UNFRAMING THE NOVEL: FROM ONDAATJE TO CARSON

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that, since at least the 1960s, there has been a distinguished tradition of Canadian poets who have turned to the novel as a result of their dissatisfaction with the limitations of the lyric and instead have built the lyric into a mode of narrative that contrasts sharply with the descriptive conventions of plot-driven novels. Citing the affinity between the lyric sequence and the visual series, the introduction maintains that the treatment of narrative as a series of frames, as well as the self-conscious dismantling of these framing devices, is a topos in Canadian literature. The term "(un)framing" expresses this double movement. The thesis asserts that Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering, Joy Kogawa, Daphne Marlatt, and Anne Carson (un)frame their novels according to formal precedents established in their long poems.

Chapter 2 illustrates the relation of the visual series to the song cycle in Ondaatje's long poems *the man with seven toes* (1969) and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), as well as his first novel *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976). Chapter 3 traces the development of the "serial novel" from Bowering's early serial poems to his trilogy, *Autobiology* (1972), *Curious* (1973), and *A Short Sad Book* (1977). Chapter 4 argues that Joy Kogawa structures her novel *Obasan* (1981) on the concentric narrative model established in her long poem "Dear Euclid" (1974). Chapter 5 shows how Daphne Marlatt performs a series of variations on the quest narrative that she finds in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (1844), and thereby develops a lesbian quest narrative in her long poem *Frames of a Story* (1968), her novella *Zócalo* (1977), and her novel *Ana Historic* (1988). Chapter 6 explores the combination of lyric, essay, and interview in Carson's long poem "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" (1995) and argues that the long poem forms the basis of her novel in verse, *Autobiography of Red* (1998).

The final chapter assesses some of the strengths and limitations of lyrical fiction and concludes that a thorough grasp of the contemporary long poem is essential to an understanding of the development of the novel in Canada.

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INTRODUCTION

A Frame of the Book

This introduction borrows its title from Erin Mouré's collection of poems, *A Frame of the Book* (1999). But *is* this the title of Mouré's collection? The cover bears the shadowy trace of a prior, overwritten title: *The Frame of a Book.* The superimposition of *A Frame of the Book* in bold type over the lingering gray-gold of *The Frame of a Book* might suggest that the former is overtaking the latter in a proprietary struggle for title, except that *The Frame of a Book* takes precedence when one reads from left to right. Is Mouré offering her reader a post-structuralist critique of book-making (*A Frame of the Book*) or a poetic sketch of a larger, unfinished work (*The Frame of a Book*)? Inside the cover, both titles receive their own title pages. The poet opens up several entry points into the text by exchanging the indefinite for the definite article and encouraging readers to pursue different avenues of interpretation. Instead of using the title to stabilize the interpretation of her text, she "forge[s] an upset frame of reference" (34) by juxtaposing various semantic structures.

Mouré's play with titles illustrates how minor semantic shifts in the framing of a text can have radical consequences for its interpretation, but her framing games do not stop at the title. The photograph on the cover of *A Frame of the Book* calls attention to the porous quality of boundaries as established by framing devices. The photograph depicts three identical desk drawers aligned horizontally in a field. The two outer drawers are empty, while the middle drawer contains an unbound manuscript. One manuscript page has blown out of the middle drawer and a second, stirred by the wind, is poised to escape. The photograph might represent the capacity of language to defy containment and escape into a field of free play. But it also shows how the transgression of frames energizes a work of art—whether these frames are pictorial, semantic, or thematic. Because "no meaning exists outside context" (Mouré, "Learned"

1), Mouré challenges her reader to convert fragments into patterns. Mouré thus dramatizes the making and breaking of contextual frames such that the evolution of "form [becomes] another kind of 'content'" (1). Sampling quotations from diverse sources and shifting abruptly between tonal registers, Mouré asks: "Is it a mistake in form/ or formal dissonance/ or form" ("Grief, or Sweetness for A." 66)? A more elaborately phrased version of this question opens Mouré's sequence "The Splendour":

> Is it rigour or is it patchwork
> Riding, alone, the engine of economy
>
> A splendour
> (or is it)
>
> Trying to be as curious
> Trying to forge an upset frame of reference
> Pulling the window thru the door   (34)

In these stanzas Mouré contemplates the formal strategies of minimalism (rigour), postmodernism (patchwork), and romanticism (splendour), and opts for a layered approach ("Pulling the window thru the door") that neither wholly endorses nor rejects the possibilities each tradition affords. The passage turns on the pivot of the question—"or is it"—in parentheses. This question could refer to either the previous stanza or the ensuing one, but the either/or framework it establishes presents a false choice. The title suggests that the poem retains its splendour, while the anaphoristic repetitions of "Is it" and "Trying" demonstrate that the poet forges upset syntactic frameworks across a number of scales in the poem. The other poems in Mouré's collection also step in and out of genres, traditions, and languages in order to test both the inhibiting and the liberating effects of frames. Mouré's poems demonstrate that the act of framing is also an act of unframing, a double movement that I express as (un)framing because the parentheses emphasize the ongoing negotiation of presence and absence performed by framing devices.

Although Mouré's poetry is aggressively non-narrative in the sense that she refuses to adopt a continuous storyline, one of the aims of this study is to demonstrate that the same process of (un)framing can be found in varieties of the narrative long poem and novel in Canada. Indeed, the treatment of narrative as a series of frames, and the self-conscious manipulation of these frames, is a topos in Canadian literature.[1] This study will explain how a number of Canadian authors overcame the limitations of the lyric by experimenting with the long poem, while at the same time developing rhetorical strategies for creating narrative out of discrete units that they subsequently used to frame their novels.

A Frame of the Thesis

It seems to be a given among certain publishers and book reviewers that, "[i]n Canada, there is a long literary tradition of poets turning into novelists" (Murray).[2] One contemporary critic even argues that the "lyric mode predominates in Canadian fiction" (Hepburn 32). However, beyond the study of individual authors, critics have not analyzed this phenomenon. In order to illustrate the formative influence of the lyric and long poem on contemporary Canadian fiction, this thesis presents five case studies of major Canadian authors who have made the transition from poetry to the novel. Scrutinizing Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), George Bowering's *A Short Sad Book* (1977), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998), I argue that the way in which the authors frame their novels derives from, and expands upon, narrative forms that they developed in their long poems—forms which, in turn, are an extension of their lyric practice. Rather than considering poet and novelist as unrelated professions, I explore various ways of approaching the novel through the lyric and long poem.

For example, Kogawa's *Obasan* reconsiders the legacy of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War and challenges the framing of her community as the

"Yellow Peril" by reconfiguring this history within an intricate series of concentric frameworks. The novel begins with a passage from the Bible which Kogawa converts into a lyrical epigram by adding line breaks. She then reverses this process in her introductory prose poem on the following page. Although the lyric frames establish a mood and a set of symbols and foster an emotional connection between the lyric "I" and the reader, it is unclear whether the "I" in the epigram and proem belongs to Kogawa or to the narrator of the history, Naomi. Much of the narrative tension in the subsequent frame tale and history in prose arises from the discrepancy between the prophetic vision of personal and social harmony in the prose poem and the quotidian experiences of racial prejudice detailed in Naomi's history. The narrator's lyrical vision acts as a tool for overcoming, symbolically, her marginal historical status as a Japanese Canadian. However, once the lyric prophecy is fulfilled at the conclusion of the frame tale, Kogawa inserts a found document (a historical memorandum outlining human rights violations committed against Japanese Canadians) to underscore the fictive quality of the narrator's lyrical resolution and the ongoing struggle for Japanese Canadian rights. Lyric and prose narrative thus enhance each other by contradiction. They engage in an ongoing process of (un)framing that breaks down the limitations of their respective genres. This dynamic is further underscored by the fact that *Obasan* elaborates on the fertility theme, moon symbolism, and concentric narrative structure of Kogawa's first collected long poem, "Dear Euclid" (1974).

In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that the novels under study stand in a serial relation to earlier long poems. Occasionally an author will acknowledge that a long poem establishes the template for his or her novel—as is the case with Bowering's long poem *George, Vancouver* (1970) and his novel *Burning Water* (1980)—but more commonly the long poem serves as a laboratory in which authors develop narrative strategies, elaborate on personal sets of symbols, and refine themes which they later employ in their novels. Chapter 2, for example, documents how Ondaatje develops a style of narrative based on the painted series in *the man*

with seven toes (1969), and the photographic series in *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* (1970), and then adapts this narrative technique to the song cycle in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976). Chapter 3 examines the formative influence of Bowering's "post-lyric" poems (*Concrete* n.p.) on his serial novels, *Autobiology* (1972) and *A Short Sad Book* (1977). For Bowering, the "serial novel" (*Short* 139) is less a work published in installments than an expansion of the serial poem, a form which I will discuss at the end of this introduction.[3] Chapter 3 will also briefly discuss how Bowering parodies his serial poem *George, Vancouver* in *Burning Water*. Chapter 4 demonstrates how the holocaust theme and moon sequences that frame "Dear Euclid" also frame Kogawa's first novel, *Obasan.* Chapter 5 traces the gradual development of a lesbian quest narrative in Marlatt's long poem *Frames of a Story* (1968), her novella *Zócalo* (1977), and her novel *Ana Historic* (1988). It focuses on Marlatt's ongoing revisions of the heterosexual quest narrative that she finds in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, *The Snow Queen* (1844). Chapter 6 examines the combination of lyric, essay, and interview in Carson's long poem "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" (1995) and scrutinizes the expanded version of this format in *Autobiography of Red* (1998). This chapter emphasizes how Carson manipulates mythic frameworks in order to allow the women's voices at the margins of her story to attain a place of prominence. Studying Ondaatje's pictorial frames, Bowering's parodic frames, Kogawa's concentric frames, Carson's mythic frames, and Marlatt's quest narratives in this way will make it abundantly clear that the long poems establish the formal precedents for the novels.

However, the manner in which the authors move from poet to novelist varies. Ondaatje and Kogawa proceed in a roughly linear fashion from lyric to long poem to novel, whereas Bowering and Marlatt produce an early (and for them unsatisfying) realist novel before earning reputations as poets and returning to the novel with a renewed conception of it. Carson, on the other hand, combines these two approaches. She begins as a lyric poet writing primarily in sequences, composes the manuscript of a prose novel, and then, dissatisfied, completely rewrites

it as a novel in verse. In each case, an intensive period of work in the lyric and long poem

furnishes the authors with the repertoire of rhetorical devices that they use to shape their novels.

The core of my argument centres on the work of Ondaatje, Bowering, and Marlatt—three

authors who have been engaged in the promotion, criticism, and production of each other's works

since the late 1960s. Although they write in different manners, their names appear frequently in

the acknowledgements to each other's works and they cite each other as influences. For

example, in a taped conversation with Fred Wah in 1980, Marlatt explains that she admires

Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Bowering's *Burning Water* because "they move in a

direction in prose I want to move in" (qtd. in Wah, "Introduction" 9). Similarly, Ondaatje names

Marlatt (along with Blaser, Kiyooka, Webb, and Nichol) as "one of my dearest touchstones, one

of those companions of opposites that have brought me here" ("Robin" 454). This

correspondence between opposites does not necessarily lead to a uniform style. For example,

Marlatt makes extensive use of fairytales in her work, but Ondaatje recalls her editorial

objections to one of his forays into the genre: "I reacted to Daphne Marlatt's *Zócalo* and *How

Hug a Stone* and she's helped me often with my books. [. . .] I remember in *Running* [*in the

Family*] Daphne Marlatt saw a chapter that was a retelling of a fairy tale and she thought it was

awful—so that went [was omitted]" ("1984 Interview" 326). Bowering, for his part, has done

extensive critical work on both authors, including the essays "Ondaatje Learning to Do" and

"Language Women: Post-anecdotal Writing in Canada," which focuses on the work of Marlatt

and Nicole Brossard. At the same time, although Marlatt cites Bowering and Ondaatje as

influences on her poetry, she issues an important qualification: "the dialogue with these people is

as primary as the actual books are" (qtd. in Wah, "Introduction" 9). My aim is to explore the

literary manifestations of this dialogue, which veers off in many different directions.

When I began this study in 1999, I also wanted to look beyond the small group of poets

collected in Ondaatje's *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979) and Sharon Thesen's *The New Long*

Poem Anthology (1991) and explore the work of two writers at opposite ends of the poet-novelist spectrum: Anne Carson and Joy Kogawa. Carson has since rocketed to fame and become, arguably, Canada's most internationally celebrated poet (Sutherland, "Takes" 2). Carson's "The Glass Essay" is now included in the expanded edition of *The New Long Poem Anthology* (2001) and Ondaatje states on the cover of *Autobiography of Red* that "Anne Carson is, for [him], the most exciting poet writing in English today" (Knopf 1999). Although endorsements on book jackets are prone to hyperbole, for the purposes of this study it is also important to note that Marlatt praises Kogawa's long poem *A Song of Lilith* as a "feminist *Paradise Lost*" on the cover of the Polestar edition (2000). *A Song of Lilith* has largely received mediocre reviews (Rae, "Lilith"), and Kogawa is still known primarily as a novelist, but I intend to explore the impact of Kogawa's early poetry on *Obasan* in order to emphasize the importance of her poetic process to the development of the novel.

I have chosen to begin my discussion of the poet's novel in Canada with Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, because it is an exemplary and influential text that draws from several currents in Canadian literature. For example, a discussion of *Coming Through Slaughter* necessitates a discussion of Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game* (1962), which I undertake in Chapter 2 because Ondaatje's critical monograph on *Leonard Cohen* (1970) sheds light on his own ambitions as a poet and novelist in the late 1960s. However, a more thorough analysis of *The Favourite Game*, which I do not have the space to attempt, would explore the influence on Cohen of A.M. Klein's novel *The Second Scroll* (1951), a work which Bowering lists among the important Canadian long poems ("1991 Statement" 351). In a discussion of framing, the critic should also keep in mind the comic strip narratives in "novels" such as *Andy* (1971) by bp Nichol, about whom Ondaatje produced the short film *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970). At the same time, Ondaatje and the other novelists collected here are strongly international in outlook, and their novels draw from Greek and English long poems, Japanese *haibun*, and what Ginsberg

calls "the U.S. prosepoetry context" ("Mode" 329), which for him includes Whitman, Melville's

Pierre, his own *Howl*, and much of Kerouac.[4] To this shortlist, one must certainly add Gertrude

Stein, whose writing plays a vital role in the works of Bowering and Carson.

Framing Genres

In choosing to work with the lyric, long poem, and novel, I have invoked three of the most

established but also vaguest terms in literary criticism. For example, after surveying the critical

literature on them, Margot Kaminski argues that "there is no clear definition of a long poem"

(57), while Daniel Albright observes that the lyric "is so difficult to characterize that sometimes

it seems as if the lyric genre consists of what is left over after all other genres are subtracted

from the corpus of literature" (ix). The formal dissolution and structural innovation that critics

identify as a key aspect of the lyric (Albright 45) and the long poem (Kamboureli, *Edge* 157)

also characterizes the novel. For example, Paul Ricoeur argues that the modern novel "has, since

its creation, presented itself as the protean genre par excellence. [. . .] Indeed, it has constituted

for at least three centuries now a prodigious workshop for experiments in the domains of

composition" (*Time* 8). My aim here is not to wrestle these shape-shifters into submission. On

the contrary, the frame-breaking capacity of these genres is what makes them so alluring. Thus,

in a glowing review of *Autobiography of Red*, Jed Rasula, alluding to Schlegel's concept of

"universal poetry,"[5] celebrates how Carson's novel in verse "recalls in its form the maverick

legacy of the novel as 'total poetic genre' as envisioned by the German Romantics":

> Historically the novel is a genre arising in the seams between other genres,
> accenting the fault lines within and between them; a genre born to contest other
> genres. Because most novels forgo this legacy, it has lately become a fetching
> prospect for poets. (187)

Recognizing that no single definition will suffice to delineate the boundaries of the lyric, long poem, and novel, I instead offer working definitions of each genre in order to provide a background against which the reader can gauge the authors' cross-genre experiments.

After epic, the lyric is the oldest recorded genre in Western literature, dating back to at least the seventh century BCE in Greece.[6] The term *lyric* derives from the Greek *lyra*, or lyre, the harp-like instrument to which the original lyrics were sung in accompaniment. While the Greeks performed both the lyric and epic as song, the lyric has retained its close association with musical performance, thereby ensuring its longevity and diversity. The form has adopted and abandoned numerous metric conventions—the Greeks' dactylic hexameter, Shakespeare's iambic pentameter—and countless formal conventions—Stesichoros' triad, Petrarch's sonnet—in response to expanding notions of musicality and the particular needs of time and place. To complicate matters even further, twentieth-century free verse dispensed with all rigid conventions of metre and structure. The term "lyric" came to encompass a broad range of styles and sensibilities, including those of prose. Demonstrating that the musical force of language arises from cadence paired to thought and emotion—and not from an imposed rhyme scheme or metrical formula—W. B. Yeats added line breaks to his favourite passage in Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873) and declared it the first modern poem in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1937).[7] Kogawa's treatment of the biblical epigram in *Obasan* performs a similar conversion. The boundary between poetry and prose is thus also one of the issues at stake in these novels. However, while Albright maintains that the "lyric is a mode, discoverable in odes and dramas and novels and possibly the telephone directory" (ix), this study will retain the distinction between lyrical passages embedded within prose narrative and isolated lyrics.

Individual lyrics tend to be short, concise, and characterized by radical associative leaps and abrupt shifts in perception. Short lyrics generally stress "formal elegance and verbal felicity" by focussing on "objects in space" and "noun-and-adjective accurate description" (Atwood,

"Introduction" xxxiii), while at the same time isolating a particular emotion or cluster of emotions. Despite a tradition of impersonal lyrics ranging from Stesichoros to T.S. Eliot, the form largely continues to assume the classical "I-You" structure of enunciation, even in cases where speaker and audience are one and the same. This apostrophic mode, as Kamboureli points out, "establishes the priority of discourse over narrative" (*Edge* 188) and encourages readers to imagine themselves experiencing the moment described by the lyric voice, rather than acting as spectators at an event. Bowering, influenced by post-structuralist critiques of the unitary self, adds an extra dimension to this geometry by calling the writer writing *Burning Water* "He," and attempting to dissociate him from the "lyrical self" (*Burning* n.p.) of *George, Vancouver*. However, even in poems where the voice of the lyric "I" is not necessarily the author's (such as in Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*) a "'doubleness' of voice" (Rogers 81) permeates the lyric such that the speaker's "anomalous voice functions as something like a symbol of the author's voice" (84). The lyric's propensity for symbol (a consequence of the form's brevity) encourages this duplicity and the rapid transitions between colloquial *parole* and more incantatory language that generally sustain the lyric's elevated tone, further compound it. Certainly Gerard Manley Hopkins had the lyric in mind when he wrote that "[p]oetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of meaning" (Hopkins 249; see also Caws 6). Such formalized speech makes readers "aware of the illusion of music beyond the sense of the language" (Albright ix), fostering a reflective mood that makes the lyric uniquely equipped to fill the role of meta-commentator in novels such as *Obasan* and *Ana Historic*.

While the lyric is brief, subjective, and musical, perhaps *the* distinguishing feature of the lyric is its mutability. This proposition does not imply that the lyric is the only genre in which symmetry and amorphousness are paradoxically combined. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, Nietzsche argues that drama, which begins as tragedy, evolved from the union of "the

plastic, Apollonian arts and the non-visual arts of music inspired by Dionysos" (19)—that is, from Apollonian symmetry paired with Dionysian "frenzy" (8). In poetry, one can write Apollonian lyrics governed by regular metre and stanzaic structure, but the Dionysian drive towards ecstasy and change evidently holds sway as "[n]o Aristotle has ever composed a manual prescribing the parts and proper sequences of the lyric" (Albright 2). Instead, the ancient Greeks used deities to represent the lyric's ordering impulses. According to Greek legend, the lyre is invented by Hermes (The Dissembling God) and taken over by Apollo (The God of Truth). In a more contemporary reading, W. H. Auden imagines the lyric as a dynamic between Ariel (the ethereal shape-shifter) and Prospero (the earthly wiseman). Albright proposes a hybrid of the latter terms in the figure of Proteus, who combines the shape-shifting ability of Ariel with the grounded wisdom of Prospero (44). Whereas Ariel aspires to "unearthly, striking perfection," Proteus "seeks to evade every finished form in favor of perpetual change" (47). The mercurial impulse in the lyric is, in one case, the origin of the genre, while in another, it is the active agent of the poem's magic. The lyric has been known to acquire fixed shapes over time, but it none the less remains "a dissembling art" (1) which changes shape frequently and fluently.

Ondaatje's "The Gate in His Head" provides a fine example of the energies active in the lyric. The poem begins as an apostrophic address to Ondaatje's poet and friend Victor Coleman. Admiring the "sense of shift" in Coleman's poetry, Ondaatje emulates his friend in the first two stanzas by juxtaposing "the tracks of thought" in lines full of shifting imagery. The imagistic fragments pile up with only the occasional comma to separate them until, in the transitional third stanza, Ondaatje turns his attention from Coleman's poetry to his own surroundings:

> Landscape of busted trees
> the melted tires in the sun
> Stan's fishbowl
> with a book inside
> turning its pages
> like some sea animal
> camouflaging itself

> the typeface clarity
> going slow blonde in the sun full water (64)

Like the broken trees and melting tires, the book in Stan Bevington's fishbowl (which also appears in Bowering's *A Short Sad Book* [136]) is losing its form. Open to external influences in its transparent container, the book is under erasure. The gate in the poet's head, in turn, is only useful if it lets things in (landscape images, Coleman's words) and out (poetic images, Ondaatje's words). Thus when Ondaatje turns from the poetry of his friends to contemplate his own, he invokes a permeable frame, the net, that is one of his favourite motifs:

> My mind is pouring chaos
> in nets onto the page.
> A blind lover, dont know
> what I love till I write it out.
> And then from Gibson's your letter
> with a blurred photograph of a gull.
> Caught vision. The stunning white bird
> an unclear stir.
>
> And that is all this writing should be then.
> The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment
> so they are shapeless, awkward
> moving to the clear. (64)

A chaos of images streams through these stanzas and the sudden appearance of full stops and more insistent punctuation cannot dam its flow. On the contrary, the poem contrives its own dissolution. Failing to net the flight of images in their shapeless, awkward, and protean transitions, Ondaatje's writing—like the gull and sea animal—moves to the clear white silence beyond the final period.

However, the lyric has been extensively criticized by the very people who practice it. Particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, authors condemned the lyric for its solipsism and the limited range of its elevated tone and diction. Experimental poets such as Bowering attempted to escape their lyrical selves, while feminists such as Marlatt came to reconsider the gender implications of lyric subjectivity: "Poetry, that inspired making (*poiein*) with words, that

wellspring, that temple of the oracular, that lyric construction of the exalted I—women come to

it troubled, doubled by the graven/craven images men have provided: Eve of the forked tongue,

miss-represented, ma-damned" (*Labyrinth* 80). From Marlatt's uncapitalized "i" to Carson's

personae, these artists developed means of decentring the exalted "I" and displacing its authority.

In the same way that poets chafed against the limits of lyric subjectivity, they also grew

dissatisfied with the restricted scope of the lyric moment. In contrast to the diachronic duration

of time in narrative poetry and prose, the lyric generally restricts itself to a synchronic fragment

of time, as Sharon Cameron explains in *Lyric Time: Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*:

> If a poem denies the centrality of beginnings and ends, if it fails to concern itself
> with the accumulated sequence of a history, it must push its way into the
> dimensions of the moment, pry apart its walls and reveal the discovered space
> there to be as complex as the long corridors of historical and narrative time. For
> the moment is to the lyric what sequence is to the story. (204)

Thus, Ondaatje's artist-heroes knock down walls and break windows in epiphanic scenes that are

written in such a lyrical manner that the sense of temporal duration is momentarily suspended.

Whereas the epic simile aims to limit description and accelerate the plot by stating that

something is like something else, the lyric propensity for metaphor slows the narrative down and

invites meditation by stating that something is another thing which it is not. Carson, an admirer

of Dickinson, corroborates this theory in her discussions of poetic error (*Men* 30-6) and of Greek

lyric in general: "lyric [poetry] attempts to enter so deeply into history at a particular point that

time stops" ("PWINTERVIEW" 57). However, Carson also stresses that the intensity of the

lyric is bolstered by its peculiar relation to the temporal continuum:

> [A] lyric aims to capture a moment of change from one time to another, from one
> situation to another, so it's not that you describe any moment in the day and make
> it intense, you choose the moment in the day when everything changed because of
> some little thing or thought or mood. Homer can tell you the whole history of the
> fall of Troy, he has 24,000 words to do it, and there's no necessary choice of
> frame, of the critical moment, as there is for a lyric poet. ("PWINTERVIEW" 57)

Of course, Homer's epics have a narrative framework, but Carson's point is that the lyric adheres to its mandate of brevity with extreme fidelity. As "a singular experience of the moment abstracted from duration" (Lecker 61), the lyric demands a particularly economic use of description and detail.

Placed in a series, however, the synchronic lyric acquires a diachronic dimension. Poets attempted early on to expand the temporal scope of the lyric by experimenting with the lyric sequence. In *Post-Petrarchanism*, Roland Greene argues that the traditional lyric sequence presents "the possibility of a thoroughgoing invention of character away from the straits of story, linearity, and causal logic" (80) by treating a single theme from multiple angles and over an expanse of time. This form of "lyric fiction" (3) permits character development, narrative focus, and a method of measuring time, while at the same time avoiding the causal chain of a conventional plot. Whereas the author of a plot-driven narrative cannot lavish too much attention on particular events without sacrificing momentum, the segmentation of narrative in the lyric sequence concentrates all the narrative energy on key moments in the story.

Many poets also embed prose anecdotes, dialogue, and found historical documents into their lyric sequences, which swings the generic pendulum away from lyric towards epic. D.M.R. Bentley argues that English Canadian long poems generally situate themselves at the intersection between lyric and epic, as do many of their French and British counterparts. In "Colonial Colonizing" (1998), Bentley traces the commemorative mode of epic across three centuries of nation-building in Canadian long poems ranging from Henry Kelsey's "Now Reader Read . . ." (1690) to Jon Whyte's *Homage, Henry Kelsey* (1981) and finds that the "encyclopedic ambitions of the epic" are usually counterbalanced by the "self-ish concerns of the lyric" (9). By and large, English Canadian long poems do not establish a stable myth of origins or arrive at the fated fulfillment of a national destiny, as in the classical epic mode of Homer and Virgil. For this reason, Northrop Frye argues in his 1946 essay "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian

Poetry" that "Canadian narrative demands a tragic resolution" (155). Frye traces a narrative

tradition that begins amid the "philosophical pessimism and moral nihilism" (156) of the

nineteenth century and extends as far as E.J. Pratt's *Brébeuf* (1940) and Earle Birney's *David*

(1942), and he surmises that the telos of Canadian narrative is not a triumphal one. However, at

the conclusion of his essay, Frye sees "Canadian poetry hesitat[ing] on the threshold of a new

era" (157) in which the traditional storytelling modes of the long poem will adapt to the radio

and thus, McLuhan would add, take advantage of the non-linear possibilities afforded by

electronic media.

