might be lost or misunderstood by the audience, as is the case when Jerome feels the viewers do not understand his feelings of “loss,” stands as an acceptable risk for Jerome in the artistic project of translating the past into forms appreciable by the present.

Jerome's public display of the recreated fences complicates his representation as a character only, or obsessively, dedicated to the banishment of the past. Indeed his public art project clarifies the precise focus of his anxiety about its permanence. Jerome worries about his *personal* past and the likelihood that his personal history is uncontainable and might bleed, like the waters around Timber Island, into the present of his life with Mira; whereas Jerome understands the relics and objects of public history to be inevitably and

perpetually decaying and disappearing. The apparent contradiction of these two positions resolves when Jerome shares his personal narrative first with Sylvia and then with Mira, and in so doing admits that sharing personal history means accepting both its affective influence on the subjective present, and its susceptibility, like the physical markers of the past, to change and decay. Indeed his eventual reconciliation of these two positions captures St. Jerome's "vow of the Convergence of Life," that Mira explains in relation to his namesake: "it might mean that, while you remain stable, you must also accept that the world will change around you, and that you should remain open to and aware of those changes" (142).

Jerome expresses his openness to Sylvia's story when she tells him, with respect to her story and Andrew's, that "You'll forget this," to which he responds, "I won't want to forget. Not the story. Not the things we've talked about . . . And the truth is, I want to know, I guess I always wanted to know what happened to him. And now I want to know about you" (327). It is through his openness to Sylvia's story that Jerome finds an opportunity to share what happened in his personal past, when his father "made a mistake. His mistake changed everything" (333). He goes on to explain to Sylvia how his father worked as an engineer in a gold mine and miscalculated the thickness of a vein and as a consequence a man, Thorvaldson, died. He stops sharing his memories there, telling her "My childhood . . . I don't know why I brought it up" (336). Sylvia responds, "Please . . . I wasn't bothered, I'm glad you told me . . . Now I will be able to remember that I knew you," she then continues, "How little, in the final analysis, we really know about another

person” (336). The repeated desire to “know” the other person allows Sylvia and Jerome to share with one another painful memories, but concludes with Sylvia's assessment of the “little” we really know of other people. In her admission of the fragility of knowledge of others, Sylvia arrives at a similar conclusion to the ethical positions of Judith Butler and Rudy Wiebe, that it is in welcoming others to share their stories, in recognizing the dependence we have on others to make sense of ourselves and our histories – the dependence we have on others to remember our histories when we can no longer do so ourselves – all the while maintaining an awareness of the opacity of the other, and so the necessity for change and invention, that ethical relationships are formed.

In sharing personal and familial histories Andrew, Jerome and Sylvia constitute history as that which is shared. Andrew includes in “The Bog Commissioners” two scenes where the past of a material object is obscured by the failure of those in the present to recognize the history fundamentally bound to the object: the layers of paint that disguise Branwell's murals and the piles of sand that bury Branwell's hotel. Andrew recuperates these lost stories by including them in “The Bog Commissioners,” but he does so while pointing out that the histories of the objects are only known by the readers of his account and that the histories are not known by those interacting with the environment of the paint and the sand. The novel judges this ignorance of the historical that surrounds us in every material object, and every immaterial instance of decayed objects to be a mistake. *A Map of Glass* argues for a permanent record of the past – even if that permanent record is subject to change based on the source and audience for the history – but argues even more

forcefully for conversations about the past, for engagements with these records, and for individuals to look for the material and immaterial traces of history in their everyday lives and to voluntarily share their stories with others. Moreover, it is in the contentious relationship between Jerome's and Sylvia's engagements with the past that the novel reminds us that individuals approach the past, and approach its interpretation, differently. Their relationship does not *demand* a sharing of personal histories; rather, the respect each character shows to the memories and experiences of the other, and their equal willingness to allow the other to remain silent, understands responsible history as dependent on mutual comfort and a willingness not only to hear, but to tell.