Dorothy Livesay elaborates on Frye's ideas in her influential essay, "The Documentary

Poem: A Canadian Genre" (1969). Livesay asserts that "our most significant body of poetry

exists in the longer poem" (268) and she thereby echoes Frye's endorsement of the long poem:

> In looking over the best poems of our best poets, while of course the great
> majority are lyrical, we are surprised to find how often the narrative poem has
> been attempted, and attempted with uneven but frequently remarkable success.
> [. . .] We tend to form our canons of criticism on carefully polished poetry, but
> such standards do not always apply to the narrative, for the test of the great
> narrative is its ability to give the flat prose statement a poetic value. (Frye 151-2)

In contrast to Frye, however, Livesay contends that Canadians "have built up a body of literature

in a genre which is valid as lyrical expression but whose impact is topical-historical, theoretical

and moral" (281) and she argues for "a new genre, neither epic nor narrative, but *documentary*"

in its "conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective

feelings of the poet" (267). Citing works such as Bowering's *Rocky Mountain Foot* (1968),

Livesay demonstrates that the pioneering documentary work of the National Film Board

(originally an extension of the government's propaganda unit) corresponds to a tradition of the

long poem which is didactic and factual as well as subjective and lyrical. This argument is less

persuasive in its assertion that the documentary poem is a distinctly Canadian genre, than in its

more minute demonstration of the resistance to continuous sequence in the narrative poems that

Frye admires:

> My premise is indeed that the Canadian longer poem is not truly a narrative at all—and certainly not a historical epic. It is, rather, a *documentary* poem, based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements. Our narratives, in other words, are not told for the tale's sake or for the myth's sake: the story is a frame on which to hang a theme. (269)

Livesay makes important observations on the lyric frames within the narrative poem, but the

didacticism of her themes has drawn the ire of numerous critics.

For instance, Roy Miki takes issue with the "humanist binary—'subject' versus 'object'—

[that] constitutes the discursive center of Livesay's often-cited description of the Canadian

documentary poem" (*Broken* 267). A leading figure in the Japanese Canadian Redress

Movement, Miki particularly objects to the moral of Livesay's best known documentary poem,

"Call My People Home" (1950), which uses exemplary figures such as "The Fisherman" and

"The Wife" to dramatize the displacement of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War:

> In "Call My People Home" the narrative frame becomes a representational device that enables the translation of Japanese Canadian experience ("the objective facts") into a public discourse ("subjective feelings of the poet"), in this instance, a radio drama which displaces the specificity of internment through "thematic" abstraction. [. . .] The thematic message conveyed to its non-Japanese Canadian readers (and listeners, since it was aired on the radio) is that internment and forced dispersal, despite the hardships, has "allowed" Japanese Canadians to assimilate. (102-3)

Kogawa's *Obasan* represents the first major literary overhaul of this assimilationist history, but

her lyric sequence "Road Building by Pick Ax" (1985) also parallels Livesay's concern for the

documentation of labour history and social injustice.

The narrative potential of the discontinuous sequence is examined in greater detail in

Robert Kroetsch's "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" (1989).

Seeking to defy what he sees as the "ferocious principles of closure" (118) in the modern lyric,

Kroetsch endorses a narrative mode based on interruption and delay that he simply calls "the

contemporary long poem" (117). As the rare novelist-turned-poet, Kroetsch rejects the isolated

lyric and favours the long poem because it offers a more expansive mode of expression. The

long poem can combine lyrics with found documents, dramatic monologues, prose fragments,

epic catalogues, nonsense poetry, visual media, and any number of disparate genres. While the

metaphors of sexualized violence that guide Kroetsch's essay seem to ground the latter in the

ethos of the epic, the concern of "Mr Canadian Postmodern" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 160) for

counter-imperial discourse, revisionary history, and interrupted teleology belongs more properly

to the anti-epic, as he explains: "Homer wrote poems without stanzas. We threaten to write

stanzas (fragments, pieces, journals, 'takes,' cantos even) that cannot become the poem" (126).

Yet the further Kroetsch pursues the fragmentary quality of the anti-epic, the closer he comes to

advocating a modified lyric sequence.

Two major works of genre criticism propose alternatives to the epic, lyric, and

documentary genres: *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (1983) by M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall

and *On the Edge of Genre* (1991) by Smaro Kamboureli. Rosenthal and Gall argue that the long

poem is an outgrowth of the lyric:

> The modern sequence, then, is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages,
> rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually
> includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its
> structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open,
> emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even
> when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope. (9)

Kamboureli cites this passage in *On the Edge of Genre* and criticizes its "modern sensibility" by

arguing that "the long poem is definitely not a simple extension or expansion of the lyric. [. . .]

Rather, it is a lyric fracturing its 'wholeness,' parodying its own lyrical impulse" (64). From this

point on in her exploration of "The Lyric Mode," Kamboureli adopts Rosenthal and Gall's

definition of the lyrical impulse as a desire for "wholeness," directly contradicting Albright's

definition of the lyric as "a poem in which one notices a certain shiftiness or instability, a certain

slipping and sliding of things, a certain tendency to equate a thing with its antiself, a certain evasiveness of being" (viii). Like Kroetsch, to whom her conception of the long poem owes much, Kamboureli defines "lyrical structure" as "a closed world, a strait-jacket" (75). Yet this definition contradicts Roland Greene's insistence that the lyric "always condones *aporia* and deferrals of meaning" (13). Operating from an Apollonian definition of the lyric, Kamboureli cannot accept Joseph Riddel's argument that the "theory of the lyric, rather than being antithetical to any notion of the long poem, indeed is the only theory of the long poem" (Riddel 466). Whereas Kamboureli sees the long poem as the undoing of lyric form, Riddel maintains that the lyric "undoes its own frame, or repeats the 'force' of framing with its own metaphorical violence—a play of displacements which the modern 'long poem' only makes explicit" (467). Kamboureli complains that Riddel's conception of the lyric "extends the lyric beyond strict generic specifications" (72), but she herself argues that critics "might even go so far as to consider the contemporary long poem as a mutant form bearing only traces of the genres it derives from, a potentially new species or at least a species engendered by generic shifts" (49). Elsewhere, Kamboureli argues that this kind of "wavering" in genre criticism is "indefensible" (67), but it is impossible to set strict generic limits on either the lyric or the long poem precisely because the disruption of formal limits is an integral part of their aesthetic. Thus, it seems logical to pursue the evolution of the lyric into the long poem and ask if this "mutant form" can transform into a novel, because I have already endorsed Ricoeur's statement that the novel is "the protean genre par excellence" (*Time* 8). In the following chapters, I include a number of interview statements by the novelists in order to emphasize that they consciously built the lyric into a narrative mode in this manner.

According to M.H. Abrams, the "term 'novel' is now applied to a great variety of writings that have in common only the attribute of being extended works of *fiction* written in prose" (117), although the genre may also incorporate sections of poetry, drama, or historical writing.

Etymologically, the *novel* means a "piece of news" (Cuddon 430), and the genre also retains

strong ties to the descriptive traditions of storytelling and reportage. In place of the evocative

glimpse afforded by the lyric, and the symbolic anecdote presented by the long poem, the novel

chooses to accumulate events, meditations, and characterizations. Where the lyricist reduces, the

novelist accretes; where the longliner sketches, the romancer embellishes. The novel's formal

antecedents can be traced to narrative verse, particularly the romance, which gave its name to the

roman. Thus it is significant that in their reconsideration of the novel, Marlatt and Carson return

to the verse origins of narrative to tell their love stories. Marlatt's narrator declares that *Ana*

Historic "is not a roman / ce" (67) and challenges the heteronormative conventions of the

romantic plot, while Carson's novel in verse extrapolates from a long lyric poem by the Greek

poet Stesichoros, "[m]ost Homeric of the lyric poets" (4). Elsewhere, Carson points out that the

"terms 'novel' and 'romance' do not reflect an ancient name for the genre. Chariton refers to his

work as *erōtika pathēmata*, or 'erotic sufferings': these are love stories in which it is generically

required that love be painful. The stories are told in prose and their apparent aim is to entertain

readers" (*Eros* 78). Carson toys with these narrative conventions in *Autobiography of Red* by

relating her protagonist's "erotic sufferings" in a sequence of 47 narrative lyrics (one "book"

short of epic). For both authors, lyric structure provides the tools for reconfiguring the

conventional romance.

Thus, while the lyric and the novel conventionally occupy opposite ends of the generic

spectrum, they are not incompatible. In *The Lyrical Novel* (1963), for example, Ralph Freedman

investigates Herman Hesse's formulation of "[n]arrative as a disguised lyric, [and] the novel as a

borrowed label for the experimentations of poetic spirits to express their feeling of self and

world" (Freedman's trans. 42). Freedman elucidates a "lyrical" technique of submersing

"narrative in imagery and portraiture" (vii) in Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), Woolf's *The*

Waves (1931), and Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (1963). "Lyrical novels," Freedman argues, are not

wholly governed by linear narrative—what he defines as "the surge towards that which does not

yet exist" (7-8). Instead, they exploit the "expectation of narrative by turning it into its opposite:

a lyrical process" (7). Lyrical process continues to be a key concern for contemporary authors

and Bowering even turns the debate about process into an entire subplot in *Burning Water*.

However, Freedman's modernist interpretation of this process does not suit the postmodern

novels in this study. Unlike Freedman, I do not believe that the lyric(al) intends to bound the

novel's energy within the poet's design, such that the "world is reduced to a *lyrical point of view*,

the equivalent of the poet's 'I': the lyrical self" (8). On the contrary, the self designing the poet's

novel is often double: Bowering masquerades as "He" (among other *noms de plume*) in order to

escape his lyrical self; Kogawa and Marlatt stage their own fictional rebirths; and Ondaatje and

Carson blur the boundary between autobiography and biography. This doubleness creates an

interplay of identities that mirrors the juxtaposition of lyric and narrative. There is dissonance in

this juxtaposition, but there is also crossover. The intersubjective frameworks facilitate, rather

than restrict, shifts within the text.

Lyrics in novels generally stand in isolation, acting as lenses that magnify certain aspects

of a larger story (epigrams and codas) or as wedges driven between blocks of prose (embedded

song cycles). However, Hesse's notion of the novel as a disguised lyric raises the question of

how the lyric, which is seemingly absent, or at least set apart in the novel, can influence its prose

without reducing the story to the point of view of the lyric "I." For example, *Ana Historic* is a

conventional Künstlerroman in that it documents the growth of an artist up until the point at

which she has achieved sufficient facility in her craft to write her story. However, the doubling

of author (Marlatt) and metafictive author (Annie) in the text complicates the definition of this

craft. According to one reading, the self-reflexive sections of *Ana Historic* relate the experience

of a poet (Marlatt) composing her first novel. According to another, the novel documents the

birth of a poet (Annie). The novel concludes with a prose poem that is unmistakably a lyric, but which is also an outgrowth of the lyrical prose paragraphs that precede it. To complicate matters further, the way in which the prose poem is framed on the page connects it to a series of self-reflexive epigrams which precede the different sections of the novel. At first, these epigrams seem to be the fragmentary musings of an author as she contemplates the title character (43) and feminist theory (75). Yet these epigrams become increasingly lyrical as the novel progresses (129), and they continually remind the reader that "a book of interruptions is not a novel" (37). The epigrams combine to form a song cycle within the text, but in the coda this song cycle becomes the apotheosis of the story. The lyric voice that has narrated Annie's story takes off its prose disguise and reveals its lyrical self in the coda, even as Annie ceases to pretend she is heterosexual and abandons her homophobic fear. Annie seems to be referring to Zoe when she says, "we give place, giving words, giving birth, to each other—she and me" (n.p.). However, the ambiguity of the pronouns in the coda also permits a reading in which Marlatt the novelist gives birth to Annie the poet, and vice versa. Thus, the juxtaposition of identities and genres in the coda keeps the ending open and unstable.

In contrast, Mary Ann Caws demonstrates in *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction* (1985) that framing devices within prose narrative focalize the perception of a story. Caws maintains that any discussion of literary portraiture implicitly invokes what Roland Barthes calls "The Model of Painting"—that is, "[e]very literary description is a view" (*S/Z* 61) which frames and makes an object of its subject. Although Caws acknowledges that "*all frames are constantly open to shift and exchange*" (5; her emphasis), she underscores the intensifying power that framing devices have. She argues that in the modern novel there are usually key scenes or passages that make use of an elaborate system of framing devices—"architectural surrounds," "drastic contrasts," temporal delays in the flow of the narrative—such that they stand out from the main body of the text (262). While Caws restricts her investigation to novels by Henry

James, Virginia Woolf, and other modernists—"postmodernism," she says, "would lie beyond

the borders of this study, focused on the frame itself" (11)—these observations also pertain to

the postmodern novel, which tests the "limits of language, of subjectivity, of sexual identity, and

we might also add: of systematization" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 8). The fragmented structures

employed by poet-novelists such as Ondaatje and Marlatt also test the limits of genre, as the

authors write paragraphs that resemble stanzas and sustain a lyric intensity that it is more

commonly associated with poetry. Moreover, they tend to equate poetry with visual media such

as photography and painting, such that the "model of painting" in their prose is largely the model

they developed in their poetry.

Jacques Derrida's much-quoted essay on "The Parergon" in *The Truth in Painting* (1987)

offers further insights into the way in which framing procedures in the visual arts pertain to

literary and philosophical issues. Derrida argues that what at first appears to be extrinsic

(wooden frame, epigram, prior publication) to the artwork (canvas, history, portrait) in fact plays

an intrinsic role in mediating the borders of that artwork. Although Derrida is principally

concerned with challenging the logic of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, his reflections

are useful for assessing the relation of epigrams to the novel (as I will demonstrate in the chapter

on Carson), as well as for evaluating the role of artworks alluded to or included in the novels.

For example, in his introduction to *The Rhetoric of the Frame,* a collection of essays that

explores a broad range of discourses (from painting to cartography to pornography), Paul Duro

succinctly paraphrases Derrida's ideas about the parergon: "the frame serves to create a space for

the artwork that the work itself is incapable of furnishing" (1). Feminist art critics such as

Amelia Jones have expanded the scope of this theory of the supplement by arguing that "the

disciplinary logic of framing and its corollary suppression of interpretive desire are informed by

specifically sexual investments" (224). Like Marlatt, Jones links representations of women in

art to broader systems of control over women's bodies and desires. Diane Neumaier affirms this

interpretation in her introduction to *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (1995), where she states that the artists included "share a consciousness that historically, women have been 'framed' through the process of representation and can be 'reframed' through the same process" (1). For these women photographers, as for the many photographers and archival researchers in the ensuing novels, issues of framing in the visual arts parallel a much larger debate about systems of containment in literature and society.

The way that limits are negotiated in the five novels exhibits many features of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," in which the "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" creates the grounds for the "reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (*Poetics* 5). According to Hutcheon, this kind of postmodern fiction "always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" through parody (5). Thus Marlatt states that she "often feel[s]—not *complicit* perhaps, so much as *duplicit* or double. [. . .] [M]y subversion takes the form of re-vising from the inside" (*Labyrinth* 66). This method of revising the historical record also informs the construction of Kogawa's silenced history, Ondaatje's "sub-history" (*Slaughter* 18), Bowering's historical burlesque, and Carson's *testimonia*.

The making and breaking of frames takes on a political importance in this analysis because the principal characters in each of the novels are, in one fashion or another, framed as marginal. Marginality, of course, depends on where one constructs the margin and situates the self. Kogawa initially posits herself as marginal to white Western Canadians in order to demonstrate the way in which Japanese Canadians were framed as the "Yellow Peril." On the other hand, Bowering—as a white male from British Columbia—constructs himself as marginal to the Eastern Canadian literary establishment, British imperialism, and, later, American imperialism. Marlatt, in turn, combats the marginalizing of her lesbian sexuality by patriarchal values, yet struggles with the influence of her colonial upbringing in Malaysia on her mother tongue. Thus, Sneja Gunew argues that the framing of marginality in works of literature is a

highly dynamic process, because marginality is a condition which is both imposed and strategically invoked:

> Being marginalised cannot be reduced simply to a struggle between oppressor and oppressed in which the latter remains utterly passive. In their spatially conceived representation of exclusionary gestures, margins have always been ambiguous signs which have served to frame the centre in terms of indictment as well as approbation. (Gunew 27)

Historiographic metafictions augment this ambiguity by calling attention to the role of the author and reader in framing narrative. For example, Ondaatje's fascination with outlaw figures such as Billy the Kid and Bracefell stems from the fact that these men are heroes or villains depending on who is writing or reading their histories. Likewise, in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson revives the slain figure of Geryon from the tenth labour of Herakles and rewrites the encounter of hero and victim as a gay love affair in which Geryon gets a second chance to defy his mythically ordained defeat. All five authors reconfigure myths and histories to create new interpretative frameworks in which marginal figures may better articulate their stories. However, the authors also show their hand in the framing process, so as to demonstrate the manner in which their own parodies may be dismantled.

Framing the Series

I have undertaken this discussion of the lyric, long poem, and novel to provide some context for the genre questions that inevitably arise in reading books by Ondaatje, Bowering, Kogawa, Marlatt, and Carson. However, the protean elements of these authors' works resist classification and remain highly enigmatic. For example, Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* is sold in the fiction section of my campus bookstore at the University of British Columbia. Bizarrely, however, Carson's *Glass, Irony and God*, a collection of essays and long poems, is also sold in the fiction section. On the other hand, Carson's *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* is sold in the essays and letters section, although it includes the prose-poem novella "The

Anthropology of Water," a section of which was included in *The Journey Prize Anthology* for fiction (Glover). Ondaatje's *The Collected Work of Billy the Kid* also floats between the fiction and poetry shelves. His editors, for their part, classify the book under poetry in the 1988 Penguin edition of *In the Skin of a Lion* and under prose in the 1998 Vintage edition of *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ondaatje himself cites *In the Skin of a Lion* as his first novel and defines *Coming Through Slaughter* negatively as "not a novel" ("1975 Interview" 26), *Running in the Family* as a fictional memoir, and *Billy the Kid* as the verbal equivalent of "the film I couldn't afford to shoot" (20). Ondaatje evidently cherishes this ambiguity, and I wish to augment, rather than dispute it.

Ondaatje's mention of film highlights the fact that, in addition to blurring literary genres, these authors also experiment with different artistic media. As Ondaatje maintains in the introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*, it is important for literary critics to take into consideration that Bowering served as an aerial photographer in the Canadian military. Because the arrested moment in a lyric resembles a photograph, while the long poem's disjointed sequence resembles a series of stills, and the novel's more comprehensive sequence recalls a film, it is important to remember that Ondaatje is a filmmaker, that Carson is a painter, and that all five authors have composed works that intermingle poetry and pictorial art. One could think of the evolution of lyric to long poem to novel in terms of the evolution of photography into serial photography and thence into film, except that in works such as *Billy* this evolution takes place within a single book.

These connections between the visual series and literature necessitate a discussion of the serial poem, a type of long poem that plays a crucial role in the writing of Ondaatje, Bowering, and Marlatt. The serial poem owes a large part of its popularity in Canada to the presence in Vancouver of Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser, the three central figures of the so-called "Berkeley Renaissance" (Ellingham and Killian xviii). Duncan

lectured at the University of British Columbia in 1963 and 1965 and became a mentor to Vancouver's Tish poets. Spicer also lectured at the Vancouver Poetry Festival in 1965. He was "offered a position at Simon Fraser University and would have begun teaching there in the fall of 1965" (Foster 13) had he not died that summer. Blaser, for his part, accepted a teaching position at Simon Fraser University in 1966 and has lived in Vancouver ever since. Together, these poets developed a unique variation on the lyric sequence:

> The serial poem as developed by Duncan, Blaser, and Spicer (who named it) is not simply a series of short works linked thematically and formally as in a sonnet sequence, nor is it what M.L. Rosenthal calls "the modern poetic sequence" in his book of that name, for that sequence is always, at least in part, lyrical, while the serial poem, at least in Spicer's case, arises outside the self and is "dictated." The serial poem may utilize any number of forms, but there is no need to keep a consistent pattern. (Foster 11)

Although Duncan would depart from the group and become involved with the Black Mountain poets, Edward Halsey Foster argues that "Spicer's aesthetic, particularly in terms of the 'serial poem' and 'poetry as dictation,' was largely what he had learned from Duncan" (Foster 31). Spicer and Blaser took as their models "Rilke's *Duino Elegies, Sonnets to Orpheus* and Duncan's *Medieval Scenes*" (Blaser, "1979 Statement" 323). Rilke's lyricism, in turn, profoundly influences Ondaatje's *Tin Roof* (1982) and Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984).[8] However, it is the anti-lyric values that Spicer and Blaser used to modify the lyric sequence that are of interest here.

Although the density, brevity, and musical quality of Spicer's poems would mark them as lyrics, Spicer objected to the lyric "I" and wished to create "a poetry that would be more than the expression of [his] hatreds and desires" (*Lorca* n.p.). He therefore renounced the lyric ego, or what he called "the big lie of the personal" (*Lorca* n.p.), in favour of a more decentred subjectivity. In *After Lorca* (1957), for example, Spicer shrouds his lyric voice by writing a series of "translations" of Lorca. Spicer frames the serial poem with an introductory letter from Lorca in which the dead Spaniard warns that Spicer has chosen English words that alter his

poems' meanings, or inserted new stanzas without warning into the translations, or titled

"translation" poems that are entirely Spicer's own. Spicer accounts for this conceit in his

penultimate letter to Lorca by stating that he thinks his own personality will shine through "the

lovely pattern of cracks in some poem where autobiography shattered but did not quite destroy

the surface" (*Lorca* n.p.). Although *After Lorca* is an early Spicer poem and not typical of his

later, more depersonalized poetic practice, it exhibits the kind of parodic playfulness that one

finds in Carson's translations of Stesichoros in *Autobiography of Red*, as well as in Ondaatje's

portrait of *Billy the Kid*—a response to Spicer's serial poem of the same name. All these works

demonstrate that a common function of framing devices is to make the implicit doubleness of

voice in the author/speaker of the lyric explicit. Thus the suppressed lyric "I" of the poet

frequently resurfaces in a different guise, and, more often that not, is emboldened by association

with artistic geniuses such as Lorca, Stesichoros, and Bolden.

Spicer and Blaser also object to the synchronic quality of the lyric's arrested moment.

Spicer argues that a "poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer" and insists that "words must be

led across time not preserved against it" (*Lorca* n.p.). In the same vein, Blaser maintains that

"the beauty of the idea that you can write a single poem [. . .] is a lie. The processional aspect of

the world has to be caught in the language also" ("Fire" 236). For both authors, the individual

poem is a unit within a book and the book is a unit within an intimate circle of poets. For most of

his career, Spicer "did not want his work published or even distributed outside San Francisco"

(Foster 46), because he believed that "poems do not exist in isolation," but rather in "a

community of readers and other poems" (23). By pooling the energies of the poems and poets,

Spicer and Blaser believe that they create a living poetic continuum, as Blaser explains:

> I'm interested in a particular kind of narrative—what Jack Spicer and I agreed to
> call in our work the serial poem—this is a narrative which refuses to adopt an
> imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact,
> a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity
> of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which

> run out when so much of a tale is told. I like to describe this in Ovidian terms, as a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected. ("Fire" 237-8)

The poets are thus singers in a song cycle that rejects the stamp of an individual ego. Barbour therefore places the serial poem "in the category of anti-lyric" because serial poems "deliberately flout high lyric conventions yet have their own, wild or atonal, music" (*Lyric* 7). However the term anti-lyric, like Bowering's term post-lyric, incorporates the lyric values it contests.

Musical metaphors play an important role in the theorization of the serial poem, as Barbour's comments demonstrate. Curiously, Blaser states that the "term serial was not adapted from serial music" ("1979 Statement" 323), although Spicer coined the term "with reference to both the serial music of Berio and Boulez and to the radio and movie serials that had entertained him as a teenager in Hollywood" (Ellingham and Killian x). Blaser is perhaps uncomfortable with this cross-genre comparison because only Spicer's *Fifteen False Propositions Against God* (1958) could be said to mimic serial music in any strict fashion. However, the atonalities and recursive phrasing in Spicer's work do make the comparison to serial music instructive:

> Serialism [in music] is based on the principle of the twelve-tone method. An order of succession is established for rhythmic values for levels of loudness, for example, as well as for pitches. All of these so-called rows are then repeated during the course of the work. The technique is sometimes called total serialism to distinguish it from the limited serialism involved in the twelve-tone method. The serial composers have included Olivier Messiaen and his pupil Pierre Boulez, both French; Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German; Ernst Krenek, an Austrian; and Milton Babbitt, an American. ("Serial"; see also Vander Weg 1-11)

Indeed, Blaser's own explanatory metaphors are drawn from music. Blaser argues that in Spicer's work there is "a special analogy with serial music: the voice or tongue, the tone, of the poem sounds individually, as alone and small as the poet is [. . .] but sounded in series, it enters a field" ("Outside" 278). Again, discussing his own influential sequence *The Moth Poem* (1962), Blaser states that the poem, which begins with the image of a moth caught in the strings of a piano, records the "wavering interruption of the music of the spheres" ("1991 Statement" 349). Blaser

considers this poem to be a "serial and continuing" sequence whose open form enables him to expand it indefinitely. Thus the final lyric in the 1991 version, "The Translator," is a late addition.

In Canada, the serial poem prevails most of all in the West, but the form has gained national prominence in part through the editorial efforts of Bowering and Ondaatje. In 1964, Bowering established the journal *Imago*, which he intended "for the long poem, the series or set, the sequence, swathes from giant work in progress, long life pains eased into print" (*Imago 1* 2). Bowering published a large number of his own and other authors' serial poems before he abandoned *Imago* in 1974. Five years later, Ondaatje edited *The Long Poem Anthology* with the aim of mapping "important new directions in Canadian poetry and in the long or 'serial' poem" (back cover). In his introduction, Ondaatje echoes Frye and Livesay in his commendation of the long poem in Canada: "it seems to me that the most interesting writing being done by poets today can be found within the structure of the long poem" (11). However, Ondaatje also acknowledges the importance of American influences. He devotes an entire section of the introduction to a long quotation from Blaser's essay on Spicer, "The Practice of Outside" (1975), and the anthology includes a serial poem by Blaser, as does its successor, *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991).

When one compares the serial poems of Blaser and Spicer to those of Bowering and Marlatt (who appear in both anthologies), however, one notices some significant differences. For example, Marlatt is suspicious of the exalted "I" in the lyric tradition, but she is not willing to abandon lyric subjectivity altogether, as she states in a 1970 journal entry: "no Martian (Spicer) writing the poem, tho it is in some sense other (not-me), but energy of the whole stream—sensual in the way as anything alive picks up sensation, reading it—the larger wave we live in" (*What* 155). Instead of taking dictation from "outside" voices, she is determined to cultivate her own embodied voice and make it interact with other voices which have been

excluded from the canonical "inside," such as the voices of the Japanese Canadian fishing community in *Steveston* (1974). Bowering, for his part, rejects the "continuing" aspect of the serial poem and establishes strict compositional limits for his poems in advance. For example, Bowering limited the composition time for each of the 26 sections in *Allophanes* (1976) to the duration of a single lecture by Blaser, such that the temporal framework is one of the limits that the poet works within and against. Bowering's practice of explicitly incorporating the frame into the composition of an artwork is particularly relevant when one considers that Marlatt wrote *Steveston* as a collaboration with the photographer Robert Minden:

> The serial poem—from those guys in San Francisco—is an openended form. It's open*ended*, that is to say, each of the pieces is discrete but it's a series that will decide when it's going to stop and where it's going to go—it could go anywhere. Whereas my sense of the serial is a lot like [Victor] Coleman's sense of serial— and a lot like painters' sense of the serial. Painters say, OK, I'm going to work on this shape, say Roy Kiyooka's Ovals, or I'm going to work in terms of this theme—"Lovers in a Landscape" by Claude Breeze. That's what I have. (Bowering, "1976 Interview" 93)

The example of Kiyooka (1926-1994) here is illustrative because Bowering considers Kiyooka to be "the first Vancouver postmodern poet, partly because he is also deservedly celebrated as a painter, sculptor, and photographer" ("Vancouver" 135). Ondaatje also cites Kiyooka as his ideal of a multimedia artist ("1971 Interview" 12), and readers at the "celebration" that began the Roy Kiyooka Conference in Vancouver (Oct. 1-2, 1999) included Ondaatje, Marlatt, Bowering, and Kogawa.[9] Like Spicer, Kiyooka published most of his poetry books in small editions that he distributed among an influential group of friends, but his connection to Marlatt here is important because she began writing *Ana Historic* after ending an eight-year relationship with him. Because Kiyooka established his reputation as a "hard-edged" painter with a modernist aesthetic in the 1950s and gradually developed a postmodern aesthetic in "photoglyphic narrative[s]" (Kiyooka, "Pacific" n.p.) that juxtaposed photography and poetry, one should also remember that Carson's first book of poetry, *Short Talks* (1992), was originally "a book of drawings with

writing as captions—and the captions proved to be more interesting to other people than the drawings. So in frustration [Carson] put the drawings in the drawer and published the writing" (Carson, "Woman" 29). Although these two artists have radically different lyric voices, they share a talent for blurring the boundary between the visual and written arts.

However, dDespite Kiyooka's use of diverse media, there is at least one formal continuity that runs throughout his work, as he explains:

> I've always been a serial artist. My books are always whole entities. They're not made up of discrete things. That's how I photograph too. I can hardly claim to be the kind of photographer for whom each photographed moment is an exemplary moment, and you frame it, and say, this is like a beautiful poem. No, I'm not that kind of photographer. I need a number of images to articulate what it's about, so I tend to work in sequences. That's so deeply a part of my practice that I don't even think of it. I painted that way too. ("Inter-Face" 52-3)

In fact, Kiyooka simply refers to his poems and photographs as "frames," with minimal distinction between media. For example, preparing a collaborative exhibition based on his serial poem *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine: 18 Frames from a Book of Rhetoric*, Kiyooka writes in a letter to artist Lora Senechal Carney about "his long-time double engagement with pictures and words" and his desire to perform "variations on callit the possibilities of a post-modern sonnet" (qtd. in Carney 30). *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine* (which appears in *The Long Poem Anthology*) pairs poems with collages as well as captions which parody the convention of poem and illustration. Thus **"the 1st Frame** shows" (110) but **"the 3rd Frame** (hides)" (112), **"the 15th Frame** pre-figures" (124) and **"the 18th Frame"** (127) offers no explanation at all. Like the hot air balloon that recurs as a motif in each collage, the poem moves with the drift of its lofty language and surreal associations. Instead of progressing in a straightforward fashion from A to B, the poem offers new and unusual perspectives on a motif as it traces its circuitous path.

In this sense, the balloon is similar to the moth in Blaser's poem. It is "the gift or the dictated"—that is, the found object that becomes the "one dominant musical note or image"

(Blaser, "1979 Statement" 323) on which the artist performs variations. However, operating from a painterly sense of the serial, Kiyooka is more self-conscious about critiquing his own framing practices. His poems and collages emphasize their extravagant mode of composition, as Christian Bök observes:

> Kiyooka performs a surrealist exercise that explores the parataxis of the unconscious through an associative logic of jumpcuts and dissolves. The technological images of both the cinema and the balloon intersect in the semiological genre of a comic-strip, whose bubbles of thought drift through a pageant of frames. (24)

These frames appear in different configurations in *The Long Poem Anthology* and Kiyooka's collected poems, *Pacific Windows*, which emphasizes Kiyooka's playful approach to art. As Eva-Marie Kröller observes, *The Fontainebleau Dream Machine* "attempts no less than a wide-ranging, dialectical, and often humorous critique of history in general, and art in particular, as a grand scheme of self-delusion" ("Roy" 47). Both sublime artwork and encyclopedic prank, Kiyooka's serial poem (un)frames its own technique in order to further the sense of shift in the serial narrative.

Keeping all these influences in mind, from the *variatio* of the lyric sequence to the recursive phrasing of Spicer's serial poems, from the collage of genres in Kamboureli's long poem to the overlay of words and images in Kiyooka's photoglyphic texts, let us proceed to the novels themselves and examine how Ondaatje, Bowering, Kogawa, Marlatt, and Carson draw from their long poems in order to pattern their novels. By studying the recursive symmetries in Ondaatje's imagery, Bowering's circumlocutions, Kogawa's concentric narratives, Marlatt's quest narratives, and Carson's academic apparatuses, I will demonstrate that these authors create lyrical fiction as an extension of their established poetic practice.

CHAPTER 2

Michael Ondaatje: (Un)framing Narrative

> *Solecki: "[D]o you ever look back to the various media interviews you've done*
> *and think of subjects you would like to have had discussed?*
> Ondaatje: Very few people want to talk about architecture.
> *Solecki: Architecture? Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe and that sort*
> *of thing?*
> Ondaatje: No, just in poems and novels. There has been a great change in what
> "structure" is in a poem or in a novel. Or "design." Or the "context" of a novel.
> (Ondaatje, "1984 Interview" 322)

In this interview with Sam Solecki, Ondaatje does not clarify what he means by the "great

change" in the structure of poems and novels. Although Solecki observes that Ondaatje's "longer

works have resisted easy categorization" (324), and other critics refer to his "Booker-winning

novel-poems" (Pyper, "Morgue"), it remains unclear what Ondaatje considers the relation of

poetry to the novel to be. In the interview, Ondaatje refuses to slot his novels into one category

and asserts that "if you're writing a novel then you're writing *against* what you know the novel

is" (325).[10] However, he does state that he thinks of architecture "in terms of repeating and

building images and so making them more potent" (322) and not in terms of "the horse race" of

plot (324). This chapter will examine how Ondaatje repeats and builds on the image of the frame

(picture frames, windows, doors, mirrors) in his long poems *the man with seven toes* (1969) and

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid (1970), as well as in his first novel, *Coming Through*

Slaughter (1976). The frame functions as a self-reflexive motif in these books, because Ondaatje

works against the expectation (entrenched by the epic tradition) of continuous narrative in the

long poem and novel by shaping his narratives as series of discrete but interrelated frames of

poetry and lyrical prose.

This chapter will focus specifically on Ondaatje's fascination with (un)framing the visual

series and transforming it into a song cycle. For example, in *the man with seven toes,* Ondaatje

frames his narrative as a series of individual lyrics loosely based on the "Mrs. Fraser" series of

paintings by the Australian artist Sidney Nolan. Stressing the mythical dimensions of Nolan's art, Ondaatje expands on the Aboriginal dimension of the Mrs. Fraser legend[11] and transforms the painted series into a song cycle. Alluding to the Songlines of Aboriginal myth, the long poem changes the setting of the legend and maps a new poetic territory using ballads and lyrics. Because song cycles work by correspondence and repetition, rather than by linear connection and continuous plot, the poet fashions a disjointed narrative using clusters of lyrics that connect through motifs and recurring themes. The woman's body is the physical link between the separate lyrics because her story of survival is inscribed upon her skin "like a map" (*man* 41). This simile connects the woman's story to traditions of European cartography and colonialism, as well as to Aboriginal traditions of body painting and Songlines. The narrative becomes a kind of secular walkabout, in which the mapping of the violent encounters between the woman and the inhabitants of the desert evolves into a cycle of songs which she performs.

Ondaatje elaborates on this dynamic between the visual series and the song cycle in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which is an aggregate of lyrics, prose anecdotes, photographs, and interviews that critics frequently liken to a "picture album" because of its disjointed, visual style (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 47-48; see also Nodelman 68). "Space throughout the sequence of prose and poetry is bordered by box frames: porch rails, windows, walls, barbed wire fences, and coffins" (Blott 189), because Billy attempts to "fix" his world by framing it as a series of photographs. The poet-outlaw perceives the world in arrested images, even as he avoids arrest himself. He portrays himself evading portraits—or rather, the mysterious Canadian "orchestra" (*Billy* 84) shaping Billy's song cycle present him in this manner. The Canadian artists disturb the fixity implied in a conceit citing photography by constructing a song cycle about mythmaking, rather than about the historical figure.

In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje personifies the dynamic between the song cycle and visual series in the friendship between the jazzman Buddy Bolden and the photographer

Bellocq. The fictional encounter between these two historical figures is structured around the image of the broken frame, which is a trope that represents the synthesis of the artists' respective talents, as well as the process of frame-making and -breaking in Ondaatje's writing. Thus, the dynamic between the song cycle and visual series—which begins as a relationship between source material and adaptation in *the man with the seven toes* and evolves into a trope in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*—functions on the level of metaphor, character, and form in *Coming Through Slaughter*, where the design of the novel is clearly shaped by the rhetorical techniques that Ondaatje developed in his long poems.[12]

Even a cursory look at the architectural metaphors that Ondaatje invokes in his poetry and prose reveals how the author dismantles the rhetorical artifices he constructs. For example, Ondaatje displays an enduring interest in the architectural order of classical and neo-classical buildings, such as the Villa San Girolamo in *The English Patient* and the Wickramasinghe house in *Anil's Ghost*. The vaults, arches, and portals in these abandoned buildings possess a certain elegance, but they are also laden with explosives and targeted by revolutionaries. They provide a temporary shelter for the artist, but they are not a secure destination. After apprenticing in the forms of classicism, Ondaatje's artist-figures apply their skills to the task of undoing the social order that these buildings represent. Thus Patrick, the protagonist of *In the Skin of a Lion*, attempts to dynamite the neo-classical Toronto Water Works, on which he has laboured. In the same novel, Ondaatje dramatizes the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct, and transforms the webbed girders of the bridge into a "main character" and "love objec[t]" (Ondaatje, "Where" 4-5). However, he contrasts the romance of bridge construction with Patrick's bombing of a Muskoka resort that caters to the Toronto elite. A similar scenario configures "Spider Blues," where Ondaatje's "black architec[t]"—the poet-spider[13]— "thinks a path and travels / the emptiness that was there / leaves his bridge behind" (62). While the poet admires the "classic" control of the spider's architecture, he reminds his reader that these "constructions / for succulent

travel" are the product of a "murderous art" in which visionaries (whether the spider, poet, or Commissioner Harris) lock their victims "in their dream" (62-3). "Spider Blues" questions the rage for order in Ondaatje's early lyrics, which were "obsessed with trapping and ordering the flux of phenomenal existence in well-crafted, closed artefacts" (Heighton 227). The shifting perspectives, self-reflexive tone, and length of "Spider Blues" suggest a re-alignment in Ondaatje's poetics in which he elevates an image into a conceit and then takes it apart.

This (un)framing strategy recurs in many of the heavily anthologized poems from *Rat Jelly* (1973), including "The Gate in His Head." Bowering regards this poem as a turning point in Ondaatje's career because it marks "a departure, if not in form at least in intention, from his earlier predilection for preserving his objects in the amber of his directed emotions. In [Ondaatje's] poetry since 1973, and more so in his non-lyric works, we have seen him seeking the unrested form he requires" ("Ondaatje" 164). Bowering argues that the poem represents a move away from Ondaatje's "habit [. . .] of intensifying the world, of fashioning artifice" (164), but in 1980 Ondaatje was still defining the poem as "a work of art. It's an artifice, it's a chair, it was made by somebody" ("Moving" 139), and that somebody Ondaatje prefers to call "an artisan" instead of a "poet" (143). Whereas Bowering regards "The Gate in His Head" as transitional, Stephen Heighton considers the poem "a kind of manifesto; it is a clear assertion about what poetry should be and how it can fly by the nets of language" (Heighton 226). However, one should note the element of paradox in Heighton's reading of this pivotal lyric. The poem is a clear assertion against clarity: "not clarity but the sense of shift." The lyric frames its own unframing and thereby enacts a paradoxical process that shapes much of Ondaatje's poetry. Like Carson, who believes that paradox is the essence of desire, Ondaatje sees paradox as a productive force, precisely because it is not restive.

From the perspective of (un)framing, Ondaatje's most concise architectural vision appears in "House on a Red Cliff," a lyric from his 1998 collection of poems, *Handwriting*.

Ondaatje uses the image of a flamboyant tree growing up through the skeleton of a fire-ravaged

house to symbolize his poetic process:

> The flamboyant a grandfather planted
> having lived through fire
> lifts itself over the roof
>
> unframed
>
> the house an open net
>
> where the night concentrates
> on a breath
>   on a step
> a thing or gesture
> we cannot be attached to (67)

The image of "the roof / unframed" and the metaphor of the "house an open net" connect this

lyric to a number of earlier Ondaatje poems, such as "The Gate in His Head," where the poet's

"mind is pouring chaos/ in nets onto the page," and "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens," where

"W.S. in his suit/ is thinking chaos is thinking fences." Solecki analyzes the latter two poems in

"Nets and Chaos" and argues that the "tension between mind and chaos is at the centre of

Ondaatje's poetry; and its implications can be seen in the dualistic nature of his imagery, in the

deliberate thematic irresolution of his major lyrics, and in the complex structuring of his two

longer poems, *the man with seven toes* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*" (94). Such

dualism and irresolution also characterize the concluding stanzas of "House on a Red Cliff":

> The long, the short, the difficult minutes
> of night
>
> where even in darkness
> there is no horizon without a tree
>
> just a boat's light in the leaves
>
> Last footstep before formlessness (68)

These stanzas contrast long and short, light and dark, horizontal and vertical to bring one object into focus against another, but the images ultimately gravitate towards obscurity and silence. The drift is entropic.

Entropy governs most of Ondaatje's major poems, such as "Letters & Other Worlds," where the poet's father composes "gentle letters [. . .] / With the clarity of architects" and then falls drunkenly to his death, "the blood searching in his head without metaphor" (46). Ondaatje's fascination with the dissolution of form stems from his desire to keep the conclusions of his poems open: "I would hate to think that a poem completed was a total canning of an incident or an event. It's something more; [. . .] there's got to be an open door or something at the end of the poem, so that you can step out or the writer can step out and admit that this isn't everything" ("Moving" 140). In his search for an open form, Ondaatje admits to being influenced by bp Nichol's "morality, how you have to lead the audience into your own perceptual sense, but then having a responsibility to lead them out again" ("1971 Interview" 12). A close examination of Ondaatje's first book-length poem, *the man with seven toes,* will demonstrate that the author leads his readers into the framework of Nolan's paintings and then leads them out again by unframing the visual series and transforming it into a song cycle reminiscent of an Aboriginal Songline.

In a 1975 interview with Solecki, Ondaatje explains that he based *the man with seven toes* on a series of paintings by Sidney Nolan on the Mrs. Fraser story: "I got fascinated by the story of which I only knew the account in the paintings and the quote from Colin MacInnes" (20). Ondaatje reprints the MacInnes account at the end of *the man with seven toes*, effectively sharing with the reader most of what he knows about Mrs. Fraser, since only a modest selection of paintings from the Mrs. Fraser series is reproduced in Ondaatje's sourcebook, *Sidney Nolan*:

> Mrs. Fraser was a Scottish lady who was shipwrecked on what is now Fraser Island, off the Queensland Coast. She lived for 6 months among the aborigines, rapidly losing her clothes, until she was discovered by one Bracefell, a deserting convict

who himself had hidden for 10 years among the primitive Australians. The lady asked the criminal to restore her to civilization, which he agreed to do if she would promise to intercede for his free pardon from the Governor. The bargain was sealed, and the couple set off inland.

At first sight of European settlement, Mrs. Fraser rounded on her benefactor and threatened to deliver him up to justice if he did not immediately decamp. Bracefell returned disillusioned to the hospitable bush, and Mrs. Fraser's adventures aroused such admiring interest that on her return to Europe she was able to exhibit herself at 6d a showing in Hyde Park. (*man* 44; see MacInnes 21-2)

Ondaatje's placement of this synopsis at the end of *the man with seven toes* both frames and unframes his narrative. It provides a basic plot line for his lyric sequence, which is largely unintelligible on first reading because it was originally written for dramatic performance. The sequence refuses all background commentary, proceeds in brief imagistic fragments, and switches voice without warning between three different speakers: a narrator, an unnamed woman, and a male convict. To borrow a metaphor from Stephen Spender in his catalogue introduction to Nolan's series, Ondaatje's lyrics are "visible links in the chain of an invisible narrative" (n.p.). However, although the painted and poetic series are interlinked, they are not the same narrative.

The MacInnes synopsis goes some way to framing *the man with seven toes* retroactively, but it cannot be used as a rigid template for plotting Ondaatje's sequence. Ondaatje's heroine is not shipwrecked off the Queensland Coast; rather, she chooses to get off a train in the middle of the Australian outback. Lost in the arid landscape, the woman escapes starvation by being adopted by a tribe of Aborigines, which is an aspect of the myth barely treated by the painter and not represented in *Sidney Nolan*. Ondaatje's heroine makes a pact with a convict named Potter, not Bracefell, and the poet concentrates on the sexual and violent aspects of the couple's journey. Nolan, in contrast, gives their wanderings an Edenic quality and emphasizes the woman's betrayal of the man. Only the middle section of Ondaatje's narrative—the swamp scenes (18-25) and the convict portrait (32-33)—appear to derive from Nolan's paintings. Ondaatje thus unframes the narrative basis of Nolan's series and incorporates certain lyrical and mythic

elements from it into his song cycle. The MacInnes synopsis helps to make sense, retroactively, of the overarching narrative and theme. However, on second reading, one reaches the synopsis and realizes that Ondaatje has largely rewritten the Mrs. Fraser story.

Elsewhere, Ondaatje's cavalier treatment of source material has caused critics such as Arun Mukherjee to condemn his blatant "misuse of historical figures" (99).[14] However, Ondaatje makes no pretense to historical accuracy in *the man with seven toes,* and the whole issue of authentic portrayal is particularly fraught here because Mrs. Fraser herself altered her story to suit syndication (Alexander 131). Furthermore, the paintings Ondaatje uses as his source material "only vaguely suggest the stories and myths they are associated with" (Lynn 38). Nolan veers away from history towards myth, since his source, the *Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle,* is already "*Embellished with engravings, portraits and scenes illustrative of the narrative,*" as its subtitle makes clear. Ondaatje proceeds even further along this mythic tagent and both artists clearly regard the dismantling of previous narratives as part of their imperative to create anew.

the man with seven toes begins with a kind of derailment:

> The train hummed like a low bird
> over the rails, through
> desert and pale scrub,
> air spun in the carriages.
>
> She moved to the doorless steps
> where wind could beat her knees.
> When they stopped for water she got off
> sat by the rails on the wrist thick stones.
>
> The train shuddered, then wheeled away from her.
> She was too tired even to call.
> Though, come back, she murmured to herself. (9)

This lyric is the most straightforward in Ondaatje's sequence, but the movement away from conventional syntax and linear narrative (symbolized by the train) has already begun. The first

sentence is a run-on. The connective "and" disappears from the phrase "she got off / sat by the rails," and the dramatic voice intrudes unheralded in the concluding sentence.

The gaps in syntax and storyline widen with the appearance of the Aborigines:

> Not lithe, they move
> like sticklebacks,
> you hear toes
> crack with weight,
> elbows sharp as beaks
> grey pads of knees.
>
> Maps on the soles of their feet (13)

Ondaatje leaves the linear train of thought behind in the first lyric and arranges his poem spatially, in blocks of images that combine to form a literary map. The map metaphor also recalls Robin Blaser's definition of the serial poem, which Ondaatje cites in *The Long Poem Anthology*: "It has to be a renewed language and information that becomes a kind of map" (Blaser, "Practice" 278). Like the picture frames with which Ondaatje is obsessed in *Billy* and *Slaughter*, the map doubles as a way of seeing and a way of writing. It is the first of many metaphors and analogies from the visual arts that Ondaatje exploits in his book-length works.

By writing a lyric sequence inspired by Nolan's paintings, Ondaatje engages in an ekphrastic process that reverses Nolan's own method. Just as Ondaatje works with maps and photographs, "literary and visual impressions have always gone hand in hand in [Nolan's] work" (Lynn 7). He has illustrated Shakespeare's sonnets, translated and illustrated Rimbaud, and exhibited his famous Ned Kelly series alongside excerpts from his literary sources. A voracious reader, Nolan spoke "frequently, until as late as 1947, of becoming a poet" (Lynn 8). He wrote "short, condensed attempts at poetic prose" and his "habit of writing down visual impressions rather than making preliminary graphic, or painted, sketches" (B. Robertson 37) persisted throughout his career. The conjunction of Nolan's paintings with Ondaatje's poems therefore produces a movement that can be summarized as Verse: Ekphrasis: (Re)Verse, except that this

reversal of direction in genre does not retrace the same narrative path. Under close examination, the connections between Nolan and Ondaatje prove to be stronger in style than in content.

Nolan's painterly example shows Ondaatje how to combine lyricism with narrative by developing myth in a series of imagistic fragments. For example, in the swamp scenes evocative of Nolan's paintings, Ondaatje's tone is clipped but his metaphors are layered and dense:

> Then swamp is blue
> green, the mist
> sitting like toads.
> Leaves spill snakes
> their mouths arched
> with bracelets of teeth.
> Once a bird, silver
> with arm wide wings
> flew a trail between trees
> and never stopped,
> caught all the sun
> and spun like mercury away from us (23)

With its vivid imagery and narrow narrative scope, this lyric fits into the larger series like a segment of a storyboard for a film. It offers a succession of glimpses, rather than full-blown descriptions. It "relies on a form made up of brief self-contained, often cinematic, lyrics each of which explodes upon the reader with a single startling revelation" (Solecki, "Point" 138), just as Nolan combines an intense lyricism with "a commitment to sudden moments of revelation" (43). In fact, Ondaatje made a proposal to the National Film Board of Canada to adapt *the man with seven toes* as "cinema verité in the desert," but "they couldn't see it as one" (Ondaatje, "1971 Interview" 12). Nolan, for his part, "never made films, but in the early 1940s he was convinced that new forms of myth [. . .] would be best expressed through film" (Sayers 23). While at work on his Ned Kelly series, Nolan "wrote glowingly of Walt Disney, describing things as though they were sequences from films. As he struggled with his canvases, he dreamed of film, a medium not 'bounded by four straight lines, colour that moves while you watch it and music at your elbow into the bargain'" (Sayers 23). Nolan's storyboard technique connects his series to

film, but it also recalls the "early Renaissance panels that showed various stages of a saint's journey or martyrdom" (Lynn 23). Although it "is rare for a series of paintings on a single theme and treated with [such] a sustained, lyrical intensity [. . .] to be preserved as a unit" (23), it is precisely the possibility of sustaining the intensity of the lyric over longer and longer stretches of narrative that interests Ondaatje at this point in his career.

Nolan and Ondaatje thus develop similar cinematic and lyrical techniques, but they produce two different "films." For example, both artists make extensive use of image repetition, because "jump cuts" between motifs create continuity within the serial narrative. Nolan's paintings exhibit a facination "with plastic rhymes, with the repetition of similar shapes: the hump of a camel mirrors the hollow of a gully; birds' legs mock the branches of trees" (Lynn 34).[15] Similarly, bird imagery appears in all the selections from *the man with seven toes* I have quoted thus far, because, as Ondaatje frequently remarks, myth is created by "a very careful use of echoes—of phrases and images. There may be no logical connection when these are placed side-by-side, but the variations are always there setting up parallels" ("Afterword" 266-267). Thus, Ondaatje's opening simile of the train humming "like a low bird" introduces an image pattern that echoes throughout the song cycle. When the woman encounters the Aborigines, she observes that their faces are "scarred with decoration / feathers" (11) and their elbows are "sharp as beaks" (13). When she encounters their goats, she reacts to the animals' "balls bushed in the centre / cocks rising like birds flying to you" (16). The bird imagery becomes increasingly masculine and sexual when Potter gives his name and a "bird screeche[s] hideously past" (19). The woman notices that he has a "cock like an ostrich" (32), echoing her observation on the previous page that the eyelids of birds are "fresh as foreskins" (31).

These phallic birds give the penultimate lyric in the collection a distinctly erotic overtone:

She slept in the heart of the Royal Hotel

> Her burnt arms and thighs
> soaking the cold off the sheets.
> She moved fingers onto the rough skin,
> traced the obvious ribs, the running heart,
> sensing herself like a map, then
> lowering her hands into her body.
>
> In the morning she found pieces of a bird
> chopped and scattered by the fan
> blood sprayed onto the mosquito net,
> its body leaving paths on the walls
> like red snails that drifted down in lumps.
>
> She could imagine the feathers
> while she had slept
> falling around her
> like slow rain (41)

The dream-like image of white feathers falling around the woman while she sleeps raises the question of whether the entire poem is in fact her dream.   For example, noting that the Aborigines resemble "figures of a delirium" more than real people, Travis Lane remarks that "[i]t is as if the poem is her dream and Potter, the title-hero, the chief figure of her dream" (159). If the woman is indeed dreaming, the bird imagery follows a pattern of dream formation identified by Scherner[16] and cited by Freud:

> [I]n all symbolic dream-structures which arise from particular nervous stimuli, the imagination observes a general law: at the beginning of a dream it depicts the object from which the stimulus arises only by the remotest and most inexact allusions, but at the end, when the pictorial effusion has exhausted itself, it nakedly presents the stimulus itself. (449)

This line of interpretation also suggests that the woman's subconscious has superimposed the story of Mrs. Fraser onto figures from her own experience. Certainly the nightmarish rape scenes and the castration images of the bird in the fan and Potter's severed toes invite a psychoanalytic reading of the narrative. Ondaatje encourages this reading with the statement that a writer "has to be on the border where [. . .] craft meets the accidental and the unconscious, as close as possible to the unconscious" ("1975 Interview" 22). However, Nolan's influence, as well as the

prominent role given to the Aborigines, suggests another interpretation that is more relevant to the broader discussion here.