All three novels in this chapter tell the histories of families and individuals, rather than the epic stories of fur trade companies or famous naval expeditions. However, while only *Where the River Narrows* self-consciously explores the family as a microcosm for the nation, or familial challenges as synecdoche for national ones, all three novels grapple with the role of individuals in settling national space and inheriting a sense of emplaced belonging. If the chapter begins with a critique of *The Holding* for its use of history to legitimate settler feelings of inherited and entitled possession to land, it sees *Where the River Narrows* as testing the usefulness of replacing archival “fact” with individual imagination to better understand individual and national inheritance, and ends with *A Map of Glass* and its call for attention to the ubiquity of the unacknowledged history in the everyday of individuals and of the nation, and the material effects of failing to recognize that there *is* history here.

**Conclusion**

In writing this dissertation I have been guided by Gwendolyn MacEwan's poem, "The Discovery," a poem which urges its reader to continue to seek answers, and guards against pat conclusions in the warning that "the moment when it seems most plain/is the moment when you must begin again." Admittedly, the poem's prompting to "look again," has fuelled more than one night of academic self-doubt, but it has also served as a poignant reminder that literary analysis ought never to be complete, because texts change in the context of their reading.

I read and wrote about these nine novels in a two-year period marked by economic recession, which dramatized the importance of solvency and sovereignty of nation-states; a period of *international* environmental disasters – not least of which includes the melting of the polar ice caps – that focused *national* debates about foreign policy on environmental refugees and military expansion in the Arctic; a period of border building in literal and symbolic walls between nations; and most recently, a period of growing citizen demand for representation and recognition by the nation-state. Beyond forming a contextual backdrop for my reading and writing, these events, and the importance of the nation-state that they signify, evidence the unassailable influence of the sovereign nation-state in the international and local landscapes.

The continued relevance and the influence of the nation-state, once a source of "worry" (Kertzer), might in this present context be viewed as a pressing reality, one which demands a thorough investigation of how the nation-state continues to be

imagined, reformed, and reified. That the nation continues as an organizing body, limiting individual agency, value and recognizability, demands – as many of these novels suggest – an engagement with how the nation-state came into existence, what values prefigured its development, and what (continuing) consequences its creation effected.

The historical fictions studied here most often return to a past that prefigures the existence of the nation. In the return to the past to explain the circumstances of the present, the paradox emerges in historical fiction that the pre-existence of the nation proves in its historical narrative its own inevitability. The strength of responsible historical fiction emerges in the moments when it considers not the inevitable outcome – the nation – but the unrealized possibilities manifest in the historical moments and relationships, and so makes some gesture to possible, or desired, changes in the present.

While the exact motivation of readers escapes precise explanation, my respect for readers as willing to suspend chronological divisions in order to glimpse the repetitions, echoes and changes of the imagined past in the present, and the concerns of the present in the fictional histories, meant that in trying to uncover and name the qualities of responsible historical fiction I aimed to capture the duties of both text and reader. Readers of historical fiction bear the responsibility of balancing temporality and assessing the “truth-to-meaning” of the historical text as it either reflects or forgets the questions and preoccupations of intervening years and the present moment of reading. Further, responsible historical fiction evokes this reader – as in *The Book of Negroes* – as a vital participant in making meaning of the past.

Moreover, responsible historical fiction identifies itself by its admission of fluid temporality and the search for origins and answers to the question of how history is present, as in *A Map of Glass*. It does not disguise or obfuscate for political or polemic reasons – as in *The Trade* – though it might draw attention to that which escapes imagination – as in *River Thieves* and *Where the River Narrows*. To forget, deny, overwrite or ignore the histories of the nation-state not only denies narratives of national commonality, it disguises the differences in perceived value and worth that establish national unity. Thus the “responsible” in history tellings – the attention to a canny reader, the acknowledgement of a continued past in the present, the working out of individual agency in national histories, the troubling of material history in light of the “truth-to-meaning” in stories – ought to extend beyond the genre of historical fiction to include history writing of all kinds, whether educational texts, personal memoirs, or the extra-textual. The reader of films like Paul Gross's *Passchendaele*, CBC's *Canada: A People's History*, or museums like the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, can take up the questions raised in this dissertation about the responsibilities that attend *using* history, in order to evaluate the motivations, methodologies, risks and successes of each iteration of the past.