Reassessing *the man with seven toes* toward the end of her article, Lane argues that the long poem "presents not a dream so much as history as a dream" (159). This interpretation raises the question of whether the poem presents, not so much a dream, as a secular Dreaming. The seeds of this Dreaming are already sown in Nolan's series, which aimed to create myth from comparatively recent Australian legends and reflected a particular post-war ideology. In the 1950s, Nolan acted as a contributing editor to *Angry Penguins*, a review of literature and the arts which "represented the spirit of experiment, of cosmopolitan modernism opposed, for example, to the Jindyworobaks, a literary group which felt that European civilisation and its discontents could be replaced by a return to the myths and environment of Australia's original inhabitants" (Lynn 15).[17] Nolan embraced myth, but he wished to create myths out of characters from the more recent past, such as Ned Kelly or Burke and Wills. In retrospect, the chief editor of *Angry Penguins*, Max Harris, remarks that the "time had come (despite Patrick White's later theory of environmental alienation) to express a white man's 'dreaming' in terms of poetry and painting" (M. Harris 16). By "dreaming," Harris refers to the Aboriginal myths detailing the creation of the universe, which map the Australian landscape through "Songlines":

> As every story or Dreaming relates to a particular feature of the landscape, series of stories create a track across the land connecting these places and the mystical happenings associated with them. These ancient tracks, which are called Songlines, go in all directions crossing the entire continent and initiated men and women can travel along these Songlines and interact with people from other tribes. (Corbally Stourton 21)

Ondaatje's series of lyrics creates a mythical track across his literary landscape, but there is a visual expression of this Dreaming that complements its oral performance. One of the principal methods for representing a Dreaming is body painting, which is "looked upon as a great skill, and women practice it widely in most communities" (Corbally Stourton 17). In the Royal Hotel,

Ondaatje's heroine creates a kind of body painting from the physical legacy of her journey as she moves her fingers over her skin. Having tracked across large portions of the outback, she traces the curves of her body "like a map," which connects her to the Aborigines who had "[m]aps on the soles of their feet." Her roving hands also reconfigure a European tradition of metaphorical conceits in which male poets, such as John Donne in "Elegy 19," conflate the exploration of the female body with the colonization of foreign territories. The autoeroticism of the concluding lyric recontextualizes this tradition. The woman both embodies her history and dreams it into the present in altered form. Solecki therefore views the woman/Mrs. Fraser as "an Australian version of Atwood's Susanna Moodie, gradually developing from a situation in which she is alienated from the land to the point where she is one with it" ("Point" 138). Certainly Mrs. Fraser, in her various incarnations, has become a kind of Great Ancestor to White Australian art and literature in the same way that Moodie has achieved mythic status in Canada.[18] The stories of both women serve as archetypes of the European immigrant experience.

Nolan's later portraits of Mrs. Fraser have more in common with the Jindyworobaks, as Nolan represents the legendary woman using the design configurations of Aboriginal rock painting. Ondaatje, similarly, borrows from Aboriginal traditions to make his heroine a figure of oral history. She becomes a legend immortalized in song, like Potter, whose first appearance inspires a bush ballad:

> *Potter was a convict*
> *brought in on the GLITTER DAN*
> *they landed him in Adelaide*
> *in a week the bugger ran*
>
> *The bounty men they came for him*
> *they looked for sixty weeks*
> *but Potter lived on wolves and birds*
> *down in Cooper's Creek (20)*

This passage supplies another example of Ondaatje's freewheeling use of historical details. The reference to Cooper's Creek alludes to an entirely separate myth, the tragic deaths of the Australian explorers Burke and Wills, which itself distorts the facts:

> Burke and Wills are popularly believed to have died in the desert when in fact they were camped by Cooper's Creek, with no shortage of water, in an area where local Aborigines easily obtained a varied and adequate diet. But by focusing on the horrors of the desert, these myths generated both national martyrs and an expectation that White Australians "deserved" the land and anything else they could wrest from it, as minimal recompense for the sufferings and death of their heroic representatives. (Haynes 33)

In contrast to the explorers, who were arrogant in their goals and ignorant in their means, Potter moves easily between European and Aboriginal cultures and so forages and survives. Nolan also painted a series about Burke and Wills, but he represented them as awkward and incompetent figures, not heroes. This fact suggests that Ondaatje gives Bracefell the name of Potter because *the man with seven toes* is a pottage of Nolan's various series on Mrs. Fraser, Burke and Wills, Leda and the Swan, and outback hotels.[19] Potter is another of Ondaatje's beloved mongrels, an inference prefigured by the cover image of "Man and Dog" and by the appearance of the wild dog who accompanies the woman in the second lyric of the sequence.

While Potter's exploits are recorded in the rollicking ballad forms of the outback, the woman's song begins with a melodic verse from the Scottish ballad, "Waly, Waly":

> *When we came into Glasgow town*
> *we were a lovely sight to see*
> *My love was all in red velvet*
> *and I myself in cramasie (42)*

In contrast to the pastoral themes of traditional Scottish ballads, Ondaatje adds two stanzas full of urban images that stress the industrial environment of Glasgow. In this setting, the attraction of the woman seems to be her connection to Aboriginal culture and its traditions of oral performance:

> *Three dogs came out from still grey streets*
> *they barked as loud as city noise,*

their tails and ears were like torn flags
and after them came girls and boys

The people drank the silver wine
they ate the meals that came in pans
And after eating watched a lady
singing with her throat and hands (42)

Whereas the real Mrs. Fraser exhibited her scars in London's Hyde Park, Ondaatje's woman

sings and acts out her songs. The crowd comes to hear the woman, Ondaatje implies, because

the Scots are also a clannish people with "wild rivers" coursing beneath their rational "calm":

Green wild rivers in these people
running under ice that's calm,
God bring you also some tender stories
and keep you all from hurt and harm (42)

Like the Aborigines, the Scottish audience responds enthusiastically to storytelling in song, and

their industrial present only heightens their fascination with the mythic past. By staging *the man*

with seven toes as a dramatic performance at the Vancouver Poetry Festival in 1968 and at the

Stratford Festival in 1969, Ondaatje aimed to reach his audience in a similar fashion.

This interpretation presupposes that Ondaatje had some interest in Aboriginal culture in

1967. I am confident that Ondaatje was familiar with the concepts of the Songline and

walkabout, but he does not allude to any specific Aboriginal myths in *the man with seven toes*.[20]

Rather, he tends to collapse myths into myth:

I am interested in myth. Making it, remaking it, exploding. I don't like poems or
works that cash in on a cliché of history or a personality. I don't like pop westerns
and pop Billy the Kids. Myths are only of value to me when they are realistic as
well as having other qualities of myth. Another thing that interests me about myth
is how and when figures get caught in myths. I thought Tony Richardson's film
on Ned Kelly was marvellous for this reason, better for me than *Bonnie and*
Clyde. ("1972 Interview" 21)

These comments on myth (also the topic of Ondaatje's Master's thesis) suggest a bridge between

the man with seven toes and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The association of Billy the

Kid with Ned Kelly in this paragraph is striking because Ondaatje has stated that he was

"previously interested in Nolan's Ned Kelly series" before he began *the man with seven toes* ("1975 Interview" 20). Like Billy, Nolan's Kelly is "a protean figure responding to Nolan's changing styles and attitudes" (Lynn 48). Also like Billy—who was not included in the general amnesty for the deaths incurred by the Lincoln County War—Kelly "began as a joking saint and as an icon-figure of justice and revenge" and eventually became "a lonely resister, a protester without a programme, carrying out ritualistic murders whose original cause has been forgotten" (Lynn 48). Nolan himself identified Kelly with Billy and, while living in New York, travelled to see "the pageant of Lincoln in New Mexico where the story of Billy the Kid is enacted" because the harsh landscape "kept Kelly fresh in his mind" (39). Cementing this connection, Ondaatje links the two outlaw myths in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by borrowing Kelly's famous helmet motif from Nolan.

Ondaatje's "picture of Billy" (5), the empty picture frame that opens and closes *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* strongly suggests the square black helmet worn by Nolan's outlaw. Although the historical Kelly wore his iron helmet only once, the head of Nolan's outlaw appears as a black square with an eye aperture in every panel from the Kelly series. Nolan fashioned and re-fashioned the helmet motif until it became "as important in Nolan's work as [. . .] the guitar for Braque, Picasso and Gris" (Lynn 10):

> Kelly's helmet, forged against a day of doom, but finally encompassing Kelly's ruin, epitomizes Kelly's destiny. In the 1946-7 paintings the helmet is a mask; in the paintings about 1955 the helmet and face are almost one, and in 1964 in a painting where Kelly and a horse almost sink in a swamp, the ruddy face transforms the helmet into a fleshy cube. (Lynn 28)

Kelly's helmet becomes his identity even as it hastens his demise, just as Billy's absent portrait thematizes the pursuit, capture, and escape of the outlaw. The real Kelly gang hammered metal ploughshares into bulletproof helmets and body armour in preparation for a shoot out with police, which they lost, in part because the weight of their armour prevented their escape. Similarly, Ondaatje's Billy shoots portraits and jails his adversaries in his stories, until he himself

is jailed and, later, shot. Thus, Ondaatje follows Nolan in matching the outlaw's portrait to his

way of perceiving (through windows, peepholes, riflesights) and of being perceived (inside the

frame of the artwork, as a "framed" criminal).

Such frames-within-frames focus the audience's vision telescopically, as Nolan makes

explicit in the picture of "Mrs. Fraser 1947," where the "grey surround makes the scene appear to

be caught in the lens of binoculars" (MacInnes 74). Narrowing the focus also limits the narrative

panorama and privileges a particular viewing subject in the manner of a lyric. Thus, in

attempting to sustain the allusiveness and intensity of the lyric voice without sacrificing the

momentum of narrative, Ondaatje takes a cue from the way that Kelly's helmet creates "rhythm

and passage over time" (Sayers 24):

> Not only does the helmet allow the Kelly legend to be told with the minimum of
> anecdotal elaboration, but it is also used as an icon of multiple emotions.
> Through the aperture the eyes blaze with revenge, droop with regret, are haunted
> with remorse or fade into weary introspection. Sometimes the aperture shows
> only the land and the sky. This, with the uniformly black, flat silhouette of the
> helmet, is an optical device to create a vivacious, tangible area in contrast to the
> smudgy details. When the landscape is concentrated in the aperture—like a
> picture within a picture—it crystallises, epitomises the impact; at the same time
> the helmet creates a focal point and gives cohesion to the scattered, dispersed
> landscape. (Lynn 29)

In *Billy*, Ondaatje's settings are sparsely detailed, his characterizations anecdotal, and his scenes

brief, but he introduces the frame as a recurring composition to create continuity and emotional

focus.

By placing the empty frame at the beginning of his text, Ondaatje invites his audience to

read *Billy* through this perceptual lens. Ondaatje has stated that "when you write you create a

photograph in some way" ("Personal" 4) and his framed compositions in *Billy* combine to form a

portrait of the outlaw in the absence of a photograph. However, because the significance of the

empty frame is not immediately apparent, Ondaatje juxtaposes it with a quotation from the

frontier photographer L.A. Huffman:

> I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked—Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire—bits of snow in the air—spokes well defined—some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main—men walking are no trick—I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle with the ground glass or tripod—please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion. (*Billy* 5)

In much the same way that he used Coleman's letter and the gull photograph in "The Gate in His Head," Ondaatje uses Huffman's commentary here to outline a poetics. The excerpt foreshadows many stylistic developments in the ensuing text: it is a prose passage that begins in a colloquial voice and then (d)evolves into a poetic tone through fragmentation that elides subjects, verbs, and connective phrases, and favours clusters of nouns. It unframes the conventional syntax of the opening clause and fashions a more vital poetic diction from fragments. Indeed, as Barbour observes, the excerpt reflects Ondaatje's writing style because Ondaatje composed it:

> [The letter] is really a carefully edited pastiche of two separate letters from Huffman to Perrin Cuppy Huffman, 18 January 1885 and 7 June 1885; the *name* of the person photographed is *Bessie*, Huffman's daughter, and the letters are found in the *chapter* titled "L.A. Huffman, Frontier Photographer," in Mark H. Brown and W.R. Felton, *The Frontier Years: L.A. Huffman Photographer of the Plains*[.] (*Ondaatje* 222)

Furthermore, Huffman photographed the disappearing Western frontier in Montana, not New Mexico, so it is unlikely that he would have encountered Billy. Thus, instead of presenting a portrait of Billy the Kid in the opening pages, Ondaatje presents a portrait of *Billy*, the written artifact.

Ondaatje's descriptive passages are frequently double-coded, such that the actions they describe also illustrate the author's writing process. For example, the barn scene (17-18) supplies a picture of Billy as well as enacting the process of (un)framing that shapes Ondaatje's writing. The first four paragraphs establish order and harmony with even prose descriptions in which Billy observes how objects "se[t] up patterns in the dark." Billy "avoid[s] the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish," and he "never [eats] flesh or touch[es] another

animal's flesh, never enter[s] his boundary" (17). He depicts an orderly, almost mechanical

universe that suddenly plunges into chaos when some rats (drunk on fermented grain) attack

each other. His tranquility disturbed, Billy sits on a window ledge, pulls out his revolver, and

kills everything that moves. When the smoke clears, only Billy remains: "the boy in the blue

shirt sitting there coughing at the dust" (18). The framed image of Billy in the window gauging

the aftermath of his violence is as emblematic a portrait as any in the text, and the "syntax of the

passage is paradigmatic in its dissolution of subject-verb-object connections and its pronominal

uncertainty. Billy narrates a self he cannot hold in place: it slips from first to third person, as the

peace slips into violence" (Barbour, *Ondaatje* 52). Billy's Apollonian love of frames thus lays

the groundwork for his Dionysian fits of unframing.

Initially, the empty frame substitutes for Billy's portrait because the outlaw wants "to

freeze action in a series of still photographs, or a series of shots approaching still photographs"

(Cooley, "Here" 217), even as he evades capture by camera or gun. The frame is empty because

the outlaw likes to portray himself as escaping portraits, jails, and domestic ties to women. For

example, in a sexually charged encounter with Angela D., Billy gets caught in a sun picture as

Angela moves seductively from the door jam towards the bed where he lies:

> she walks slow to the window
> lifts the sackcloth
> and jams it horizontal on a nail
> so the bent oblong of sun
> hoists itself across the room
> framing the bed the white flesh
> of my arm (21)

Ensnared by Angela's seductive approach, Billy reacts by turning himself into a camera: "I am

very still/ I take in all the angles of the room" (21). He freezes the scene as a photograph and

stops the poem before Angela can take him. As in the visual narrative of a storyboard, the gap

between this frame and the next leaves much to the reader's imagination.

Even alone, Billy peers through an endless series of thresholds and portals which mimic the camera obscura on which the photographic camera is based. Consider, for example, the "7 foot high doorway" whose "slide of sun" Billy watches and avoids:

> I am on the edge of the cold dark
> watching the white landscape in its frame
> a world that's so precise
> every nail and cobweb
> has magnified itself to my presence (74)

In this scene, the reader finds "Billy, typically, staring warily at the edge, constantly on edge. In every way an out-law, he tries, at times distends and transgresses, boundaries. More often, he fears to cross the lines, hopes to defend his hard-held borders against all trespassers" (Cooley, "Here" 212). The outlaw positions himself on the edge between presence and absence, caught vision and unfettered motion in order to unsettle the photographic frames he creates.

The connection between Billy and framing is so insistent that the (un)framed composition immediately identifies Billy as the perceiving "I." Ducking out of portraits and shooting word pictures (like Huffman) with his horse in motion, Billy challenges the notion of photography as a static art. This critical position, which I have endorsed thus far, can be seen for example in Nodelman's "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," where the critic argues that "Billy's artistry is a matter of stopping change—the dead stillness of the actual photographs in the book mirrors the dead stillness of Billy's own perception of the world; he 'fixes' things, either with guns or with the photographic 'word pictures' of his collected works" (76). Yet, when Billy recalls Huffman's blurred (and fictitious) photograph, he reminds his critics that photography does not necessarily fix its subject: "I remember, when they took the picture of me there was a white block down the fountain road where somebody had come out of a building and got off the porch onto his horse and ridden away while I was waiting standing still for the acid in the camera to dry firm" (68). Like the gull in "The Gate in His Head," the subject of this photograph moves to the clear. Add mind-altering chemicals into the mix, and the effect is like a dam break, as

Billy discovers when he experiments with red dirt marijuana: "I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. I was standing on a wall, at my feet there was this bucket and in the bucket was a pump and I was pumping water out over the wall. Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo" (50). However momentarily caught, these subjects are not permanently arrested.

Because Billy moves out of the frames of his own photography, *The Collected Works* proves to be less an historical portrait of an American icon than an exploration of "how and when figures get caught in myths" (Ondaatje, "1972 Interview" 21). Ondaatje sets the story in a "fantasy west" ("Personal" 3) that he lyricizes (in Billy's poems), dramatizes (in the interview dialogue), and satirizes (in the comic book legend). This outlaw fantasy began to take shape for the author at "about the age of seven":

> Roughly when the last picture in the book (of me in Ceylon in a cowboy outfit) was taken. Then it wasn't specifically Billy the Kid, but *cowboys* that was important. [. . .] The question that's so often asked—about why I wrote about an American hero [—] doesn't really interest me cos I hardly knew what an American was when the image of 'cowboy' began that germinating process. I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country or having some political or sociological meaning. ("1972 Interview" 20)

Ondaatje's fantasy Billy is thus part Ceylonese cowboy, part comic book hero, part Australian bushranger, and part American legend. The photograph of Ondaatje the Kid, the comic book illustrations, and the visual allusions to Ned Kelly communicate the fantastic, rather than photo-realistic, basis of the text.

From the opening catalogue—where Billy intones in the present tense: "These are the killed./ (By me)" (6)—Ondaatje's presence behind Billy's persona is evident. Gradually, however, Ondaatje dismantles the artifice of Billy speaking from beyond the grave. For example, several passages where Billy possesses an uncommon knowledge for a nineteenth-century cattle rustler strike an anachronistic chord, such as this reference to a white dwarf:

> I have seen pictures of great stars,
> drawings which show them straining to the centre
> that would explode their white
> if temperature and the speed they moved at
> shifted one degree
> [. . .]
> the one altered move that will make them maniac. (41)

Making allusions to "White Dwarfs" and other early lyrics, Ondaatje wears a very thin mask

while speaking in Billy's voice. To a certain extent, he strips away this mask at the conclusion of

Billy by inserting a photograph of himself as a child into the empty picture frame that began the

book. This portrait of Ondaatje the Kid does not fill the entire frame and it remains unclear

whether Ondaatje is juxtaposing his picture with Billy's portrait, or whether the snapshot is in

fact the "picture of Billy" that has taken the length of the narrative to fix in developing solution.

If the smaller photograph had been of Billy, it would have grounded the narrative by creating a

bookend arrangement of portraits. As it is, however, the final photograph has a subversive,

rather than stabilizing effect on the documentary framework.

Although MacLulich states that photography is a "controlling metaphor" (107) in *The*

Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Ondaatje uses the medium to subversive ends. In an analysis

of "The Gate in His Head" that applies equally well to *Billy,* Bowering observes that "Ondaatje

loves photographs, especially when they disrupt one's settled notions of composition"

("Northward" 8). Such disruptions occur from the very first photograph reproduced in *Billy* (13),

which portrays three cavalrymen by the skeleton of a large animal, although "the law" in the

story is a sheriff's posse, not a cavalry regiment. The picture complements themes in the

narrative (landscape, law, death) rather than illustrating its plot. The photograph also calls

attention to the form of Ondaatje's writing, as the cavalryman in the foreground steps out of the

picture while the soldier in the middle ground paints a sign. All of the men "face the borders of

the picture, creating the impression of what Barthes calls a 'blind field' outside the frame beyond

the access of the viewer" (M. Jones 74). A similarly blind field informs the initial "picture of

Billy," according to Kamboureli: "The absent portrait of Billy also announces the 'negative' of narration. It becomes, in Derrida's words, an *exergue*—what lies 'outside the work,' 'inscription,' 'epigraph.' It suggests that Billy lies outside the poem, cannot be contained in a single frame" (*Edge* 185). Ondaatje thus incorporates the conventional association of photography with the captive image into his authorial ruse and inverts its documentary authority.

Traditional portraiture fares little better than photography in capturing Billy's visage, as the outlaw observes:

> a pencil
> harnessing my face
> goes stumbling into dots (*Billy* 85)

Other characters get caught in Billy's frames, but even then the writing gravitates towards formlessness. For example, Billy frames a portrait of Sallie Chisum in a bright interior, but his narrative gaze directs the reader's eye towards a dark exterior:

> Around us total blackness, nothing out there but a desert for seventy miles or
> more, and to the left, a few yards away, a house stuffed with yellow wet light
> where within the frame of a window we saw a woman moves carrying fire in a
> glass funnel and container towards the window, towards the edge of the dark
> where we stood. (*Billy* 37)

This passage supplies a perfect example of an aperture highlighting one aspect of a scene in contrast to the smudgy details of the surrounding landscape. While rehearsing the tenebristic contrast between light and dark that plays an important role in *The English Patient* and *In the Skin of a Lion* (hence the character Caravaggio), this passage multiplies frames-within-frames and blurs the distinction between the inside and outside of the portrait.[21]

Ondaatje also multiplies frames-within-frames in the actual photographs he selects as the visual complement to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. For example, one photograph (23) depicts a conventional homestead in which a window frames the head of a woman and a doorway frames the body of a man. A later photograph (45) seems to enter the open doorway and offer a shot of the homestead's interior. Yet another photograph (91) reproduces a detail

from this interior, showing a gun hanging in a holster by the bed. Punning visually on the verb "to shoot," the lens narrows its focus from the formal portrait, to the rustic interior, to the bedroom detail with its suggestions of sex and violence. From panorama to close-up, the embedded series has the cinematic effect of a zoom, yet each frame unsettles the impression conveyed by the previous one.

By repeating images and performing minor variations on them, Ondaatje encourages his reader to make the connection between pictures and moving pictures. For example, in *Billy*, the empty frame begins as a photograph, but repetition of the motif creates the impression of a film being shown frame by frame. Indeed, as studies in motion, serial photography anticipated film. The photograph of man and horse on the cover of *Billy* (which echoes the image of "Man and Dog" on the cover of *the man with seven toes*) is from a motion study by the pioneer of serial photography, Eadweard Muybridge (Scobie, "Two" 191). Responding to a dare from the former governor of California, Leland Stanford, who wished to prove that a trotting horse can have all four feet off the ground at once, Muybridge demonstrated that the pictorial conventions of Western art had misrepresented the horse for centuries. Using 24 cameras positioned in a row and triggered electronically, Muybridge produced his famous *Animal Locomotion* series, which was initially financed by Stanford (1872-82), but later garnered subscriptions from luminaries such as Degas, Whistler, Sargent, and Rodin. These motion studies led Muybridge, who began his career as a bookseller, to develop a prototype of the motion picture camera, which he called the zoopraxigrapher. Thus, in producing a book whose photographic imagery functions cinematically, Ondaatje again reverses the artistic process of one of his heroes. Although Ondaatje does not overtly acknowledge Muybridge in his book credits, he plants a clue when he states that "the comment about taking photographs around 1870-80" (n.p.) is from the Huffman letter, which dates from 1885, as Barbour has demonstrated

The image on the cover of *Billy* belongs to the second frame of Plate 79 in Muybridge's "Animal Locomotion" series, which bears the suggestive title, "Pandora jumping a hurdle" (Muybridge n.p.). In opening the cover of *Billy*, then, the reader opens a Pandora's box of framed images and authorial ruses. As in Muybridge's series, where "[f]ramed dark space between the individual images produces a slow, careful cadence akin to the feeling of watching fast motion slowed down" (Sheldon 15), Ondaatje uses black borders and white gaps to give each segment of his story the visual rhythm of poetry. Yet, like Spicer and Muybridge, Ondaatje is a "time mechanic" (Spicer, *Lorca* n.p.) and his sequence of arrested images produces a sense of temporal continuity. In this context, it is worthwhile to note that Stanford was a railroad tycoon, because, at the outset of *the man with seven toes* and the conclusion of *Coming Through Slaughter,* the train functions as a symbol of the linearity that Ondaatje's narratives work with and against. Ondaatje creates a sense of narrative progression, but he reconfigures the segments of time's arrow in his "modular fiction" (Godard 32), as did Muybridge, who later juxtaposed photographs of the same series of events taken from multiple angles, thereby producing an impression of simultanaeity decades before Cubism, and "presag[ing] the cinematic convention of the cut" (Sheldon 16).

Paying close attention to the cinematic aspects of *Billy,* MacLulich argues in his essay "Ondaatje's Mechanical Boy: Portrait of the Artist as Photographer" that repetition and fragmentation profoundly alter the narrative by allowing Ondaatje to reconfigure the segments of a linear storyline:

> Ondaatje's images of Billy do not create a static portrait, but a shifting and elusive picture—like a film which contains discontinuities, flash-backs and slow motion segments. As we turn Ondaatje's pages, Billy's story dissolves into fragments of action, isolated moments of sensation, recollection or hallucination. Taken collectively, Ondaatje's snapshots of Billy lose their static qualities and map a world of flux and uncertainty. (MacLulich 108-9)

MacLulich's interpretation of *Billy* here contradicts Nodelman's argument that the images are static, but even Nodelman observes that Billy "remembers putting his hand into a wounded stomach in order to retrieve a bullet, and the last six lines are the first six in reverse order—like a film run backwards" (Nodelman 70; see *Billy* 27). Indeed, Ondaatje has claimed that "with *Billy the Kid* I was trying to make the film I couldn't afford to shoot, in the form of a book. All those B movies in which strange things that didn't happen but could and should have happened I explored in the book" ("1975 Interview" 20). In this light, one could argue that the "picture of Billy" is in fact a film being projected onto the blank screen of the empty frame, just as Huffman's commentary projects images of his photographs onto the blank page. In any case, Ondaatje, Nodelman, and MacLulich set out to investigate photography, but their investigations, different as they may have been, lead them to film.

Yet even when working in film, Ondaatje is not content to work within the conventions of the genre. For example, in discussing his film *The Clinton Special* (1972), Ondaatje says he "wanted that sense throughout the film that each shot would *almost* be a static photograph. Thus throughout the film the camera doesn't move very much at all [. . .]. It's talking photography" ("1975 Interview" 16). I have emphasized the adverb "almost" here because Ondaatje slows down film so that it is *almost* photography, and he blurs and serializes photography so that it is *almost* film. Film and photograph are not static nouns in Ondaatje's vocabulary; they are active verbs in the process of being modified. The author makes one genre approximate another, as he does when he distinguishes the aims of "documentary poetry" from the Canadian tradition of documentary film in the introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*: "In a country with an absurd history of film, real film goes underground. And it comes up often in strange clothes— sometimes as theater, sometimes as poetry" (15). In this game of disguises, the guiding generic format is not always the one designated on the cover, as Ondaatje explains: "You know, I wanted to call my new book of poems, *Secular Love*, 'a novel.' I structured it like one. For me its

structure and plot are novelistic. Each section deals with a specific time. But the people in them are interrelated. But, of course, they are drawn in a lyric, perceived by a lyric eye" ("1984 Interview" 324). Thus, whether writing, drawing, photographing, or filming, Ondaatje disguises one genre as another. Yet he consistently creates lyrical frames that combine to approximate a plot, in the manner of a song cycle.

Ondaatje personifies the confrontation between lyrical and prosaic impulses in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by staging a generic gunfight between Garrett (who communicates in blocks of prose) and Billy (who speaks mostly in lyrics). Critics generally equate Billy with Ondaatje because of Billy's lyricism and the photograph of Ondaatje as a kid, but the author also writes from Garrett's first-person perspective, and to ignore Garrett's prosaic role underestimates the complexity of Ondaatje's long poem. In Garrett's voice, Ondaatje "finds Billy both attractive and undisciplined. The prosaic lawman dismisses out of hand the poetic outlaw—precisely for his poetry, the imagination confronting chaos" (Barbour, *Ondaatje* 62-63). Garrett overtakes Billy according to the plot; but Billy exacts his revenge formally, by absorbing Garrett's voice and narrative strategies into his collected works. Their antagonism parallels Ondaatje's struggle to escape the perspectival confines of the lyric "I," as the author explains: "With *Billy* I began with a couple of poems I had written about Billy the Kid and moved from these to being dissatisfied with the limits of lyric; so I moved to prose and interviews and so on" ("1975 Interview" 26). Writing prose poems (20, 90) and prose with line breaks (15), as well as having Billy speak increasingly in prose (60, 67), and framing the comic book legend in the same black outline used for the photographs (99-102), Ondaatje gradually breaks down generic distinctions until Sallie Chisum can offer these "FINAL THOUGHTS" on Billy and Garrett:

> There was good mixed in with the bad
> in Billy the Kid
> and bad mixed in with the good
> in Pat Garrett.
> [. . .]

Both were worth knowing. (89)

This near convergence of opposed personalities reflects the near convergence of poetry and prose in *Billy*.

By testing the univocal and synchronic limits of the lyric and photograph, Ondaatje calls attention to "the *fictional* nature of the frame and disrupts its coherence [. . .] via the strategies of documentary-collage" (M. Jones 76). Ondaatje uses collage to lead the reader into a particular perspectival stance and then lead them out again, as Barbour's reading of *Billy* demonstrates: "Asserting the play of significations, the insecurity of flux, the refusal of closure, the collage text remains open, breaking out from the 'frame-up' of the still photograph into a confusion of gestures that cannot be held in place" (Barbour, *Ondaatje* 63). It is not surprising, therefore, that Ondaatje also produced a "picture collage of Billy," as well as a concrete poem called "silver bullet" that incorporated the picture of Ondaatje the Kid ("1971 Interview" 9). Ondaatje attributes his interest in such visual strategies to being "surrounded by so many painters— my [ex-]wife Kim, and Greg Curnoe, Bob Fones, and Tony Urquhart" (9).[22] Paradoxically, by investigating these visual strategies and testing their limitations, Ondaatje creates a composition that easily transforms from a visual series into a song cycle.

Although the opening of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* suggests that photography will be the controlling metaphor in the book, Ondaatje's collage technique opens up multiple entry points into the story. The importance of this initial impression should not be overlooked, as Ondaatje stresses the connection between beginnings and architectural strategies in one discussion of narrative form: "At the conference on the long poem, George Bowering was talking about the derivation of the word 'order' as coming from 'to begin.' I don't know if that's true or not but it's interesting that in writing *Running* and *Slaughter* the two pieces I wrote to *order* the book were written last—but went in at the beginning" ("1984 Interview" 327).

However, a second beginning comes 15 pages into the narrative that refutes the authority of photography in its opening sentence:

> Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in.
>
> Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (*Billy* 20)

This new beginning underscores the recursive treatment of time in *Billy*. It also introduces the first reference to Canada and suggests, without historical basis, that Billy and his friends engage in border crossings to the north as well as to the south. The anachronism suggests that the "key" to unlocking Billy's maze involves a close consideration of Billy's "posse" and its connection to Canada. For example, researching the photograph of John and Sallie Chisum (31) reveals that it is "a photo of two of the people the book is dedicated to, Stuart and Sally Mackinnon" in pioneer dress (Barbour, *Ondaatje* 54). Having inserted Stuart Mackinnon into the text in place of Tip McKinney, Ondaatje also deputizes the Canadian poet—author of "The Intervals," collected in Ondaatje's *Long Poem Anthology*—to accompany Garrett and Poe in their final pursuit of Billy (92). Photography thus functions as both an ordering impulse and a force of disorder in *Billy*, as it provides an entry point for Mackinnon's parodic interventions. The unframing of the photographic conceit is thus a kind of jailbreak which frees the transgressors to transgress again.

As the pretense of documentary realism in *Billy* gradually erodes, the importance of the song cycle structure becomes increasingly clear. The dedication at the end of *Billy* is in fact a list of the players—"Kim [Ondaatje], Stuart and Sally Mackinnon, Ken Livingstone, Victor Coleman, and Barrie Nichol" (n.p.)—involved in the performance of the collected/collective works, as Ondaatje explains:

> I *know* when I was writing both *Billy* and *Slaughter*, I had a sense that it wasn't just my point of view that was writing the book; it was people around me that I knew, the interests of people around me, being aware of certain things—certain questions—from the point of view of people around me as much as myself. It doesn't matter who writes the book; the book is for me a kind of funnelling of various people's ideas and emotions, between the years 1968 and 1973 or 1973 to 1976, who represent your age and your group and the book comes out that way. ("Moving" 141)

The song cycle structure permits any voice, however minor and fragmentary, to enter and exit the narrative without disturbing the flow of the story. As editors of *Billy,* and as artists in their own right, Kim Ondaatje and Victor Coleman have an unobtrusive influence on Ondaatje's writing, which I have already documented. However, Ken Livingstone, who directed the first performance of *the man with seven toes* at the Vancouver Festival (*man* 45), makes a direct appearance in *Billy*. Livingstone appears as an outcast who breeds a race of mad spaniels. (Note that Ondaatje is listed in the *Canadian Who's Who* for having "developed and bred [a] new strain of spaniel, 'The Sydenham Spaniel,' Candn. Kennel Club 1970, with Livingstone Animal Foundation Kennels" [718]).[23] A reference to Barrie (bp) Nichol—the subject of Ondaatje's film *Sons of Captain Poetry* [1970] and a member of the sound poetry collective The Four Horsemen—also appears in *Billy*. The outlaw praises Nichol in an apocryphal statement towards the conclusion of his "Exclusive Jail Interview" (81) with the *Texas Star:* "There's a Canadian group, a sort of orchestra, that is the best. Great. Heard them often when I was up there trying to get hold of a man who went by the name of Captain P-----.* Never found him. But that group will be remembered a long time" (84). The asterix lacks an explanatory note, but it emphasizes that the text is double-coded. The text can be read at the level of American pop culture, whose influence stretches from contemporary Canada to the Ceylon of Ondaatje's childhood, and beyond. For audiences who recognize the clues, however, the text functions as a tribute to the stylistic experiments being conducted by a particular group of Canadian artists in the late 1960s.

Having put together his own gang of orchestral Horsemen in this *livre-à-clef*, Ondaatje

summons them for a performance of the mock-elegy that follows Billy's (possibly mistaken)

shooting. The chorus performs Billy's ballad in a voice similar to, but more satirical than, the

concluding ballad in *the man with seven toes*:

> Poor young William's dead
> with a fish stare, with a giggle
> with blood planets in his head.
>
> The blood came down like river ride
> long as Texas down his side.
> We cleaned him up when blood was drier
> his eyes looked up like turf on fire. (104)

"We" uses an "eight foot garden hose" to wash Billy down, then "I" sells the outlaw's bullets "to

the Texas Star" where "[t]hey weighed them, put them in a pile/ took pictures with a camera"

(104). Taking this pronominal uncertainty one step further, the concluding verse repeats the

opening verse, but invokes the authority of an ambiguous "he":

> Poor young William's dead
> with blood planets in his head
> with a fish stare, with a giggle
> like he said. (104)

The final written entry in *Billy* further complicates the referent of "he" by keeping the

distinction between author and protagonist to a minimum. Having staged a gunfight between

Billy (poetry) and Garrett (prose), Ondaatje clears away the smoke and remarks:

> It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. The
> morning sun has concentrated all the cigarette smoke so one can see it hanging in
> pillars or sliding along the roof like amoeba. In the bathroom, I wash the loose
> nicotine out of my mouth. I smell the smoke still in my shirt. (105)

The death of Billy in the previous pages, combined with the picture of Ondaatje the Kid on the

ensuing page, would seem to identify this speaker as Ondaatje. However, the passage repeats a

description from an earlier scene in which Billy is the narrator (71), thereby maintaining the

possibility that Billy speaks from beyond the grave. On the other hand, the speaker is in a kind of

garrett, suggesting that he could be the lawman. These identities shift like the architectonic

smoke and underscore the indeterminacy of the entire text. This indeterminacy, in turn, signals

the increasingly playful character of Ondaatje's writing.

In "Ondaatje Learning to Do," Bowering argues that the trajectory of Ondaatje's career—

from its anecdotal and imagistic beginnings in *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) to its cross-genre

developments in the collage texts—epitomizes the course of Canadian writing in general:

> The development of Ondaatje's poetry, from his early years in this country to the
> present, resembles the development of the main currents of Canadian verse over a
> period perhaps twice as long. Unlike the Vancouver poets with their advocacy of
> open-ended, process form, Ondaatje emerged from the school that believes the
> poem to be an artifact, something well-made and thus rescued from the chaos of
> contemporary world and mind. If the Vancouver poets might loosely be said to
> descend from Robert Duncan, and Victor Coleman from Louis Zukofsky,
> Ondaatje might be said to descend from Yeats and Stevens.
> But over the course of his first fifteen years as a Canadian poet, Ondaatje
> came to seek a less British and more American poetic. (163)

Although this summary greatly oversimplifies the history of Canadian poetry, and although

Bowering humorously stretches his point by baptizing Toronto's Coach House Press as the

"Toronto arm of the West Coast movement" (163), his observations are useful. *Billy* is a

Western, of course, and Ondaatje wrote *the man with seven toes* for performance at the

Vancouver Poetry Festival. Jack Spicer's serial poem "Billy the Kid," which Ondaatje reviews

as a "very good poem" in *Quarry* (44-5), may even have been the catalyst for Ondaatje's book.

However, the trick that Ondaatje is learning to do with myth and history in *Billy* is very different

from the one Spicer performs. Spicer's serial poem makes no attempt to tell the life story of Billy

the Kid, but is rather a short history of a gay romance:

> *Billy the Kid* is apparently the only [serial poem by Spicer] drawn directly and
> specifically from private emotion, "the big lie of the personal." The work was
> written immediately after one of Spicer's friends had left him, and he was
> desolate. But the poem argues that erotic love is a kind of myth with the enduring
> powers that myths can have. (Foster 25-26)

Moreover, when one remembers that Yeats was one of Bowering's "favourite predecessors," and that he sometimes claims (falsely) that the name *Tish* came from a marginal inscription beside a Yeats poem in Ross MacDonald's *The Chill* (*Errata* 6), it becomes increasingly clear that Bowering is outlining the course of his own career. Ondaatje, on the other hand, demonstrates an obsession throughout his career with unmaking the well-made artifact. Like Stevens—who is American, as Bowering is well aware— Ondaatje displays an abiding fascination with the dualities of order and chaos. While the West Coast influences on the Toronto poet are crucial, particularly on his development of a serial poetics, the single most important influence on Ondaatje at this stage in his career is the Montrealer, Leonard Cohen.

Ondaatje's only book of criticism, *Leonard Cohen* (1970), is a monograph on the Montreal poet's early career that deserves consideration here because it reads like the draft of an unpublished artist's statement for Ondaatje's own writing in the late 1960s and 1970s. Two things about Cohen's writing particularly interest Ondaatje: his transition from poet to novelist and the techniques that give his novels "a visual rather than a literary style" (*Cohen* 28). Ondaatje criticizes Cohen's first book of poetry, *Let Us Compare Mythologies* (1956), for being "too fond of [. . .] an excessive poesy" that "drowns [its] objects in a rhetoric that does not really fit" (7). Ondaatje prefers Cohen's second collection, *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961), which is more "concrete" in its use of language and "relies on the strict ballad form rather than the biblical rhetoric that appeared in *Mythologies* and was to re-emerge in *Flowers for Hitler*" (*Cohen* 19). "After *The Spice-Box of Earth*," Ondaatje argues, "Cohen was really becoming a novelist. The best moments in *Flowers for Hitler* [1964], such as the prose passages or rhetorical wit, would not seem out of place in a novel" (43-44). *The Spice-Box of Earth* obviously holds a special importance for Cohen as well, since he structured his first novel, *The Favourite Game* (1963), around its poems.

The Favourite Game is an imagistic, fragmented, and elliptical work that unabashedly

announces the transition of a poet to prose. It opens with an epigrammatic ballad, taken from *The*

Spice Box of Earth, and moves into a series of lyrical prose sketches that gradually expand into

more conventional (albeit short) prose chapters:

> [T]he novel was rewritten at least five times, with the result that its descriptions,
> dialogue, and portraits are shaved down to an almost poetic form. The book has the
> effectiveness of a long prose poem, with each scene emerging as a potent and
> enigmatic sketch rather than a full-blown, detailed narrative. As in a poem, the
> silences and spaces, what is left unsaid, are essential to the mood of the book.
> (Ondaatje, *Cohen* 23)

Cohen's prose style becomes more expansive in the latter half of *The Favourite Game*, but the

presence of *The Spice-Box of Earth* remains strong as Cohen begins to insert passages from it

directly into his novel. The alternation between poetry and prose in chapters such as 3.11 sets a

precedent for the intermingling of lyrics and lyrical prose in Ondaatje's *Coming Through*

Slaughter. In devising a "poetic form" that retains "the effectiveness of a long prose poem"

without becoming "a formal novel," *The Favourite Game* blazes a path for Ondaatje's first novel:

> The plot-line is non-existent. We are not reading a formal novel but are looking
> at various episodes in the life of Breavman. We are not guided along a cohesive
> time sequence but are shown segments from scrapbooks, home movies, diaries—
> all of which flash in front of us like 'those uncertain images that were always
> flashing in his mind.' This style is the most fascinating and successful aspect of
> *The Favourite Game*. (Ondaatje, *Cohen* 24)

Despite the important structural role of the ballads in *The Favourite Game*, however, music plays

a surprisingly minor part in Breavman's life. As in *Billy*, the framed imagery and home movies in

The Favourite Game enjoy far greater prominence in the consciousness of the artist-hero.

Cohen justifies his aphoristic phrasing and fragmented staging in *The Favourite Game* by

making constant reference to visual media, particularly film.[24] He introduces his home movie

conceit in the fourth of the early fragments: "Here is a movie filled with the bodies of his

[Breavman's] family. [. . .] Breavman is mutilating the film in his efforts at history" (10). Cohen

implicitly compares the vivid but choppy effect of his prose to the "slow-motion movie" that is

"always running somewhere in [Breavman's] mind" (99). Like the old-fashioned "viewer" (29) that Breavman admires because "[e]ach frame glowed with tenderness and passionate delight" (30), Cohen's cinematic style intensifies his isolated images:

> The most obvious quality in the style and technique of *The Favourite Game* is its visual or cinematic style. Each chapter is a scene, and the feeling one gets in reading the novel is not so much an insight into a character as a vision of Breavman in different poses, playing the lead in several movies. We see him in sporadic, imagistic relationships or histories. [. . .] We get to see only the perfect photographic image, and this is why the book appears so romantic. It is Breavman the romantic artist who connects these images. (Ondaatje, *Cohen* 26)

However, as Ondaatje points out, it "is not just the reliance on film that gives *The Favourite Game* a visual rather than a literary style. Cohen constantly uses photographs, or he replays a scene, or he uses painters like Rousseau or Brueghel [the Elder] to remind him that he is part of a portrait" (*Cohen* 28). Rousseau is also one of Ondaatje's favourite artists, and it helps to understand Ondaatje's storyboard technique if one knows that "Breavman loves the pictures of Henri Rousseau, the way he stops time": "Always is the word that must be used. The lion will always be sniffing the robes of the sleeping gypsy, there will be no attack, no guts on the sand: the total encounter is expressed. The moon, even though it is doomed to travel, will never go down on this scene" (Cohen, *Favourite* 58). Nolan, furthermore, claims that his Ned Kelly series is composed of "Kelly's own words, and Rousseau, and sunlight" (qtd. in MacInnes 30), and his placement of freeze frames in a series sheds light on Cohen's lyrical technique:

> This sense of [*The Favourite Game*] being artistic, poetic, being 'framed,' is important because this is the way Breavman sees people—as heightened images or potent highlights of conversation. In spite of the seemingly loose form, the book is, in reality, concrete and sparse. It is a beautiful book and one returns to it several times as one returns to a photograph album. (*Cohen* 34)

Ondaatje also explores Cohen's cinematic use of editing, soundtracks, and composition in *Leonard Cohen* (27). In *Coming Through Slaughter*, he employs all these techniques to produce a portrait of an artist, Buddy Bolden, whose legendary cornet playing was recorded on neither film nor phonograph.

Although Cohen took his ballads to the stage and abandoned the novel in the decades after the publication of Ondaatje's critical monograph, Cohen's technique for lyrical narrative, which "cut[s] into the natural progression of time, like a movie frozen into a single image and then released to run again" (*Favourite* 99), lives on in Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*. For example, the most lyrical metaphor for the treatment of time in *The Favourite Game* sets a precedent for the dolphin sonographs that frame *Coming Through Slaughter*. Discussing birdsong with his girlfriend Shell, Breavman remarks:

> "If you tape their whistles, Shell, and slow them down, you can hear the most extraordinary things. What the naked ear hears as one note is often in reality two or three notes sung simultaneously. A bird can sing three notes at the same time!"
> "I wish I could speak that way. I wish I could say twelve things at once. I wish I could say all there was to say in one word. I hate all the things that can happen between the beginning of a sentence and the end." (*Favourite* 169)

The echo of these remarks resonates in the commentary that Ondaatje positions beneath the dolphin sonographs as an epigram to *Coming Through Slaughter*:

> *Three sonographs—pictures of dolphin sounds made by a machine that is more sensitive than the human ear. The top left sonograph shows a "squawk." Squawks are common emotional expressions that have many frequencies or pitches, which are vocalized simultaneously. The top right sonograph is a whistle. Note that the number of frequencies is small and this gives a "pure" sound—not a squawk. Whistles are like personal signatures for dolphins and identify each dolphin as well as its location. The middle sonograph shows a dolphin making two kinds of signals simultaneously. The vertical stripes are echolocation clicks (sharp, multi-frequency sounds) and the dark, mountain-like humps are the signature whistles. No one knows how a dolphin makes both whistles and echolocation clicks simultaneously.* (*Slaughter* n.p.; see Warshall 140)

Despite the obvious similarities of these two passages, Ondaatje's epigram differs from the Cohen excerpt in that Ondaatje takes great pleasure in the things that can happen between the beginning of a sentence and the end. Whereas Breavman aims to counteract dissolution through greater and greater discipline, Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje's "one man avant-garde" (Solecki, "Making" 256), does "nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them and all the tiny facets so that eventually he [is] almost completely governed by fears of certainty"

(*Slaughter* 9). Bolden's jazz scorns "the sure lanes of the probable" (10) and delights in "showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story" (38). Hence the middle sonograph, the image of a miraculous aural hybrid, is the principal object of interest in the epigram.

As with Muybridge's photograph and Huffman's letter in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje uses the sonographs and commentary in *Coming Through Slaughter* to outline a poetics. The language in the novel, the author implies, will intermingle "common emotional expressions" in "many frequencies" (lyrics, prose poems, anecdotes) with "personal signatures" (of metaphor and symbol) while locating subjects (within the context of a historical narrative). Like the triptych of sonographs, the structure of the novel will be triadic, depicting three stages of Bolden's career in separate books. As for characterization, the sonographs (photographs of sound) allude to the key artist figures in the text, Bellocq and Bolden, and the way that Ondaatje represents them. The terms defining the dolphin language, for example, double as a vocabulary for describing Bolden's playing style. In the climactic moment when Bolden parades his "shimmy dance of victory" (131), he combines "squawks" with "slow pure notes" (131) to create "[s]quawk beats" (130) on the cornet. However, in order to achieve this synthesis, Bolden must first apprentice his understanding of art under the photographer Bellocq. The photographer teaches Bolden the usefulness of establishing a framework of the known and imbuing it with the inexplicable. Thus the sonographs represent an aural phenomenon that can be arrested, but not explained, as a visual series.

Likewise, Ondaatje's portraiture in *Coming Through Slaughter* pivots on a double axis of visual frame-making and aural frame-breaking. The novel is ekphrastic in the sense that the prose builds out of associations with the sonographs. As Ondaatje acknowledges in his book credits, the novel is also ekphrastic in the sense that the real Bellocq's *Storyville Portraits* were "an inspiration of mood and character" for the author (n.p.). Like Nolan's paintings, Bellocq's photograph functions as a starting point for the author's investigation of his protagonist's

character and environment. In addition, Ondaatje extrapolates much of Bolden's career from a black and white print of Bolden and his band, which Ondaatje fictitiously attributes to Bellocq and situates as the frontispiece to *Slaughter*. Ondaatje writes in a carefully worded statement that there "is only one photograph that exists today of Bolden and the band" (63) and all the critics I have read take this statement to mean that the "picture on the title-page of Ondaatje's book is the only extant photograph of Bolden" (Maxwell 102). Bowering, for example, follows this interpretation when he raises the question of how a writer can "write a historical novel with no historical documents":

> Having produced a book about Billy the Kid out of sources that were mainly frontier lies, Michael Ondaatje essayed *Coming Through Slaughter* about Buddy Bolden, "born" at the dawn of the twentieth century, nothing saved from the multiplicity of chaos except one group photograph in which Bolden is holding a cornet in his left hand, as lots of people wish Billy had held his six-gun. ("Northward" 8)

However, a careful look at the thumbnail portrait on the back cover of the Vintage edition of *Coming Through Slaughter* reveals that there are at least two extant photographs of Bolden. At first, the thumbnail portrait appears to be a detail from the band photograph. Bolden wears the same suit and stands in front of the same backdrop, but the picture is evidently a solo portrait, probably taken at the same sitting. No part of Bolden's body is obscured by Brock Mumford, the guitarist, and Bolden holds his trumpet vertically in his right hand, not horizontally in his left hand. Ondaatje alludes to this second photograph when he writes that Bellocq "made one more print of the group and shelved it and then one of just Bolden this time, taking him out of the company" (48). As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje plants photographs like blueprints for the deconstruction of history's singular authority.

Although the artists were of different generations and racial backgrounds, Ondaatje states in his book credits that "[p]rivate and fictional magnets drew [Bellocq] and Bolden together" (n.p.). Bellocq and Bolden belonged to a world of which "there is little recorded history," and

what little there remains has "come down to us in fragments" (*Slaughter* 2). Dipping into his

"pail of sub-history" (18), Ondaatje imagines the lives of two artists who, at least in the early

1970s, had been marginalized by the prevailing historical accounts. (Bellocq has since become a

principal character in Louis Malle's 1978 film *Pretty Baby*, which draws from Al Rose's

Storyville, New Orleans and other sources cited by Ondaatje in his book credits). Thus

Ondaatje's fictional Bellocq is a social outcast whose only friend in the novel is Bolden. Like the

"heroes" in "White Dwarfs" who "sail to that perfect edge/ where there is no social fuel" (68),

Bolden and Bellocq "tal[k] for hours moving gradually off the edge of the social world. As

Bellocq lived at the edge in any case he was at ease there and as Buddy did not he moved on past

him like a naive explorer looking for footholds" (61). Bolden explains that Bellocq "was a

photographer. Pictures. That were like . . . windows. He was the first person I met who had

absolutely no interest in my music" (55). To Webb, Bolden clarifies that what he loved "were

the possibilities in [Bellocq's] silence" (89).[25] As in *The Favourite Game*, and "[a]s in a poem,

the silences and spaces, what is left unsaid, are essential to the mood" of Bellocq's portraiture.

These qualities contrast the photographer with the (initially) loud and gregarious bandleader, as

well as with "Mr. Audubon" (159), the naturalist whose photo-realistic paintings are the

antithesis of Bellocq's art. Audubon painstakingly renders every physical detail of the animals

and birds he takes as his subjects, whereas Bellocq seeks to record the dream states of nude

women (50). Instead of rendering absent figures as present in the manner of Audubon, Bellocq's

portraiture seeks to figure absence into presence. As an artist, Bellocq attempts to see beyond

the body and incorporate something intangible into his portraiture. As a sexually frustrated

individual, however, Bellocq degrades his subjects and his art by fetishizing the nudes and

slashing the photographs with a knife in symbolic acts of sexual penetration.

Bellocq's strengths and weaknesses put him in the company of Ondaatje's other artist

heroes: "Bellocq, the crippled artist who makes pictures of prostitutes, is strikingly reminiscent

of Toulouse-Lautrec; and like another of Ondaatje's favourite artists, Henri Rousseau, 'he even talked to his photographs he was that lonely'" (Scobie, "Fictional" 12). Ondaatje also inserts himself into this company of visual artists towards the end of the novel. The writer/historian stands on the street "where [Bolden] lived seventy years ago," and remarks: "The place of his music is totally silent. There is so little noise that I easily hear the click of my camera as I take fast bad photographs into the sun aiming at the barbershop he probably worked in" (134). Initiating his ekphrastic process, Ondaatje turns the street into "a black and white photograph, part of a history book" (136). The slippage between genres Ondaatje encourages also leads to slippage between the identities of the frame-makers. Ondaatje stares at Bolden's band photograph and it "moves and becomes a mirror," as the author feels a surge of identification with his subject: "When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of memory. For I had done that. Stood, and with razor-blade cut into cheeks and forehead, shaved hair. Defiling people we did not wish to be" (134). This blurring of identities leads to a merging of technique, as Ondaatje emulates Bolden's assault on mirrors:

> Why did my senses stop at you? There was the sentence, "Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade . . . " What was there in that, before I knew your nation your colour your age, that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself? (135)

Ondaatje the Artist thus passes through the looking-glass and enters the novel, just as Ondaatje the Kid inserted himself into the long poem through a photograph.

A shared technique also unites Bellocq and Bolden. Mixing the composure of Bellocq's photographic imagery with the ecstatic rhythms of Bolden's jazz, Ondaatje represents the friendship between the two artists as an exchange of ideas, a mutual apprenticeship in composition. Bolden plays his cornet through open windows perhaps because Bellocq is Ondaatje's arch-typical frame-maker: "We were furnished rooms," Bolden states, "and Bellocq was a window looking out" (56). Bolden also has a propensity for breaking windows, and

Bellocq similarly unframes his creations when he slashes the portraits of prostitutes that he so carefully produces. Framing and unframing thus are united in Bellocq's aesthetic: "The making and destroying coming from the same source, same lust, same surgery his brain was capable of" (51). This sublimated violence eventually turns upon its perpetrator, and Bellocq's suicide is yet another example of (un)framing. The photographer places chairs around the perimeter of his room, then walks along the chairs lighting fire to the walls, until he is framed by the blaze. He "stands there silent, as still as possible, trying to formally breathe in the remaining oxygen" (64) until his excessive self-control turns maniac. The suffocating photographer throws himself "into the wall, only there is no wall anymore only a fire curtain and he disappears into and through it [. . .]. Then he falls, dissolving out of his pose. Everything has gone wrong. The wall is not there to catch or hide him. Nothing is there to clasp him into a certainty" (64). As with Billy in the barn, accidental and unforeseen events dissolve the pose of absolute self-control.