History will continue to be put to use to justify, explain, contest and confirm the values and relationships of the present. The responsibility to determine the usefulness of history in terms not of its application, but of its merit, falls to each reader.

**Works Cited**

- “Aboriginals and New Canadians: The Missing Conversation.” *Ideas*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. 16 October 2009. Radio.
- Alter, Peter. *Nationalism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Edward Arnold, 1994. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983. Print.
- Anderssen, Erin, and Michael Valpy. *The New Canada: A Globe and Mail Report on the Next Generation*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004. Print.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota UP, 1996. Print.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. 1895. New York: Cosimo, 2008. Print.
- Ballantyne, Robert Michael. *The Young Fur Traders*. 1856. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1901.
- Barthes, Roland. “The Discourse of History.” Trans. Stephen Bann. *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1982): 7-20. *University of Florida College of Liberal Arts and Sciences*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.
- Beck, Ervin. “Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe.” *Modern Fiction Studies*. 47.4 (2001): 855-86. *Scholars Portal*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Billig, Michael. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage, 1995. Print.
- Birkwood, Susan. “From 'Naked Country' to 'Sheltering Ice': Rudy Wiebe's Revisionist

Treatment of John Franklin's First Arctic Narrative.” *Nordlit* 23 (2008): 25-38.

DOAJ. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Bottez, Monica. “Memory and Place in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*.” *Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives, Proceedings from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress of Polish Association for Canadian Studies and 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference of Central European Canadianists, April 30-May 3, 2004, Cracow, Poland*. Ed. Anna Śpiewak, Magalena Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek, Anna Reczyńska. Kraków : Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 2005. 48-58. Print.

Bouchard, Gérard, and Charles Taylor. Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles. *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*. Abr. ed. Montreal: Government of Québec, 2008.

*Accommodements.qc.ca*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Boyden, Joseph. *Three Day Road*. Toronto: Viking, 2005. Print.

Broad, Graham. Rev. of *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, by John Ralston Saul. *The Beaver* 89.2 (2009): 45-57. *ProQuest*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.

Byatt, A.S. *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001.

Print.

Cabajsky, Andrea, and Brett Josef Grubisic, ed. *National Plots: Historical Fiction and Changing Ideas of Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010. Print.

“'Canadian Style' Multiculturalism a Menace to Québec, Commission Hears.” *Canadian*

*Broadcasting Corporation* 24 Oct. 2007. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Churchwell, Sarah. "Bought and Sold." Rev. of *The Book of Negroes*, by Lawrence Hill.

*Guardian* [London] 24 January 2009: 6+. *LexisNexis*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Clarke, George Elliot. *George and Rue*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2005. Print.

Colavincenzo, Marc. "Trading Magic for Fact," *Fact for Magic: Myth and*

*Mythologizing in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. Print.

Cohen, Andrew. *The Unfinished Canadian: The People We Are*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007. Print.

Cowart, David. *History and the Contemporary Novel*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989. Print.

"Cowichan Tribes reach Olympic sweater deal." *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* 28 Oct. 2009. Web. 28 April. 2011.

Crummey, Michael. *River Thieves*. 2001. Toronto: Anchor, 2002. Print.

de Groot, Jerome. *The Historical Novel*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.

"discovery." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1989. Oxford UP. Web. 15 October 2010.

Duffy, Dennis. *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay On Canadian Historical Novels*. Toronto: ECW, 1986. Print.

Durmin, Katherine. "Archives and Truth in Fred Stenson's *The Trade*." *Canadian Literature* 178 (2003): 73-88. *Literature Online*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Felman, Shoshana. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984. 76-100. Print.