Appropriately, the news of Bellocq's suicide foreshadows Bolden's self-destructive performance in the parade. When Bolden tells Nora about the suicide, she screams at him: "Look at you. Look at what he did to you" (127). Earlier, Bolden had demonstrated Bellocq's influence to Webb by instructing the detective: "Come with me Webb I want to show you something, no come with me I want to *show* you something. You come too. Put your hand through this window" (89). This passage carries with it the force of repetition. It echoes the first thing Bolden says in *Coming Through Slaughter*, when he urges his bandmate to play louder: "Cornish, come on, put your hands through the window" (8). Two pages later, Bolden acts out the metaphor:

> Furious at something he drew his right hand across his body and lashed out. Half way there at full speed he realized it was a window he would be hitting and braked. For a fraction of a second his open palm touched the glass, beginning simultaneously to draw back. The window starred and crumpled slowly two floors down. His hand miraculously uncut. It had acted exactly like a whip violating the target and still free, retreating from the outline of a star. [Nora] was delighted by the performance. (10)

These (un)framing metaphors accumulate until they reach an explosive density in the fight scene between Bolden and Pickett. The combatants throw fragments of shattered mirror at each other, break the barbershop window, pass through its "empty frame" (72) and land in the street, where the rain falls "like so many little windows" (72). Chaos (Bolden) triumphs over the fence (Pickett), but at the same time Bolden passes through the liminal space between genius and madness. "Locked inside the frame, boiled down in love and anger into that dynamo that cannot move except on itself" (110), Bolden shines brilliantly in the parade and then goes silent. The black jazzman becomes a white dwarf, one of "those burned out stars / who implode into silence / after parading in the sky" ("White Dwarfs"). In the interval between the fight and the parade, however, Bolden achieves his stylistic breakthrough.

Brock Mumford describes Bolden's breakthrough as he watches the cornetist play through the broken barbershop window. Mumford's musical ear and peculiar viewpoint combine to shape an impression reminiscent of the middle sonograph of the triptych that began the novel:

> Thought I knew his blues before, and the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen careful for he's playing something that sounds like both. I cannot make out the tune and then I catch on. He's mixing them up. He's playing the blues and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder than the hymn. That is the first time I heard hymns and blues cooked up together. (78)

This blues hymn is called a reel, a fusion of the secular and the spiritual that parallels the fusion of journalism and hagiography in Ondaatje's portrait of Bolden. The reel inspires Mumford to imagine himself dancing with prostitutes and then humming in church, because the "picture kept changing with the music" (78). Not only is the musical frame of reference broken, but it is also constantly shifting. Bolden therefore contrasts his improvisational style with the waltzes of John Robichaux, who "dominated his audiences. He put his emotions into patterns which a listening crowd had to follow" (91). "Robichaux's arches" (92) made "[e]very note part of the large curve,

so carefully patterned" that the "mind mov[ed] ahead of the instruments in time and wait[ed] with pleasure for them to catch up" (91). Although Bolden reluctantly admits that he sometimes "enjoy[s] listening to the clear forms" (91) of his arch-nemesis, the jazzman asserts that the "right ending is an open door you can't see too far out of" (92). Like Billy, Bolden leaves the door open, but resists going all the way outside. For the duration of his playing career, Bolden remains "one footstep before formlessness."

To be more precise, Bolden's jazz is not a "free-form music" (Hutcheon, *Canadian* 48), but an improvisational style that frees itself from form in an ongoing fashion. This antagonism towards preset form also defines Bolden's relationship to Cornish, the trombone player in his band "who played the same note the same way every time who was our frame our diving board that we leapt off, the one we sacrificed so he could remain the overlooked metronome" (111). Like Billy, Bolden incorporates frameworks into his art only to counter them, as Frank Lewis explains:

> But there was a discipline, it was just that we didn't understand. We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it. He tore apart the plot—see his music was immediately on top of his own life. Echoing. As if, when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes. (32)

As this monologue progresses, it begins to paraphrase "The Gate in His Head." The prose descriptions recall the poem's "sense of shift," its shapeless bird "moving to the clear," and its epistolary conversation with Victor Coleman:[26]

> Listening to [Bolden] was like talking to Coleman. You were both changing direction with every sentence, sometimes in the middle, using each other as a springboard through the dark. You were moving so fast it was unimportant to finish and clear everything. (32-3)

To demonstrate this point, *Coming Through Slaughter* concludes without clearing up all the questions surrounding Bolden's final years.

As in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the conclusion of *Coming Through Slaughter* portrays the writer ceasing to write. The scene is brief and haunting as "figurative images of corners, rooms, and broken windows become the literal room of the author" (Wart 25):

> I sit with this room. With the grey walls that darken into corner. And one window with teeth in it. Sit so still you can hear your hair rustle in your shirt. Look away from the window when clouds and other things go by. Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes. (*Slaughter* 160)

Locked inside these architectural frames, the author seems to follow Bolden into white dwarf-like silence. Although the writer's loneliness and stillness recall Bellocq at his suicide, Ondaatje stresses his connection to Bolden by rehearsing the final scene twice in Bolden's voice. Bolden first articulates the "cornered" theme while he is secluded in Webb's cabin: "Here. Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. So I can make something unknown in the shape of this room. Where I am King of Corners" (83). Later, Bolden improvises a lyric on this theme, in which the repetitions of "corner" produce mind-wandering associations with cornet (life) and coroner (death). The fourth repetition of "corner" also forces the rhyme scheme to depart from the AAB pattern of the twelve-bar blues:

> In the room there is the air
> > and there is the corner
> and there is the corner and there is the corner
> and there is the corner.

> If you don't shake, don't get no cake. (148)

The altered blues rhythms of this final line—also the title of the song (17)—underscore the necessity of improvising exits from the labyrinth of pattern. There is something pernicious about the way the corners multiply their sense of order, and indeed, in the asylum, Bolden is regularly raped by orderlies. However, just as Bolden submits wordlessly to these rapes, the author seems to be overwhelmed by the effort of constant improvisation in the final scene of the novel. The frames that he has manipulated throughout the story close in on him and he manages one final assertion of uncertainty— "There are no prizes"—before abruptly falling silent. This sudden

silence does not achieve closure by tying up the various narrative threads in the novel and proffering the reader a neat package of resolutions. As in *Billy*, Ondaatje avoids closure by blurring the pronominal distinction between author and protagonist and leaves the reader wondering whether the room with the window is Bolden's cell or Ondaatje's study. The suddenness of this ending recalls the mood of the serial poem, which, according to Blaser, "is often like a series of rooms where the lights go on and off. It is also a sequence of energies which burn out, and it may, by the path it takes, include the constellated" ("Practice" 278). But does a constellated series qualify as a novel?

Coming Through Slaughter won the *Books in Canada* award for the best first novel in 1976, but during its writing Ondaatje insisted that it is not a novel: "Right now I'm working on some prose but if I mention it people say that I'm working on a novel and I'm not. To me the novel is a 100 yard hurdles which you have to plan, prepare, etc. And what I'm doing doesn't have a preformed shape" ("1975 Interview" 26). Rather, the shape is performed, as Ondaatje learns to write in cadences that echo the style of music that Bolden is reputed to have played. Like Bolden, Ondaatje aims "to overcome th[e] awful and stupid clarity" (*Slaughter* 99) of generic convention by learning "not craft but to play a mood of sound I would recognize and remember. Every note new and raw and chance" (93-4). Because Bolden mixes blues and hymns to create jazz, Ondaatje cooks up as many generic ingredients together as possible to produce a text that he called, at its launch, "soup" ("1984 Interview" 324). Ondaatje frequently changes the time signatures of the narrative, inserts historical documents, and replays scenes to disrupt any sense of linear narrative and do justice to a musician whose "whole plot of song [is] covered with scandal and incident and change" (*Slaughter* 38). This narrative style also befits a musical form that "is the enemy of plot, that square space, and is the limitless ground" (Maxwell 108). However, although Ondaatje writes himself towards his jazz ideal, it is once again a mistake to identify the author completely with his protagonist. Despite the merging of artistic

identities that Ondaatje imagines, important differences remain between the writer and musician. The structure of Bolden's music is "[n]ever repeated" (*Slaughter* 94), whereas Ondaatje's text is carefully patterned with images of windows that get broken and mirrors that get shattered. Paradoxically, these symbols of disorder structure Ondaatje's text and give it continuity in place of a stable narrator, linear plot, or consistent tone.

From start to finish, the broken frame provides, in spite of itself, the formal coherence demanded by the designation "novel," which is a term that I believe applies to this work even though Ondaatje rejects it. As Bowering observes, *Slaughter* "works by recurrence rather than progression" ("Northward" 10), and the broken frame (like Cornish's metronomic trombone) functions as a vehicle of the order that the artist simultaneously challenges. Ondaatje was conscious of ordering the text ("1984 Interview" 327), but the trope of the broken frame underscores the impermanence of both order and disorder. For the romantic artist, the imperative to create frames of reference is matched in force by the desire to transcend them. Thus, Bolden's character develops, but his development is a dissipation. The jazzman's portrait emerges out of a photograph, but that photograph is torn apart by the author's manipulation of history. Stylistically, descriptive prose is initially the dominant genre in the text, but it yields to lyrics, monologues, catalogues of research data, and oral interviews. Indeed, Scobie remains "uneasy about calling *Coming Through Slaughter* a novel":

> Like Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (a book to which it bears more than a passing resemblance), it is a "novel" in which the real action takes place at the level of the poetic image. In Ondaatje's case, many of these images are extensions or parallels of images that he has used in his poetry, and it is impossible to discuss *Coming Through Slaughter* without reference to Ondaatje's other books, especially *Rat Jelly*. ("Fictional" 5-6)

Certainly, lyrics such as "King Kong Meets Wallace Stevens," "Spider Blues," "'The Gate in His Head,'" and "White Dwarfs" (all from *Rat Jelly*) supply image patterns that shape *Coming*

Through Slaughter. However, like Cohen in *Beautiful Losers*, Ondaatje is also "dynamiting the delicate poetic imagery of his past" (*Cohen* 49) through his experiments in prose.

The intermingling of poetry and prose in *Coming Through Slaughter*, as well as the relentlessly fragmented quality of the writing, compel Hutcheon to consider the novel as a song cycle: "If Billy is more overtly a poetic song-cycle, *Coming Through Slaughter* (the story of a jazz musician whose unwritten and unrecorded music lives on ironically in Ondaatje's printed fragments) is also appropriately structured in this musical way" (*Canadian* 84). In addition to the numerous refrains in *Slaughter*, Ondaatje indicates the musical value of the text by fashioning found poems out of song titles (17) and band names (105), as well as devoting separate pages to the unrecorded lyrics of Bolden's songs (11, 82). Given Ondaatje's enthusiasm for blues and jazz, it is also likely that the motif of the window derives from the lyrics of "Buddy Bolden's Blues," a song popularized by Jelly Roll Morton (and played by a Morton look-alike in *Pretty Baby*):[27]

> I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout
> Open up that window and let that bad air out
> Open up that window and let the foul air out
> I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say (my line breaks)

Morton's lyrics complement the testimony that Ondaatje cites from the chaplain of the East Louisiana State Hospital, who notes that Bolden had a "tendency to go to a window to play to [the] outside world" (*Slaughter* 139). Evidently, Ondaatje constructs his song cycle around this "dictated" detail.

Ondaatje also embeds a song cycle within his song cycle by performing several variations on the phrase, "Passing wet chicory that lies in the field like sky" (57). The phrase initially appears in isolation on its own page, but Heighton observes that the "use of the relatively uncommon dactylic foot and strong assonance (chicory/field, lie/like/sky) suggest the line's musical nature" (241). The emphatic first stress of the dactylic line is a feature of African

percussive traditions in music such as calypso and funk, and Ondaatje builds on its driving rhythm to produce "Train Song" (82). This song reconfigures the original dactylic line, converting "field" to the plural to underscore the variations being performed. The plural "fields," Kamboureli argues, designates both the "geographical field and the field of language" ("Poetics" 119). She maintains that language "creat[es] its own terrain: 'lies' becomes highly ambiguous; 'like' can be read both as an adverb and as a verb; the simile is transformed into a metaphor, 'passing wet sky chicory,' finally to become something more than a metaphor, a riddle that brings into question the meaning of language" ("Poetics" 119). This riddle grows more complicated towards the conclusion of the novel when Bolden takes the train through Slaughter and the phrase makes its final appearance (141). At this point, the fields return to being a field and the dactylic line that became a song has been transformed into a prose fragment. These transformations of the refrain, as well as the title of the novel, raise the question of whether the entire book has been a series of variations on the emotional moment when Bolden takes the train through Slaughter. If so, the linearity of the train ride once again contrasts with the meanderings of the song cycle. The narrative does not derail: it is a derailment. Although the tracks from Storyville to the insane asylum are straight, the artist flourishes for as long as he can veer off, circle back, and forestall his unwelcome end. Such digressive and circumlocutionary narrative Kroetsch describes as a "method, then, and then, and then, of composition; against the 'and then' of story" ("Play" 120). Although Kroetsch intended these remarks for the long poem, Ondaatje has clearly transferred the narrative style he developed in his long poems to *Coming Through Slaughter*.

With the Booker Prize that followed the publication of *The English Patient*, and the Academy Awards that followed its film adaptation, Ondaatje's fame as a novelist greatly overshadowed his reputation as a poet. However, the verse origins of his prose style are unmistakable. Even *Anil's Ghost* (2000), which Ondaatje claims he wrote "in a different kind of

way than the way [he]'d written the earlier books," so that the language was "not too

heightened," the effect not "too formal" ("2000 Interview" 15), and the narrative "full of [the]

possibility of plot," has inspired an American reviewer to exclaim:

> Michael Ondaatje breaks the rules. He forces the novel to do things it isn't
> supposed to do and he gets away with it. [. . .] The Sri Lankan-born Ondaatje is a
> poet, and he throws himself headlong at beautiful sentences, revelatory scenes,
> larger-than-life moments. He treats plot as if it were a line of verse: What's
> important is that it scan and swell, not that it ticktock along with the weary world.
> (Kamiya)

Framing narrative in the fragmented and lyrical manner he developed during his work on the

long poem, Ondaatje breaks the rules of the novel and invigorates its sentence structure with the

sensibility of poetry. At the same time, by converting visual series into song cycles, Ondaatje's

early narratives, like those of Cohen, create an effect similar to the popular entertainments of

Muybridge's day, in which "photographic narratives [were] told by a series of stereocards and

photographs" (Sheldon 14). Judging by this pattern in the architecture of Ondaatje's narratives,

the "great change in what 'structure' is in a poem or in a novel" (Ondaatje, "1984 Interview" 322)

has to do with serializing the lyric in order to expand its temporal scope, multiply its points of

view, and produce what Bowering calls the "serial novel," which is the subject of the next

chapter.

CHAPTER 3

George Bowering: (Un)framing the Serial Novel

Writing is not parallel it is serial. (Bowering, *Short* 140)

Bowering redefines the term "serial novel" (*Short* 139) in his trilogy, *Autobiology* (1972),

Curious (1973), and *A Short Sad Book* (1977). The term conventionally refers to a novel

published in installments with cliffhanger chapter endings. These novels, which achieved

considerable popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, take part in "a continuous

negotiation between producer and reader in which the final form and content is largely

determined by a commercial transaction" (Myers and Harris vii). Their populist means of

distribution (as segments in journals and newspapers) established a broad and regular readership,

thus reducing the financial risk of publishing a new work and increasing the number of book

titles in circulation (Brake 84). Bowering plays with this legacy in his novels by periodically

interrupting the narrative to assess its progress and address the reader; by composing

Autobiology, *Curious*, and *A Short Sad Book* as a trilogy on his development as a poet-novelist;

and by dramatizing the struggles of a small literary press in *A Short Sad Book*.

However, Bowering does not confine his use of the term "serial" to the historical sense

outlined above. He rejects the realist novel and its promise of a window onto a parallel world

because he is suspicious of what he perceives as an instrumental use of language, as well as the

alleged causal inevitability of the realist plot. Instead of the plot-driven realist serial, Bowering

develops a prose form based on the serial poems of Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser, which

"refus[e] to adopt an imposed storyline" (Blaser, "Fire" 237) and create a narrative through series

of poems (predominantly lyrics) that develop recursively around motifs. The serial poem, an

essential poetic form for Bowering, appears regularly in Bowering oeuvre from the mid-1960s

onwards, beginning with *Baseball, a Poem in the Magic Number Nine* (1967), which is

dedicated to Spicer, and including *Allophanes* (1976), which Bowering wrote during the course

of 26 lectures by Blaser. However, unlike Spicer[28] and Blaser, Bowering has also adapted the literary strategies of the serial poem to the novel. This chapter will explore how Bowering frames *Autobiology, Curious,* and *A Short Sad Book* according to the logic of the serial poem and unframes the serial poem *George, Vancouver* to create a historical novel.

Like many avant-garde writers, Bowering has experimented with numerous literary genres and styles. The broad outline generally painted of his career depicts him as a lyric poet in the 1960s, a serial poem writer in the 1970s, and a prose writer in the 1980s, although Eva-Marie Kröller notes that such major works as *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984) fall outside of this paradigm (*Bright* 115). In fact, Bowering published in all three genres in each decade, and he continued this pattern in the 1990s. None the less, Bowering's prevailing interests map important transitions in his development as a writer. At first, he embraced the lyric, only to grow wary of its subjectivity; next he became interested in the epic, but deplored its treatment of history; several times he tried his hand at the novel, but was dissatisfied with the language of his early attempts at naturalism and realism. The serial novel thus presents itself as a means of reconciling Bowering's attraction to, and rejection of, these approaches to writing. The serial novel is a hybrid form, capable of accommodating the linguistic and formal pyrotechnics of the lyric and long poem, while sustaining the narrative dimension of the novel.

Unlike Ondaatje, Bowering did not move in a more or less linear fashion from lyric to long poem to novel. In his late teens, the "burning novelist from the [Okanagan] Valley" (*Piccolo* 52) was "more interested in writing prose fiction than [he] was in writing poetry" and his style resembled "James T. Farrell naturalism" ("1976 Interview" 81). However, Bowering's early novel, *Delsing*, was rejected by publishers (Kröller, *Bright* 116). His next novel, *Mirror on the Floor*, was published in 1967, but by then he had already published four volumes of lyric poetry: *Sticks & Stones* (1962), *Points on the Grid* (1964), *The Man in Yellow Boots* (1965), and *The Silver Wire* (1966). The lyric thus won Bowering his first success as a writer, and although

he has spurned and derided the form, it retains a central place in his repertoire. Most

importantly, Bowering's poetic affiliations in the 1960s aligned him with a group of writers,

many of whom would become friends and peers for the rest of his career.

Along with Frank Davey, Fred Wah, James Reid, and David Dawson, Bowering helped

publish a poetry newsletter, *Tish*, from September 1961 to March 1963. The monthly

newsletter—which was later co-edited by Daphne Buckle (Marlatt)—grew out of a literary group

in the Creative Writing and English Departments at the University of British Columbia, but it

created a community of Vancouver writers by encouraging submissions from promising local

poets such as David Bromige and Roy Kiyooka, and by mailing issues free of charge to

subscribers (who were requested to donate contributions). *Tish* offered the young poets a forum

for publishing new poems and debating poetics. It also answered the demand for a Canadian

journal receptive to the poetics associated with the *Black Mountain Review* (1954-57), which

published avant-garde American poets such as William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, and

Allen Ginsberg. This review showcased the postmodernist aesthetics emerging out of Black

Mountain College in North Carolina, where Charles Olson was rector and Robert Creeley and

Robert Duncan taught in the 1950s. The very name of *Tish* bears the stamp of this influence, as

Bowering explains in one of his versions of the *Tish* story:

> When a bunch of us tyros was considering starting a monthly poetry newsletter,
> our regular mentor, Warren Tallman, cautioned caution, but Duncan, a guest in
> Tallman's house, told us to go ahead. What'll we call it, we wondered. Should we
> call it something like *The Vancouver Poetry Newsletter*? In the doorway between
> the front hall and the living room at 2527 West 37th Avenue, Duncan said, "Call it
> *Tish*." (*Magpie* 209)

The scatological connotations of *Tish* (an anagram of "Shit") underscore the collective's anti-

establishment irreverence, but they also suited the group's admiration for Charles Olson:[29]

"Olsonites, we jokingly called ourselves. Olsonite was the brand name for a toilet seat, but we

were confident enough about where we stood" (Bowering, *Magpie* 26). Jokes aside, the *Tish*

poets were extremely serious about Olson's theory of poetry as an energy discharge, and they formed a study group to discuss his 1950 essay, "Projective Verse."

Bowering claims that Olson introduced the term "postmodern" to the *Tish* poets ("Vancouver" 121) as a guest lecturer at UBC in 1963. He also credits Olson with steering the young poets away from the Eurocentric bias of Eastern Canadian poetry:

> Olson told us to dig exhaustively into our local concerns. We began to do so, and the geography, history, and economics of Vancouver became the grid of our poetry. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, xenophobic critics and professors in Ontario accused us of selling out the "Canadian Tradition" to U.S. American interests. The latter would include Charles Olson and the anti-Vietnamese war machine. They started calling us Black Mountain poets. I dont know any Canadian poets who ever went to North Carolina. (*Magpie* 27)

This East/West dichotomy does not quite work because, at the same conference where Bowering pledged his allegiance to Olson, he was so impressed with Ginsberg's reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley that he resolved to "start poetry all over again, with Shelley on the first page" (*Magpie* 72). Moreover, the irony involved in students embracing the ideas of a visiting American professor on counter-imperialism and adopting his theories of the local has been interpreted as treason by many Canadian critics, including Keith Richardson, who wrote *Poetry and the Colonized Mind: Tish* (1976), and Robin Mathews, who contributed a preface to Richardson's work and attacked Bowering in his own articles (Mathews).[30] Although Bowering now resents the identification of the *Tish* group with the Black Mountain poets, the connection is well-established—and not only because Bowering discovered that there is a Black Mountain north of Vancouver. David Dawson writes in an editorial for *Tish 20* that the editors "print poems that work the way we think a poem should work. our debt, stated or otherwise, to the so-called Black Mountain group, is obvious" (5). Davey did his doctoral dissertation on the "Theory and Practice in the Black Mountain Poets" (1968) and, in other contexts, Bowering explicitly aligns himself with the figureheads of American modernism and postmodernism. Although an Olsonite, he maintains that his "personal model in the early sixties was H.D." (*Magpie* 193). He

also considers himself "the imaginary son of WCW and nephew of Denise Levertov and cousin of Ron Silliman" (201), as well as being one of a group of "Vancouver poets [who] might loosely be said to descend from Robert Duncan" ("Ondaatje" 163). Blaser, Spicer and Creeley—who lectured at UBC from 1962-63 and was Bowering's teacher—also occupy prominent positions on this family tree.[31] Taken together, these poets are not a very compatible group, but Bowering picks and chooses his influences according to his purposes at a given moment.

Such a broad range of American mentors contrasts sharply with the limited influence of Canadian authors on Bowering's early poetics, as well as on that of the *Tish* group:

> Well, when the whole *Tish* thing was happening, we were people who had been deracinated—we didn't get any Canadian writing at school in B.C. Most of the people in *Tish*—Fred Wah and Frank Davey—didn't know anything about Canadian poetry. The only people that knew of Canadian poetry were Lionel Kearns and I, who got together before the *Tish* stuff happened anyway. Lionel had been an exchange student in Québec and he brought back the Contact Press books and I read them in one of those cabins in the dorms. Souster, Layton, Dudek, D.G. Jones, Milton Acorn and all those guys. I hadn't even thought about Canadian poetry. I didn't even think about thinking about Canadian poetry. ("1976 Interview" 81)

Bowering's commentary on the curriculum here is not quite accurate, and he chooses to overlook the presence of Earle Birney, who founded the Creative Writing Department at UBC in the mid-1960s, and whose long narrative poem *David* (1942) was by then a canonical work.[32] Bowering's views on Canadian literary history are often selective and subject to change. For example, in a 1976 interview with Caroline Bayard and Jack David, Bowering praises Layton's "*Laughter in the Mind*—oh, a great book, and I was reading Dudek's *East of the City*— fantastic" (81). However, only three years earlier, he had ridiculed Layton and Dudek in *Curious* and portrayed Jones as too busy with family to write (n.p.). Generally, only Souster escapes Bowering's derision: "I probably got more out of Souster than I did out of the other guys, that is the short lyric poem that I wrote a thousand of" ("1976 Interview" 81). The long poem "Sousterre" in *Smoking Mirror* (1982) acknowledges this debt to Souster's lyricism, albeit in an

"underground" manner: Bowering's series begins with an epigraph by E.E. Greengrass, one of Bowering's pseudonyms. None the less, in the new millennium, Bowering has warmed to the idea of having Canadian predecessors and he now claims that the Contact Press poets were "the signal of the new" for his generation of young Canadians (*Magpie* 200).[33]

I have noted the influence of the Tish, Black Mountain, and Contact Press poets because they play an active role in Bowering's early publications. Bowering dedicated his first collection of poems, *Sticks & Stones* (1963), to "Robert Duncan/ —the man who teaches/ people to listen" (n.p.), and had it printed as "part of a projected series of chapbooks, Tishbooks, to be published by the first *Tish* collective of writers" (Miki, "Real" 55). However, fewer than 30 draft copies were circulated privately before Contact Press accepted Bowering's manuscript for *Points on the Grid* (1964), which included many of the poems from *Sticks & Stones*. Talonbooks reissued *Sticks & Stones* in 1989, including the original companion drawings by Gordon Payne and the preface by Creeley, but no large-scale printing occurred before then.

The early poems are perhaps most notable for their use of parataxis and the ampersand. They layer image upon image and record the metonymic correspondences of what Duncan calls "rime." Bowering tells Bayard and David that he is "crazy about rime, see, so what I'm paying attention to is not trying to render some other experience with the writing itself and seeing what happens from point to point" (90).[34] Forever contrasting a poetics of representation and a poetics of process, Bowering documents the interaction of his mind and body with his environment and favours techniques that promote a sense of becoming, as opposed to being, in his poetry: "Form, then, in this practice is alive and difficult of access because it is not before or after the fact of the writing, but within it. That is to say, the movement of life into language [. . .] is not formulaic or expected. It is perhaps a surprise" (Blaser, "George" 10). Creeley's slogan, adopted by Olson and Bowering, expresses this sense of process: "Form is never more than an extension of

content." Creeley later amended this statement to produce the succinct declaration, "Form is what happens" ("Interview" 286), which nicely summarizes Bowering's early poetics.