Fruhwald, Maria. "A Discovery of Strange Things in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*." *New Worlds: Discovering and Constructing the Unknown in Anglophone Literature*. Ed. Martin Kuester, Gabriele Christ and Rudolf Beck. Munich: Verlag Ernst Vogel, 2000. 134-145. Print.

Frye, Northrop. Conclusion. *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*. Ed. Carl Klinick, Alfred Bailey, Claude Bissell, Roy Daniells, Northrop Frye and Desmond Pacey. Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 1965. Rpt. in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: Anansi, 1971. 213-51. Print.

"Fur Trade: Standard of Trade – Albany Fort, 1733." *Our History: Business*. Hudson's Bay Company, n.d. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Gillmor, Don. *Kanata*. Toronto: Penguin, 2009. Print.

---. *Canada: A People's History*. 2 vols. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000. Print.

Granatstein, J.L. *Who Killed Canadian History?* Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998. Print.

Great Britain, Parliament. A Bill for Regulating the Fur Trade and Establishing Criminal and Civil Jurisdiction Within Certain Parts of North America. 2 Geo. IV.- Sess. 6 June 1821. *Early Canadiana Online*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Griffiths, Rudyard. *Who We Are: A Citizen's Manifesto*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009. Print.

Hay, Elizabeth. *Late Nights On Air*. 2007. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008. Print.

Heighon, Steven. *Afterlands*. Toronto: Knopf, 2005. Print.

Hill, Gord. *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*. Chicago: PM Press, 2010. Print.

Hill, Lawrence. *The Book of Negroes*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007. Print.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. "Telling It As You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight From Fact." *The Postmodern History Reader*. Ed. Keith Jenkins. London: Routledge, 1997. 158-174. Print. Rpt. of. "Telling It As You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight From Fact." *Times Literary Supplement* 16 Oct. 1992: 12- 15. *LexisNexis*. Web. 3 Mar. 2011.

Hoepfner, Kenneth. "The Spirit of the Arctic, or, Translating the Untranslatable in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*." *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative*. Ed. John Moss. Ottawa: University of Ottawa UP, 1997. 145-152. Print.

Huggan, Graham. *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 1994. Print.

Hulan, Renée. *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 2002. 169-178. Print.

Hulan, Shelley. "Telling a Better Story: History, Fiction, and Rhetoric in George Copway's *Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation*." Cabajsky and Grubisic 99-112.

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988.

---. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.

Innis, Harold. *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. 1930. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. *Scholars Portal Books*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

James, William Closson. "A Land Beyond Words': Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*." *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*. Ed. Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001. 71-92. Print.

Jenkins, Keith, ed. *The Postmodern History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print. "John Ralston Saul." *Big Ideas*. TVOntario, 6 Sept. 2008. Television.

Jones, Manina. *That Art of Difference: 'Documentary Collage' and English Canadian Writing*. Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 1993. Print.

Kaltemback, Michele. "Explorations Into History: Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*." *Etudes Canadiennes/Canadian Studies* 44 (1998): 77-87. Print.

Kellner, Hans. *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. Print.

Kertzer, Jonathan. *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 1998. Print.

- Kilgour, Maggie. *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.
- Korrka, Janne. “Representations of Aboriginal Peoples in Rudy Wiebe's Fiction: *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *A Discovery of Strangers*.” *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*. Ed. Uts Lischke and David McNab. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005. 351-77. Print.
- Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. Lancaster: International Non-Aristotelian Library, 1933. Print.
- Kuester, Martin. *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels*. Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 1992. Print.
- Laberge, Aimée. *Where the River Narrows*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2003. Print.
- Lawrence, Bonita. “‘Real’ Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood.” Lincoln: University of Nebraska UP, 2004. Print.
- Lawson, Alan. “Postcolonial Theory and the Settler Subject.” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 56 (1995): 20-36. *LexisNexis*. Web. 16 June 2009.
- Luna, James. *Artifact Piece*. 1987. Performance. Museum and Man, San Diego.
- Magill, Susan. “History.” *Pikwàkanagàn: Pick-wok-nah-gone First Nation*. Aboriginal Canada Portal. n.d. Web. 15 Mar. 2011.
- Morton, Desmond. *A Short History of Canada*. 5th ed. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001. Print.
- Munslow, Alan. *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies*. 2nd edition. London:

Routledge, 2000. Print.