Bowering's second collection, *Points on the Grid,* expands on this preoccupation with movement and process, as the title poem indicates:

> The man's life
> a series of points
> strung into a wavering line
> on the graph
> his grid of action. (66)

Bowering examines the strategies and media of observation throughout this collection, but the grid metaphor of the title poem suggests a Cartesian point of view that Bowering would later question. It also recalls Bowering's years as an RCAF aerial photographer, and Bowering would grow wary of this "god's eye" view for the same reason he rejected the military.[35]

"Taking Pictures," a poem from the series "Four Jobs" in *West Window* (1982), expresses Bowering's reservations about the purpose of his military photographs and film footage:

> I used a screwdriver to open a little
> door in the aluminum wing of a cold airplane. I opened
> the sixteen millimetre movie camera screwed there,
> took out a cassette of negative film, & stuck in a new one
> [. . .]
> It was always a movie of one thing,
> a target. (141)

The cameraman's privileged vantage point here is analogous to that of the lyric poet who targets his or her subjects through a formal aperture and then captures their images. This vantage point becomes the object of Bowering's criticisms in subsequent publications, where he strives to "edit out any verse that seem[s] to be peering thru a crenel at the passing show" (*Catch* n.p.). For example, in "Brown Globe," Bowering criticizes the detached and aestheticized perspective of "pure poetry":

> If this is confession it is crooked,
> it is not as valid as pure poetry, I once wrote
> pure poetry till the bombs fell on Asia,

but that is an evasion, isnt it? Isnt it
that I have to write letters to publishers instead of to
angels? (*Flesh* 16)

Bowering searches for an evasive poetics here, as opposed to an invasive one, even as he

condemns (in a glancing fashion) the U.S. military and invokes Rilke's address to the "angelic/

orders" (5) in the *Duino Elegies*. Uncomfortable with the imperial stance "of a poetic self intent

only on expressing its own centrality," Bowering "did not simply go on honing a style and

polishing a signature [. . .]. The singular lyric poem characteristic of his first volumes of poetry

gave way to the extended form, to what Bowering would call (taking the term from Jack Spicer

and Robin Blaser) the 'serial' poem" (Miki, "Editor" 232). The serial poem provides a means for

the author to explore the complexity of phenomena because it registers how phenomena shift

over a number of exposures and from a variety of vantage points.

In 1964 Bowering established the journal *Imago* "expressly for long poems and shorter

poems, because at that time there werent (m)any magazines that printed long poems" ("1991

Statement" 351). Although *Imago* grew out of Bowering's *Tish* experience, it signaled a shift in

his formal concerns as an editor and writer, as he explains: "That long poem business, of starting

the magazine, was naturally contemporaneous with my wanting to write long poems myself.

Saying, OK, I've written all these lyrics, I've got to do something else" ("1976 Interview" 92).

Bowering claims not to "recall having held any great theories about the long poem" ("1991

Statement" 351), but, like *Tish*, this letter was not entirely open.[36] He did not want "just

anybody's long poems, but the long poems in our context" ("1976 Interview" 85)—that is, serial

poems. Bowering's introductory editorial states that *Imago* is intended "for the long poem, the

series or set, the sequence, swathes from giant work in progress, long life pains eased into print"

(*Imago 1* 2). Bowering published Duncan beside Davey (*Imago 2*) and Olson beside Kearns

(*Imago 7*) while flatly rejecting any nationalist claims to the genre: "I know, I have heard, that

the long poem is somehow normal to Canada. Well, Dryden me no Drydens, Pope me no Popes"

("1991 Statement" 351). Indeed, Bowering maintains that he started *Imago* because he "noticed that in the United States all the good Modernist poets, all the Imagist poets, went ahead and made the long poem their main life's work. *The Cantos. The War Trilogy. Patterson. A. Lifting Belly*" (351). However, this "symphonic period" (*Flesh* 8) in Bowering's career also marks a broadening of his poetic interests. The move to the long poem places him in a larger continuum than the legacy of American (post)modernism. For example, alluding to *George, Vancouver*, Bowering observes that in "the eighteenth century the important verse is found in long poems. Among the Romantics and the Victorians the reputations were made on long poems of heroic visionary voyages" (351). The thematic breadth of the long poem seems to have forced him to come to terms with the obvious: the Britishness of British Columbia and the Englishness of his language. In 1967, Bowering began a Ph.D. dissertation on Shelley at the University of Western Ontario in London. He abandoned this project a year later in order to accept a position at Sir George Williams University (Concordia) in Montreal, but it influenced the Romantic theories of the imagination set forth in *George, Vancouver* and *Burning Water*.

However, Bowering's work as an editor preceded his work as a writer, and he would publish two more collections of short lyrics before producing his first serial poem, *Baseball* (1967). In 1965, Bowering published *The Man in Yellow Boots*, a collection of lyrics preoccupied with the escalating military tensions of the Cold War. The title recalls the fact that Bowering spraypainted his boots bright yellow while he was in the Canadian military, but he directs his irreverent wit primarily at the American military in his poems. Although Bowering retains his love of jazz and Hollywood Westerns, his growing disillusionment with American politics manifests itself here in poems such as as "Vox Crapulous (alternative title: J. Edgar Hoover)" (*Yellow* 32-34) and in the reprinted letters to the book's editors: "What are the Americans going to do now a country [China] they dont recognize has detonated the Bomb? They'll have to keep it a secret from America, or walk around wondering, where did that noise

come from? It cdnt have come from that part of Asia because there aint no country there" (*Yellow* 98). The publication of *The Man in Yellow Boots* coincided with the official American invasion of Vietnam, and Bowering's youthful enthusiasm for the U.S. would steadily turn to disenchantment in this and subsequent publications. Although he would continue to side with American countercultural figures such as Ginsberg, his disdain for American military ambitions became a standard theme in his writing from this point on: for example, in the serial poem *At War with the U.S.* (1974) and the "Vietnam & Other Wars" section of *Seventy-One Poems for People* (1985).[37]

Intimations of Bowering's move to the serial poem are already present in *The Man with Yellow Boots*. Bowering gives the looming threat of nuclear holocaust particular poignancy by juxtaposing his lyrics with a series of collages by the Japanese-Canadian artist Roy Kiyooka. Unlike the drawings by Gordon Payne in *Sticks & Stones*, which are interspersed between the poems and meant to complement or illustrate them,[38] Kiyooka insisted that his series "be included in the book in one solid block and not be scattered throughout the book" (Bowering Papers, NL).[39] The poems and photography series represent two distinct meditations on a theme which are juxtaposed within the text. For example, the split oval in Kiyooka's first collage juxtaposes a mushroom cloud with a headless torso, conjuring formal associations with the split atom and connecting thematically to such Bowering poems as "Her Act Was a Bomb" (38) and "The Good Prospects," "writ on the occasion of the Moscow test ban treaty meeting" (52). On a broader level, the collage series foreshadows the future direction of Bowering's poetry and underscores the importance of visual art to Bowering's craft.

In *George Bowering: Bright Circles of Colour*, Eva-Marie Kröller argues persuasively that Bowering's designs are heavily influenced by his friendships and collaborations with Canadian visual artists.[40] The starting point for Kröller's book is Bowering's dedication of *Another Mouth* (1979) to "three artists who have graced my life, illuminated my imagination, &

talkt my year off: Greg Curnoe, Roy Kiyooka, & Brian Fisher." Kröller goes beyond these three

figures to examine Bowering's connections to Jack Chambers (who contributed the drawing of

"Man and Dog" to the cover of Ondaatje's *the man with seven toes*), Guido Molinari, and others,

but the three dedicatees have a particularly prominent role in shaping Bowering's poetics, as he

acknowledges in the Bayard/David interview:

> I hang out with painters in every city I go to, for some reason. Roy Kiyooka and
> Brian Fisher are two of my best friends in Vancouver. I think painters tend to talk
> more than poets do; poets tend not to talk about their art too much with each
> other, very seldom. But painters who have been quiet all day long, want to talk
> about serious things when they finish. (88)

Among these artists, Kiyooka's influence deserves particular consideration here because he is the

oldest friend of the three.[41] Like Spicer, Kiyooka thinks of the book a unit of composition, but

his manner of composing is different from that of the American serial poet. Although he shares

Bowering's enthusiasm for Spicer, Duncan, and Olson, and puts a copy of *The Poetics of the*

New American Poetry (Allen) in his photography series in "Pacific Windows" (n.p.), Kiyooka's

background in the visual arts leads him to a different interpretation of the serial form. He rejects

the notion that serial poems are completely open in form and likes to establish certain parameters

for his poems which give them a recurring architecture. Bowering follows this example by

working ekphrastically from the 38 cards of the Geneva tarot deck in *Genève*, using the border of

a single page to frame his literary portraits in *Curious*, and limiting his composition time to the

duration of a Blaser lecture in *Allophanes*. In *A Short Sad Book*, to cite an example that

resonates with the conclusion of *Coming Through Slaughter*, the stops of the Yonge Street

subway remind one character "of a serial poem" (167), because he sees radical difference framed

by recurring architectural forms. These forms establish a framework by which the reader judges

the differences among the discontinuous segments.

Such limiting practices are in place from Bowering's very first serial poem, *Baseball, a*

poem in the magic number 9 (1967). This poem responds to Spicer's opening injunction in

"Seven Poems for the Vancouver Festival": "Start with a baseball diamond high/ In the Runcible Mountain wilderness" (259). Acknowledging his literary debt, Bowering dedicates the poem to Spicer (who died shortly after lecturing in Vancouver in 1965) and celebrates their favourite sport:

> I knew an old man in San Francisco
> came to life
> when the Dodgers were in town.
> Now he is dead, too,
> & Jack is dead,
> & the soldiers play baseball
> in Asia,
> where there is no season,
> no season's end. (*Baseball* 29)

On one hand, Bowering praises the exuberance of Spicer's serial technique by comparing it to the endless summer of America's favourite pastime.[42] On the other hand, the spectre of American imperialism looms over this passage as the soldiers play baseball in Asia. Perhaps for this reason, Bowering marks off his literary territory and signals his difference from Spicer by establishing limits to the reach of his poem. *Baseball* appears in nine sections, limiting its scope to nine innings of varying but not disproportionate length. Instead of creating a segmented form that is conducive to enlargement—the "to be continued" of Spicer's beloved TV serials— Bowering establishes a temporal or spatial limit ahead of time and plays against that limit.

At the same time, because Bowering considers himself doubly colonized in BC, he resists the limitations that he feels are placed upon him by the Eastern Canadian literary establishment, as well as by the northern ethos of the Dominion:

> the Mounties, nuts, they are Dominicans of the North
> dusky smiling on the lucky number souvenir program,
> where I no longer write mystic scorekeeper numbers in the little squares,
> sophisticate of baseball now, I've seen later famous players here. (25)

For Bowering, as a product of the hot and dry Okanagan Valley, baseball has always represented his resistance to the cultural dictates of hockey-mad Eastern Canada. Bowering's views on

baseball also allegorize his opinions on postmodernism (*Imaginary* 47), reading (*Magpie* 99-107), and, in this case, his refusal to write short lyrics ("mystic scorekeeper numbers in the little squares") to please anthologists in the East. Bowering thus embraces the American game and poetic genre in order to become more local. The situation is contradictory but, like Whitman, Bowering would say: "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then . . . . I contradict myself" (96). Of course, Whitman makes this statement in "Song of Myself" because he is "large" and "contain[s] multitudes" (96), whereas Bowering implies it because he feels constrained regional, national, and genre expectations. Yet he also finds creative inspiration in resisting these pressures, and it is therefore appropriate that Bowering wrote a critique of Albertan culture in *Rocky Mountain Foot* (1968) while teaching in Calgary, and then started a serial poem on the colonial exploits of George Vancouver while beginning a Ph.D. in London, Ontario.

In *Rocky Mountain Foot*, Bowering intermingles lyrics with quotations from Alberta road signs, newspapers, geological surveys, and other found materials in order to step out from behind his crenel and engage with the passing show. As Bowering makes clear in his critique of Ondaatje's early lyrics, he desires "a world rather than a picture of one" ("Ondaatje" 165), and collage provides him the means of creating a stereophonic impression in the reading, as well as a panoramic impression on the page. Clearly influenced by Kiyooka and their friend bill bissett[43]—who, as a painter and poet, is interested in "vizual writing discovering *space* on a sheet/ uv paper nd all yu can do with it nd the non-gramaticul/ line" (qtd. in Bayard and David n.p.)— Bowering turns to serial collage in *Rocky Mountain Foot* as a means of addressing his "dissatisf[action] with the lyric poem as a mode":

> Now there's got to be some way of getting away from the danger of the lyric which is the personalism that's involved, the seeing things from that personal point of view. I don't know what the model might have been but I had a sense that the way to do that was to inject or meet what you were writing with the other, so you can somehow move it out of the lyric mode so it no longer is my opinion on that or my response to that or my feeling on that, that there will be something like a collaboration perhaps. ("1976 Interview" 98)

Thus, Bowering juxtaposes fragments and includes quotations from other Canadian poets on related subject matter in order to underscore that he is one voice in a larger dialogue. In *George, Vancouver*, similarly, Bowering's lyric voice is interrupted by deadpan historical reports on the state of King George's health and the English Romantic movement, excerpts from Vancouver's and Menzies's journals, a catalogue of sailing vessels, nautical statistics, and other factual intrusions into the subjective space of the lyric. *George, Vancouver* is subtitled "A Discovery Poem" and it represents Bowering's exploration of this new method of composition, as well as his research into the history of Vancouver—the place he continues to think of as home even while in Calgary, London, and Montreal.

Particularly in its revised version in *The Catch* (1976), *George, Vancouver* follows *Rocky Mountain Foot* in offering visual analogies for this diversification of voice. The use of interspersed italics, the repetition of the pictographic symbol for Cancer, and the placement of stanzas across the breadth of the page indicate that Bowering is beginning to think of the page as a space to explore rather than as an transparent medium for transcribing the voice. However, the juxtapositions of collage complicate Bowering's already complicated politics and poetics. There is probably no better illustration of Bowering's flair for controversy and contradiction than the public response to *The Gangs of Kosmos* (1969). The book consists of short lyrics and a modernization of the Haida myth of the "Hamatsa," its cover features a drawing of Margaret Atwood and Angela Bowering, and its title derives from a Whitman quotation. Atwood, who edited the collection, suggested the title *You Too*, but Bowering insisted on Whitman (Miki, *Record* 21). Despite the explicit Americanism of the title, *The Gangs of Kosmos* together with *Rocky Mountain Foot* won the Governor General's Award in 1969, to the dismay of literary nationalists such as Mathews. Seven years later, Bowering ridicules Mathews and his ilk in *A Short Sad Book*, but he also taunts Whitman:

> I saw a stand of trees in London Ontario where Walt Whitman the American had
> walkt & we lived a block away.
>> He said he had no ending.
>> Well, here I am Walt, & I dont see you around & you still havent annex'd
> Cuba & Kanada. (26)

In a similarly paradoxical manner, Bowering produced his greatest number of serial poems in the 1970s, but abandoned *Imago* in 1974 because "the long poem had become a fad" ("1976 Interview" 85). Never content to run with the pack, Bowering started looking for ways to expand the form's generic vocabulary and his search led him back to the novel.

In 1970, when Bowering began work on the serial novel *Autobiology* in "an Irish section of London, England" (*Magpie* 37), he had already written two realist novels: *Delsing* (unpublished) and *Mirror on the Floor* (1967). The latter novel offers a Vancouver perspective on the late Beat Era and is, in many respects, a testament to Bowering's enthusiasm for "Jack Kerouac, the French-Canadian writer who happened to be born and raised in the United States" (Bowering, *Magpie* 52). "Tallman wanted the novel to be called 'Vancouver Blues,'" thereby aligning it with Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (1959), "but GB stuck with his own title" (Miki, *Record* 13), perhaps because it engages explicitly with the definition of the realist novel as "a mirror held up to real life" (Abrams 153). Set in diners, cars, and artists' houses, and populated with poets, painters, and other bohemian figures, *Mirror on the Floor* treads a well-trodden literary path in many respects. Stylistically, it approximates the speed and speech rhythms of Kerouac's shotgun prose through run-on sentences and hip, witty dialogue. It celebrates youthful exuberance and glamorizes the Beat aesthetic—except in the section where the Vancouver police beat the third-person narrator, Bob, after throwing him in jail.[44] In this respect, the novel emulates the accelerated realism of *On the Road* and presages Ondaatje's assertion in *The English Patient* that a "novel is a mirror walking down a road" (91).

However, *Mirror on the Floor* is also a romance, and in the passages where Andrea (Bob's love interest) appears, the writing achieves a lyrical intensity that frequently eclipses its realism. For example, in the two-page chapter from which the title derives, Bowering develops the kind of lyrical prose that he later employs in *Autobiology*:

> She pulled the screws out and put the full-length mirror on the floor. The room seemed to tip without a lurch and the ceiling came into the mirror a little crooked. The edges of her eyes caught more yellow wall than before. Swimming season was over and white bodies lay wavering back and forth in the long green weeds, long hair trailing wet with tendrils among little fish and fugitive underwater green sunshine. Winter was ready with its cloud-bank out on the Pacific rainwaters and the cold air of fall was settling in over the city.
>
> Poised over the mirror, she looked down ten feet to her face looking down to her from ten feet above. The figure in the glass was wavering, ready to fall, to sail, to come out and away, swaying on the edge of adhesion, out of the world in a second, it was herself seen from within the glass and out to the yellow walls. (62)

At the conclusion of this scene, Andrea strips naked and lies down on the mirror. The medium and subject of representation intersect as Andrea's body spreads over the mirror and fills its frame. Bowering conveys the (auto)eroticism of this moment by emphasizing horizontal movement in the narrative:

> She stood over the mirror and looked down at the reflection. Somebody could have been standing at the rail of a bridge. Rain could be falling on bodies in the park. It could be summer in the world, somewhere. The quartet was in the middle of the blues.
>
> The glass was cold against her skin. She flattened herself more, pushing away the cold, and the fronts of her shoulders pressed against the glass. She lowered her open mouth to the open mouth. (63)

Andrea's kiss unites the composition's horizontal planes, causing two parallel worlds to collide. As Olson observes, speaking generally, "mirror and model are each figures in Euclidian space, and they are *not* congruent. They require a discontinuous jump" ("Equal" 180). The eroticism of Andrea's gesture bridges this discontinuity and challenges the supposed passivity of the mirror-image, blocks its gaze, and mocks its (in)ability to reproduce. These actions pose only a brief challenge to conventional prose and its symbols, but her gesture foreshadows Bowering's more aggressive challenge to realist convention in *Autobiology*.

When *Autobiology* was published in 1972, it signalled Bowering's most generically daring experiment to date. For example, Harris calls the "book-length lyric" Bowering's poetic "masterpiece" (29), while the biographical blurb on the back cover of *A Short Sad Book* lists it as a novel. The original York Street Commune edition of *Autobiology* facilitates the latter impression by using large type and doublespaced lines to create 48 chapters of two pages in length. However, subsequent reprintings of *Autobiology* in *The Catch* and *George Bowering Selected* present the work as poetry and condense its chapters onto single pages. The reprinted versions also have typographically unnecessary line breaks which suggest that Bowering came to think of *Autobiology* as a serial poem.

These changes reflect how editorial pressures can entrench generic boundaries. McClelland and Stewart editor Anna Porter accepted the original manuscript of *The Catch*, but rejected "Sousterre" for its middle section. Bowering proposed *Autobiology* as a replacement because, as a *Georgia Straight Writing Supplement*, it had had a smaller print run than Bowering felt it deserved: "I am also very high on it, and I consider that I will stand on it for years to come" (McClelland and Stewart Papers, McMaster University; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 48). Porter's response to this proposal triggered a debate on genre:

> Porter was hesitant because for her the work was prose, not poetry, so would create a mixed book that might be hard to market. GB responded 31 July 1975: "Recognize yr hesitation re *Autobiology*, but wd Instruct that the distinction is not really between prose and poetry but between prose and verse. Poetry can be in both prose or verse. Verse has to do with the making of lines, i.e. coming back to the margin at times, etc., while poetry has essentially to do with how one treats or is treated by the language regarding what he wants his reader to do. That is, prose directs one toward the world he presumably [is] already in, and poetry invites him into a world, a new one. Or as Hulme had it, prose is a train that tries to get you to a destination, and poetry is a pedestrian, who steps and sees every bit of the way. Well. In any case *Autobiology* is poetry[.]" (McClelland and Stewart Papers, McMaster University; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 48)

For Bowering, the distinction between poetry and prose is in some ways inconsequential because "[i]f you spend all those years writing lyric poems, your body remembers, your body knows how

to write those poems now. That's why I compare writing to athletics so much, because your body learns to do it" ("1976 Interview" 89). The serial structure of *Autobiology* is thus an extension of (rather than a departure from) Bowering's lyric corpus.

However, I have noted the poetic lineage informing the serial novel because Bowering claimed to have outgrown the lyric in the 1970s:

> I started building on the lyric into a larger mode and using an Olson sense of how you get into a long poem, not very well. So I did that long Alberta sequence [*Rocky Mountain Foot*] in which lyrics are mixed with non-poetical materials and it was called [subtitled] "A Lyric, A Memoir" and I did, after that, the Captain Vancouver one in which there is a collection of lyrics taken from different places, all on the same subject. Then I wrote some shorter long poems which were a lot more interesting. Then I wrote *Genève* [1971] and from then I've never written a lyric poem or a short poem. ("1976 Interview" 92)

This statement is useful, if slightly misleading. The lyric is so fundamental to Bowering's practice that he apparently publishes whole collections despite himself. In addition to the "last lyrics" (n.p.) from *The Concrete Island: Montreal Poems 1967-71* (1977), Bowering produced two more collections of "Last Lyrics" (*Another* 37) in the 1970s: *In the Flesh* (1974) and *Another Mouth* (1979). Bowering also writes lyrics under the pseudonyms Helmut Franz, E.E. Greengrass, Erich Blackhead, and Edward Pratoverde and offers this paradoxical explanation to Bayard and David: "I still publish lyric poems under a pseudonym because I'm not a lyric poet anymore" (84). In addition, the structure of Bowering's serial poems compels one of his editors, Roy Miki, to debunk his "post-lyric" pronouncements:

> In the midst of composing serial texts in the late 1960s and 1970s, Bowering announced many times that he had abandoned the lyric poem altogether, that he had gone post-lyric as it were, but the collections published in the 1970s belie that statement. The poems themselves reveal that the younger poet had learned to mistrust the conventional lyric stance which privileges the isolate self imposing order on the world, and had learned how to renew the lyric in complicated forms that maintain a vital tension between order and process, craft and language, self and otherness. ("Editor" 233)

Serial texts such as *Autobiology* are thus a kind of elaborate disguise for the lyric impulse.

In addition to being an innovation in style and content, *Autobiology* places a new

emphasis on Bowering's family life. Bowering's only child, Thea, was born in 1972, and "a

photograph of father and daughter appears on the back cover, complementing a picture of a three

or four-year-old Bowering with his mother [Pearl] on the front" (Kröller, *Bright* 65). Framed by

these portraits, Bowering's text explores new kinds of continuity in his writing by exploring his

genealogy and translating it into a literary form. Unlike in *George, Vancouver* and *Genève*, there

is a discernible narrative in *Autobiology*. Bowering traces his progress from childhood to

adulthood and thereby complies with the standard autobiographical technique hinted at in the

title. However, as an auto*biology*, this piece of life-writing treats life and death in their

biological contexts. The cover images position Bowering as a link in a chain of life extending

from his mother Pearl to his daughter Thea, and this sense of selfhood extending beyond the

lyric "I" is part of the rationale behind the book's title, as Bowering explains in *Errata*: "I never

wanted to write an autobiography. I think that certain works I have done with what looks like

my life story should be called biotext. [. . .] Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an

extension of him" (34).[45] The distinction between autobiography and autobiology is thus another

example of the distinction Bowering makes between parallel writing (that mirrors a life) and

serial writing (that multiplies perspectives on a life). This sense of familial extension and

variation is particularly poignant when one considers that Thea Bowering is now a published

poet, and that, prior to her death in 2000, Bowering worked collaboratively with his wife Angela

on the novel *Piccolo Mondo* (1998), as well as on "a sequence of meditations on pictures"

(*Magpie* 37) as yet unpublished.

The strong female presence in *Autobiology* also accentuates the author's growing

enthusiasm for Gertrude Stein. Whereas William Carlos Williams is Bowering's "poetry Dad"

(*Magpie* 56) in his early books, Stein serves as his stylistic mentor in the 1970s. By modifying

Stein's style of circumlocution, repetition, and inversion, *Autobiology* establishes the stylistic

basis for *Curious* and *A Short Sad Book.* As in *Curious,* a series of literary profiles akin to Stein's cubist portraits, and as in *A Short Sad Book,* a response to Stein's *A Long Gay Book,* *Autobiology* employs the fragmentated and incongruous style of juxtaposition that Stein developed as a literary equivalent to cubism. Bowering links these fragments with his beloved ampersand and builds poems out of an accumulation of objects and moments viewed from different angles. The effect is "something like a movie film, Gertrude Stein's analogy for her writing, 'discrete frames in/ a continuous flow'" (Bowering, "bp" 194)—a metaphor that Bowering uses to describe bp Nichol's long poem *continental trance,* in which discrete images pass by like "picture windows in a moving train" ("bp" 194). Bowering thus grafts his family history onto a new branch of his literary family tree and develops a digressive prose style that connects to Ondaatje's writing in its serialism and to Nichol's writing in its voice.[46]

Yet, in developing these continuities, Bowering also explores new kinds of discontinuity in his writing. The discontinuous, Steinian sentences are the most obvious example. However, one should also remember that Bowering writes *Autobiology* out of a sense of geographical displacement. This displacement affects the genre and content of the text, as Bowering explains in his preface to *The Concrete Island*: "My sojourn in the east took me out of place & took place out of my poetry. [. . . In] Montreal I wrote my last lyrics, old habit, & my first books, or my first post-lyric books. I wrote *Genève* in Montreal, & most of *Autobiology*" (n.p.). Although Bowering frequently equates the serial poem with the West Coast, he finds the impetus to write many of his serial works while living away from it. Bowering produced *Autobiology* as a means of connecting to his roots—as he did *Rocky Mountain Foot,* which is set in Alberta but ends in Vancouver, and *George, Vancouver,* which he began in London, Ontario. The dates of composition given in the back of *Autobiology* underscore this westward trajectory: "London, June 12, 1970—Vancouver, June 12, 1971" (103). The way that Bowering registers time is thus

framed by his feelings of dislocation, and the temporal shifts in the narrative have a vertiginous effect.

Although the sequence of frames in *Autobiology* gives an impression of Bowering's development as an artist, the novel largely shuns plot. On the level of the chapter, the text progresses in a roughly linear fashion from Bowering's childhood to his adulthood; but on the level of the sentence it "introduces a complex superimposition of times, refusing to adopt a sequential ordering of time" (Kröller, *Bright* 66). The narrative rimes rather than climaxes. It moves horizontally rather than vertically, developing a lateral technique that Bowering revisits in "Alphabiography" (a prose piece organized according to the 26 letters of the alphabet that constitutes the largest section of *A Magpie Life: Growing a Writer*). Time in the story jumps forward and backward, and Bowering creates a sense of duration through temporal overlay, not through extended description in any one tense. The series of 48 (twice 24) chapters is thus both chronological and achronological.