Neu, Dean, and Richard Therrien. *Accounting for Genocide: Canada's Bureaucratic Assault on Aboriginal People*. Black Point, Fernwood, 2003. Print.

*The New Jerusalem Bible*. Henry Wansbrough, gen. ed. New York: Doubleday, 1985. Print.

Omhovere, Claire. "The North in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers: A Land Beyond Words?*" *Commonwealth: Essay and Studies* 24.2 (2002): 79-91. Print.

Québec. Municipality of Hérouxville. *Les Normes de vie*. N.p. Jan. 2007. Web. 3 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/normes.pdf>>.

Quinney, Henry Bird, and Eric Robinson. *The Infested Blanket: Canada's Constitution: Genocide of Indian Nations*. Winnipeg: Queenston House, 1985. Print.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago UP, 1984-88. Print.

Rigney, Ann. *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

Rosaldo, Renato. "Imperialist Nostalgia." *Representations* 26 (1989): 107-122. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Rowe, Dan. Rev. of *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* by John Ralston Saul. *Quill & Quire* 74.10 (2008): 22+. *ProQuest*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Saul, John Ralston. *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*. Toronto: Viking, 2008. Print.

---. Hamilton Public Library, Hamilton. 4 Dec. 2008. Lecture.

---. “On Being Canadian.” University of Guelph, Guelph. 9 Dec. 2009. Lecture.

Siddiqui, Haroon. “A Call to Arms Against Governing Elites.” *Toronto Star* 25 Sept.

2008: A08. Print.

Simonds, Marilyn. *The Holding*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004. Print.

Sioui, Georges. *Histoires de Kanatha Vues et Contées = Histories of Kanatha Seen and*

*Told : Essais, Contributions, Discours et Oraisons, 1991-2007*. Ottawa:

University of Ottawa UP, 2008. Print.

Stenson, Fred. *The Trade*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000. Print.

Sullivan, Alan. *The Fur Masters*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1947. Print.

Sugars, Cynthia. “Past Lives: Aimée Laberge's *Where the River Narrows* and the

Transgenerational Gene Pool.” Cabajsky and Grubisic 21-37.

---. “Original Sin, or, The Last of the First Ancestors: Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*.”

*English Studies in Canada* 31.4 (2005): 147-75. *Project MUSE*. Web. 1 Mar. 2011.

Thobani, Sunera. *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*.

Toronto: University of Toronto UP, 2007. Print.

Tremblay, Tony. “Piracy, Penance and Other Penal Codes: A Morphology of Postcolonial

Revisions in Three Recent Texts by Rudy Wiebe, John Steffler and Joan Clark.”

*English Studies in Canada* 23.2 (1997): 159-173. Print.

Urquhart, Jane. *A Map of Glass*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005. Print.

Valpy, Michael, and John Ralston Saul. “This Native Land: Our Debt to Native People.”

*Globe and Mail* 27 Sept. 2007: F8. Print.

Van Kirk, Sylvia. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870*. Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1980. Print.

Vautier, Marie. *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 1998. Print.

Venema, Kathleen. "A Trading Shop So Crooked a Man Could Jump through the Cracks': Counting the Cost of Fred Stenson's *Trade* in the Hudson's Bay Company Archive." Cabajsky and Grubisic 3-19.

Wharton, Thomas. *Icefields*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1995. Print.

Wiebe, Rudy. *A Discovery of Strangers*. 1994. Toronto: Vintage, 1995. Print.

Wylie, Herb. *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002. Print.

---. *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*.

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. Print.

---. "Windigo Killing: Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*." Cabajsky and Grubisic 83-97.