Although the serial novel abandons the ticking chronometer of naturalistic pace, it is no less preoccupied with the passage of time. The importance of Pacific Coast history to *George, Vancouver* and of autobiography to *Autobiology* is a symptom, Bowering explains, of entering a new phase in his life: "[E]specially for somebody who has been deracinated, it makes sense, in your twenties, to write lyric poems in which the configuration of the place is so important to your finding out who you are in the twenties. I think in the thirties you tend to get out of place and more into time" ("1976 Interview" 88). Of course, Bowering's new interest in time does not cause him to abandon his old enthusiasm for narratives of place. Instead, he maintains that the "next place is really a series of places so that the next place is really time, that is, a series, not as on the railroad, though that is certainly, there" (*Autobiology* 75). Considering time as a series of places and place as a series of times does not conform to standard biographical technique, but Bowering's nonconformity is the source of his charm.

Times and places intertwine and overlap from the very first chapter of *Autobiology*, which begins in a paratactic fashion: "When I was thirty I had free raspberries in the backyard & I loved them. In the back yard & I ate them. & I ate them in the kitchen out of an aluminum pot. When I was thirty I loved raspberries, I loved to eat them" (*Autobiology* 7). Bowering immediately contrasts this recollection with its negative: "I could not eat raspberries when I was three years old when we had free raspberries in the front yard" (7). This juxtaposition enacts a series of inversions similar to the inverted parent/child roles in the cover photographs: front yard becomes backyard, 30 becomes 03, a love of raspberries becomes a fear of raspberries. The parallel worlds intersect in the iconic image of the raspberry[47] because "Bowering's prose insistently repeats and varies key phrases. These repetitions blur temporal and spatial distinctions between individual sentences, which are looped together with the melodious playfulness of the *terza rima*" (Kröller, *Bright* 66). The raspberry recurs in Chapter 6, where it continues to blur distinctions between times and places (Montreal, Peachland, Greenwood): "I lookt up when I was five & when I was twenty & when I was thirty when I had raspberries in my backyard across Canada while the yard in Greenwood grew not berries but sweet peas" (17-18). The looping tangle of the raspberry canes thus sets a precedent for the shape of the narrative.

Although Bowering rejects the classical demand for clarity of image, he evidently does not reject the concept of mimesis entirely, because his syntax imitates the convoluted shape of the canes. Instead of holding up a mirror to nature, he strives to imitate organic processes of growth, as he explains in an essay on William Carlos Williams:

> The plant, the city, the human being, any kind of organism, the poem, undergoes perpetual change; yet at the same time it is characterized by a unique shape. For the organism, order is process—the search for form *IS* form, the form. It is the poem, searching for language, that manages to imitate nature, the only palpable universal. An Aristotelean desire suggests that poetic form implies a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that this is the base for all that can be said about form in nature or in its imitation. But a humble eye looking at the water sees nothing ending. ("Dance" 141)

Thus, Bowering cannot conclude Chapter 1 of *Autobiology* with the static contrast of the thirty-year-old and three-year-old. To imitate nature as a process in motion, he introduces the story of himself as a three and a half-year-old who eats the raspberry but suspects "there [i]s the bug on it" (8). Years later, the child sees a man's face "at a girl's window" (8) and this juxtaposition transforms the raspberry into the Biblical forbidden fruit. In the next two chapters, Bowering amplifies these allusions to Genesis by having the young narrator perform the Adamic task of naming. Both chapters begin, "Sometimes they are called [. . .]" but Bowering dispels any impression of him being the first man by making the process of naming an act of choosing between dialects: "Sometimes they are called see-saws, but that is in a school-book or back east, & we always called them teeter-totters" (9). Instead of sanctioning the definitive, referential Word, Bowering distinguishes between parallel and serial by offering (at least) two linguistic perspectives on the same object. Such bifurcations are his means of maintaining movement in the text, rather than letting it achieve the static state that, in organic terms, signifies death.

To complicate matters further, Bowering explains his ideas of movement in terms of pictorial art. One might assume that pictorial art is identical with the frozen image and stable composition, but Bowering disagrees. Paraphrasing Olson, Bowering offers an opinion of what the great shift in the structure of a poem or novel was for his predecessors:[48]

> [T]he main twentieth century change from nineteenth century esthetic is that in the nineteenth century all art aimed at rest, finally. When you looked at a painting, you were led by the structure of the painting to having your eyes rest on some area of the painting. And when you taught painting in the academy, you taught where to put the most important material of that painting. And similarly with poetry. You were finally to come to rest. And the main thing that happened in the twentieth century art was that you weren't allowed to do that. So Cézanne[49] came along, and your eye doesn't rest anywhere in that painting. And the same thing started to happen with William Carlos Williams. There's one guy who finally cracked through and showed you that where Williams was coming from was from French painting. Not from Whitman or wherever. Gertrude Stein was another one. And that's why I've come back to her. It seems to me that that's the main message of the twentieth century. You can't come to rest—your eye or ear or whatever. So what do you do? You say, OK, very clear articulation of the muscle rather than a golden bird on a golden bough. ("1976 Interview" 90)

Translating this rest/restlessness distinction into a Canadian context, Bowering contrasts his

poetics with those of the poet Ralph Gustafson, who had strongly criticized Bowering's early

poetry:

> [Gustafson is] interested in structure and I'm interested in form. I ran across the structure argument all the time when I first came East to go to the University of Western Ontario, and people were talking about structure and they never said anything about form. If you look at a human being physically, structure is bones but form is what you can see. Form is about the way the wrist moves. And that's the argument between us. He's an artifact man. ("1976 Interview" 87)

While it is certainly true that Bowering's compositions record form in motion, the limiting

conditions he places on his writing must, according to this definition, be seen as structural.

Movement occurs within a well-defined frame of reference. Bowering thus gives his serial

poems a structural skeleton, but he also shows how the individual parts can dance.

These views on form in literature and art have interesting consequences for the

photographs in *Autobiology*. If "Bowering's work is restless" (Blaser, "George" 9), how does

one explain the presence of an artform that is not inherently cubist or abstract? Bowering agrees

with Ondaatje's reading of photography in "The Gate in His Head," in which Ondaatje describes

photography as a medium for registering the "sense of shift" in objects that are "shapeless,

awkward." However, Ondaatje takes particular pleasure in freezing the moment "in immobilised

time" ("Four" 17), whereas Bowering places emphasis on the way that photographic imagery

evokes transience. Bowering claims not to "believe in art as a product or an artifact or any of

that business of polishing it" ("1976 Interview" 87), and photography—or more accurately,

snapshots—exhibit the immediacy he seeks:

> I like photographs rather than paintings or drawings, rather than art, to decorate my books. [. . .] Photographs happen now, and then, now and then. But art always happens when. No matter how active, art comes from somewhere like eternity and is pointing its nose, and ours, toward eternity. The photograph is "taken" or made in perhaps one five-hundredth of a second. [. . .] But look how much light there was available in one five-hundredth of a second! (*Errata* 27)

For Bowering, photographs suggest the ephemeral and absent more than the eternal and present.[50] Thus, in Chapter 9 of *Autobiology*, a photograph substitutes for a memory instead of preserving one: "My Aunt Dorothy died when I was a baby so I saw her but mainly in the photograph" (23). In Chapter 11, Bowering recalls a photograph for what it does not depict: "There is a picture of me wearing a large black hobo hat in the front yard. I am wearing it with no smile on my face & big round eyes. I am not carrying it upside down" (28). In Chapter 37, Bowering turns a photograph into the negative of memory: "In the photograph of the group I am the only one without a smile with closed mouth an hour before I fainted & I cant remember the pain. That is the reason for fainting" (80). In Chapter 7, Bowering even questions photography's ability to capture the present moment by underscoring the complexity of the instant caught by the shutter: "I took her [Pearl's] photograph & was careful with the f-stop, aiming the camera to catch the present forever. Now the photograph is a reminder of my past but I look forward every time for the present" (20). This statement is even more complex in the poetic version, where a line break registers the final word as "pre-/sent" (*Catch* 51) and implies that the present exists as a fragment of the past that Bowering looks forward to in the future. In his habitually contradictory way, Bowering thus demonstrates that photography is and is not an agent of the eternal.

Perhaps this duplicity is what Bowering aims to capture by juxtaposing the mother and child photograph on the cover of *Autobiology* with a hand-drawn outline of its silhouette on the title page.[51] Kröller observes that the silhouette "is both an abstraction of the potentially sentimental photograph and an elaborate enactment of the entry into the 'composition' and the 'code' with which the book is concerned" (*Bright* 69). Pictorially, the silhouette enacts the iconography of madonna and child. In the text, however, "The Code" is the title of Chapter 17 and refers to the Steinian mantra, "Consciousness is how it is composed," which Bowering repeats in *Autobiology* (38, 67), *A Short Sad Book* (151), and *Harry's Fragments* (61, 115). Just

as the position of the cover photographs implies the transmission of genetic code from mother to granddaughter, Bowering's compositional technique implies the continuation of Stein's literary code, as he would acknowledge in 1976:

> [I]n the last six or seven years I've been flirting around with Gertrude Stein [. . .]. I'm living in a community where everybody goes to shrinks, and does all kinds of the latest experiments in head business—psychology and so forth. That kind of repels me. So I'm drawn to Gertrude Stein who was a William James student and refused to believe there was such a thing as a subconscious. ("Interview" 90)

Following Stein in her rejection of the subconscious, Bowering humorously interjects, "I may be romantic but I am no dream," in both *Autobiology* (34) and *A Short Sad Book* (87). However, genetic and literary codes do not pass onto the next generation unmodified. Codes, like skeletons, are not inviolable, and thus both Chapters 8 and 20 of *Autobiology* bear the title "The Breaks." Structures decompose over time and the "code is broken article by article, as teeth are, as confidence is, & once it was triumphant to break the mystery but now it is sad because one loses confidence" (71). Thus, five years after *Autobiology*, Stein's *A Long Gay Book* becomes Bowering's *A Short Sad Book*, but the latter's unmaking of Canadians is a far cry from the former's *The Making of Americans*. Bowering summarizes this (de)composing process with an aphorism: "It is not so much composing as the imposing & breaking the code to break the imposing" (*Autobiology* 39).[52] The same aphorism eloquently expresses what I have been calling (un)framing.

In *Autobiology*, Bowering identifies the body as "the basis for composition & autobiology" (95), but he also recognizes that the body decomposes: "The body of the work gets tired as the body gets tired & that is your own biology & it is not disaster" (96). Because Bowering adopts the Heraclitean idea that life is flux, he perceives composition and decomposition as two parts of the same process:

> When you've finisht with them words
> throw the skins on the compost will ya?

> That is composition,
> autobiologist. (*Allophanes* n.p.)

This process can be clearly seen in "The Body," the conclusion to *Autobiology*, where the poet

defies closure by joining his narrative to the Heraclitean stream:

> I am in the middle of a stream & my body is the stream & what is the boat. The body is not muddy it is mostly water & so was my mother, she was the first stream the primal stream I floated out on to the land I landed on making a bit of mud with my water. (101-2)

For all its photographic imagery and stylized syntax, Bowering's text is finally dispersive. The

"humble eye [. . .] sees nothing ending" as Bowering's autobiology extends beyond his own

body, through amniotic fluid to his mother and through semen to his daughter. The narrative also

goes beyond these gestative and seminal metaphors to incorporate feces and urine—or what

Davey calls "the numen in the excremental" ("*Theory*" 13)—because, in an ever-changing

universe, even birth is accompanied by decomposition. Such refuse is a substance of creation,

and although Bowering rejects the lyric as an "old habit," the conclusion of his autobiological

novel alludes to his origins as a lyric poet publishing in *Tish*. Bowering's creative process thus

recycles his lyrical "mud" and transforms it into the clay of his autobiological Genesis.

The processes of recirculation and decomposition also shape the works that follow

Autobiology. In 1973, Bowering published *Curious*, a series of literary and photographic

portraits of authors (from Olson to bill bissett) who had influenced his development as a poet.

While Bowering continues to use Stein's portraits as his stylistic model in this collection, many

of the poems alter the Steinian voice by responding to the literary style of their subject—for

example, by parodying the braggadocio of Irving Layton. In addition, Bowering revisits key

themes from *Autobiology* in *Curious*, such as the nature of composition ("Frank Davey") and the

presence of absence in photography ("Raymond Souster"). This continuity underscores the

diversification of Bowering's serial technique and he notes that it highlights his renewed

curiosity about other writing styles:

> *Autobiology* tends to be the same form of prose in every place, whereas this one [*Curious*] plays around. It goes into what could be verse, other times its straight prose, and other times a mixture, but it takes certain key phrases that were still running through my head when I was writing *Autobiology* and they show up somewhere in *Curious*. ("Session 4"; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 36)

Thus, literary echoes create a feedback loop in *Curious* that distorts the Steinian voice.

At the same time, although Bowering maintains that *Autobiology* is poetry, he claims that it "was [his] way back into writing fiction, this book, which really got going again in *A Short Sad Book*" ("Session 2"; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 34). The serial form of Autobiology thus lays the groundwork for *Curious* and *A Short Sad Book*, as Bowering explains in the Bayard/David interview: "So in *Autobiology*, I began to understand, after a while, that the subject of that was, as the title suggests, things that happened to me biologically that changed my head around. [. . .] And the one I'm working on now [*A Short Sad Book*] is a book about taking that form and turning it into what I now call a novel" (93). However, in order to determine what sort of novel interests Bowering in this period, it would be useful to examine an essay in which he articulates his formal concerns in the 1970s.

Bowering published "The Painted Window: Notes on Post-Realist Fiction" in 1978, but the essay begins by discussing a quotation that he has been contemplating for "a decade" (24). The citation comes from "the much-interviewed John Hawkes, perhaps the leading light of postmodernism in American fiction":

> My novels are not highly plotted, but certainly they're elaborately structured. I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained. [. . .] Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of my writing. (24)

Bowering maintains that "the whole quotation from Hawkes illustrates a major shift in attention," and he illustrates this shift through an architectural metaphor: "whereas the realist had seen his writing as a window, the post-realist presents something opaque. Notice that Hawkes

spoke of meaningful density, where a realist might have striven for clarity" (24-25). Rejecting

the ideal of transparency in the realist novel, Bowering insists that the "art in fiction, as in

poetry, is that part of language that is not communication" (*Errata* 4). Thus, Bowering paints

over the realist window that Ondaatje chose to smash.

Bowering pursues this analogy further by investigating connections between literature

and the fine arts:

> The representational painting whose condition as serious art Henry James claimed
> for fiction, would begin to disappear from the scene during his lifetime. By the
> first decade of the twentieth century western art had insisted that it be looked
> upon as paint & collage materials, not as window-like reference to the real world.
> Even after poetry had been captured by the printers & referred to as one of
> the writing arts, poetry always had that distinction from prose, that one should be
> reminded continuously of its construction. ("Painted" 25)

Searching for an example of a novel that shares the formal concerns of twentieth-century

painting and poetry, Bowering chooses Hawkes's *The Beetle Leg*, because the "time in the book

is not sequential & linear, but repetitive":

> The imagery is not explanative but eruptive, connected by visual rime rather than
> realist representation. The characters act not according to how they treat each
> other, but metaphorically, as in a fable.
> In other words, Hawkes demands for his fiction what readers have earlier
> in this century accorded to poems by T. S. Eliot & Ezra Pound. (25)

The mention of Eliot, Pound, recursion, and fables gestures towards the mythic and underscores

the distance that Bowering has come from the naturalistic technique he used at the outset of his

career.

In this mythic context, it is fitting that the only Canadian examples of post-realist fiction

that Bowering cites are bp Nichol's comic strips and Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (28).

The "major shift in attention" that Bowering discusses in the "The Painted Window" is akin to

the "great change in what 'structure' is in a poem or in a novel" ("1984 Interview" 322) that

Ondaatje mentions in the passage that I have chosen to preface my first chapter. Both authors

maintain that the change is architectural, but Bowering's essay opposes the spatial arts of

sculpture and architecture to the temporal arts of music and cinema (29), which is a distinction

that Ondaatje does not make. Bowering insists that "[s]pace, & the inter-relationships of smaller

spaces, is the ordering principle" (30) informing post-realist fiction, but his segregation of space

and time does not hold up even for the duration of his essay. At the conclusion of "The Painted

Window," Bowering's emphasis on spatial technique transforms into an endorsement of oral

performance and ritualized time:

> If the reader is directed now to the surface it is to a verbal surface, a linguistically
> interesting surface. So, far from being a window on a world, today's fiction is a
> voice in one's ear, & at the best of times a whisper on one's lips. One is advised to
> read a lot of the new novels aloud. In that way one is engaged as one's ancestors
> may have been, in a ritualized narrative. (35)

As this fusion of the visual/spatial and the aural/temporal is more consistent with the rest of

Bowering's writings than his earlier assertion,[53] I can only surmise that Bowering wants to stress

the ritualistic properties he admires in painting and poetry, as well as the self-reflexive

construction of books such as *Coming Through Slaughter*.

A Short Sad Book puts into practice many of the ideas that Bowering outlines in "The

Painted Window." Part detective story, part poetry, and part literary criticism, *A Short Sad Book*

is "without innocence or realism of plot, character and action. Thus, it enters concernedly the

long modern meditation on anti-forms—the anti-novel and anti-poem—which by a paradox

becomes a renewal of form in consciousness" (Blaser, "George" 15). Bowering reminds his

reader continuously of the constructedness of his own novel, even as he deconstructs the

tradition of the novel in Canada. Like Ondaatje, Bowering writes against his conception of what

the novel is. However, Bowering focuses specifically on the Canadian novel, which he

associates with realism:

> It is all around us, writing that makes it appear as if it is there. That is writing
> about or writing of or what is it it is writing as if it is there. The reader loves
> Canadian literature because he can just about see it it is as if it is there.
> > But if you hear it you have the right to speak.
> > In the best writing it is there.

> In the best writing it is there & now it is not it it is writing.
> If you are lucky you are reading writing. (134)

Although early Canadian literature is more romantic than realist, Bowering is addressing canonical works such as Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*, as well as the work of certain popular, Eastern contemporaries of himself.[54] Atwood's novel *Surfacing* and her book of criticism *Survival* (1972) are his most visible targets, and thus he mocks the conclusion of the former:

> Put it another way, [writing] is not a clear lake with a body on the bottom.
> It is a body & who needs a lake.
> This is the real body of literature. (134-5)

However, even in his polemical mode, Bowering admits that realist prose is not merely an Eastern phenomenon. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, where Bowering tried to read the development of Canadian literature through Ondaatje's writing, Bowering is, at least in part, talking about his own development in his criticisms of his peers. Thus, in *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering also implicates the realist qualities of his own early novel: "It is so easy to write something & make it appear as if it is there. We all like to read about something as if it is there. This is not writing it is thinking, I mean this, yes a mirror on the floor" (134). In this particular incarnation, Bowering paints over the realist mirror and insists on fiction that is serial, not parallel.

However, by arguing that the "real body of literature" is an extension of the larger literary corpus (which is predominantly myth and poetry), Bowering comes close to the position of Northrop Frye, one of the pillars of the Eastern Canadian culture that he had set out to topple. Bowering seems to refer to the mythopoeic poets (MacEwen, Macpherson, early Atwood) and Contact Press poets when he observes that the critics "have been pretending that there is a succession in Canadian literature. One of them said there are two main lines in Canadian poetry & I noticed that I'm not in either. This is happening around the Great Lakes & down the St

Lawrence River, the same place Canadian history happened" (*Short* 166).[55] To counteract this

exclusion, Bowering deconstructs a number of national myths and even sacrifices the sacred

cows cherished by his friends, publishers, and critics. He claims to be trying "to turn this short

story into a roman-à-clef" (44), perhaps similar to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but he

only manages to disguise the characters by using their first names and caricaturing them. For

example, he turns the poet "Al" (Purdy)[56] into a detective hunting for the killer of "Tom

Thompson" [sic] while arguing that "Canadian literature is a lot like a bank. It has Group of

Seven paintings all over the wall & it is always lockt up at night" (*Short* 132). From Chapter 6

onwards, he makes frequent reference to "Peggy" (Atwood) and in one infamous passage he has

Sir John A. Macdonald and Longfellow's Evangeline (who has been brought back from Acadian

Louisiana) turn the psychological "victim positions" from Atwood's *Survival* into sexual

positions (*Short* 71-72). The concluding scene in *A Short Sad Book* also features the writer

conversing with the vision of Evangeline, who, before departing for "the paradise [she] ha[s]

found in women's heaven" (185), first lectures the writer on Frygian theories of myth:

> Myth is a truth of repetitive time. It is a blot that bleeds thru all time.
>   I bowed my head beneath her point. You are right, I said. This has all
> been a waste of time. (*Short* 184-5)

Satirical to the end, Bowering none the less acknowledges the value of myth as long as it does

not automatically exclude Westerners. He unframes national myths in order to ensure that they

do not limit their narrative focus to the East. This unframing leads to a renewal and enlargement

of the myths, not to their dismissal.

Indeed, for the most part, Bowering treats history, even recent history, as myth. In his

1984 essay, "A Great Northward Darkness: The Attack on History in Recent Canadian Fiction,"

he explains the rationale behind this approach to writing the past:

> Novelists who believe that history is a force or a law tend toward realism and
> naturalism—Zola, Dreiser, Hugh MacLennan. They believe that history speaks
> and teaches. Fiction writers who believe that history is someone's act of narrative

tend toward myth and invention—Conrad, Borges, Robert Kroetsch. History comes from an old European word meaning possession of knowledge. Fiction comes from an old European word meaning the act of shaping. Our artists and critics are engaged in a dispute regarding which comes first. (3)

However, Bowering deploys an idea of myth different from Frye's in his theory of archetypes.

He defines myth as a process, instead of a narrative structure:

> The word "myth" gets tossed around a lot, by people who may have forgotten for a while that it comes to us from Greek *muthos*, meaning mouth and speech, and is related to Old Slavic *mudh*, meaning to think imaginatively, and even Lithuanian *mausti*, to yearn for, to desire. Myth is not a story about desire (for salvation, e.g.), but is the expression, the body of desire itself. The desire of the author is in the text itself, and if it is to mean anything, the reader must experience his own. ("Watson" 105)

Although Bowering uses archetypal figures such as the trickster, he does not accept narrative templates as a given, but rather foregrounds the imaginative part of the shaping process. Instead of relating certain knowledge about a person or event, Bowering maintains that "[i]f you dont understand the story you better tell it" (*Allophanes* n.p.). He considers storytelling a creative act of shaping and cites Ricoeur's definition of narrative as the act of "extract[ing] a configuration from a succession" ("Narrative" 278). Of course, Ricoeur argues that all narrative, including realist narrative, configures time. Bowering does not deny this fact, but he criticizes the realists for disguising their hand in the configuring process. His critique is rather ineffectual when applied to the latter half of Atwood's *Surfacing*, which departs from any sense of the quotidian and foregrounds the mythic configuration—life (journey), death (descent into the underworld), rebirth (surfacing)—of the narrative. However, despite the gerund in the title, Bowering would reject Atwood's use of myth in *Surfacing* because she does not call much attention to her role in shaping it.

To underscore the constructedness of history and myth in *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering foregrounds the presence of the writer writing and makes his literary persona part of the story:

> Canada is the country in which writing about history is history.
> Let me try again.

> I meant to say that Canada is the country in which writing history is
> history.
> In some countries killing natives is history & some countries killing kings
> is history but in Canada writing history is history.
> Every historian writing history knows this.
> Every historian is aware of this, he is at his desk writing history & he is
> the history of Canada. He is the history of Canada in many volumes. (*Short* 74)

This passage foregrounds both the strengths and weaknesses of Bowering's ludic style. On the one hand, his wordplay illustrates the constructedness of history by focusing attention on minute differences in the construction of the first and third sentences. On the other hand, in making his point, Bowering insinuates that the killing of Natives is not history because "He"—the white, male historian—chooses not to write about it. This does not mean that Bowering is indifferent to the historical sufferings of Native Canadians. Indeed, the situation of Natives in the BC Interior in the late 1800s and the execution of the Métis McLean gang is the subject of his historical novel, *Shoot!* (1994). However, Bowering likes to overstate the formal positions he holds at a given moment and in so doing he minimizes some enduring social conflicts.

Having foregrounded the capriciousness of the writer and of language in *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering demands that readers acknowledge their own role in shaping the story:

> Shove over, I want to talk to the reader. I want to say something to the reader
> reading. Reader reading, dont imagine any more that you can put on your
> invisibility suit & watch what [the characters] are doing [. . .].

> Either admit that what I report of the matter is the truth of the matter or face the
> truth, that if you can see them they can see you. Literature is not a one-way
> mirror. [. . .] Writing is not transparent writing is not a window people dont live in
> three-sided houses like a play by Arthur Miller. (174)

To prevent his audience from feigning passivity, Bowering filters *A Short Sad Book* through two introductory frameworks that emphasize the readers' role in the construction of the text. The first such framework is an epigram from Alain Robbe-Grillet's first novel, a pastiche of detective narratives entitled *The Erasers*: "Under our gaze, the simple gesture of holding out our hand becomes bizarre, clumsy; the words we hear ourselves speaking suddenly sound false; the time

of our minds is no longer that of the clocks; & the style of a novel, in its turn, can no longer be

innocent" (n.p.). Bowering then addresses the active reader in an author's note that follows the

epigram. This framework offers some tips for reading that turn the reading process into a

scavenger hunt:

> Dear Reader Reading:
>
> 1. Please take your time.
> 2. Also there is one dream in the following pages.
>   You should be able to find it. (n.p.)

Bowering thus invites the reader to play detective. However, this detective story has as much to

do with the crimes of the author as with the crimes of the characters.

There are multiple dreams in *A Short Sad Book*: the national dream of Macdonald's

railroad, the final vision of Evangeline, the "curious dream" from which the author awakes to

declare "I love this country" (95), and so on. Like *the man with seven toes*, *A Short Sad Book*

presents history as a kind of dream, except that Bowering calls attention to the way in which he

consciously invents it. The Purdy detective story and the Evangeline-Macdonald romance

supply two sketchy plot lines, but the actual writing of the book is a story within the story. Thus,

Chapter 1 begins by introducing the writer's romance with the *roman* and establishing a phrase

that recurs throughout the novel: "I was going to write a book about love, & one time I woke up

& said I love this country" (15). Bowering immediately qualifies this opening statement: "I love

this country, I didnt then, thirty years ago" (15). Baiting the critics who have publicly

questioned his love of country, Bowering describes his youthful enthusiasm for the United

States:

> When I grew up I was going to be an American boy. I loved that country. That was human nature not my mind.
> I didnt say hello to my mind till I came back to Vancouver from the east fifteen years later. (15)

In the ensuing chapters, Bowering periodically explains the reasons for this enthusiasm, but he explains his preference in the present tense, giving the impression that his mind has not changed:

> Let me introduce myself.
> I am eight years old & my name is George Bowering & I will change that & the name of my country when I grow up.
> I will shoot the guns out of their hands the way all us Americans do. (16)

The autobiographical dimension of the novel thus splits into an older persona and a younger one, as it did in *Autobiology*. Bowering accentuates this duplicity by allowing repetition to generate difference: "I love this country, I didnt 30 years ago but am I I" (*Short* 52). This sentence problematizes the continuity of the lyric or narrative "I" because the "first-person pronoun suddenly looks like the Roman numeral for the number 'two'" (Kröller, *Bright* 56). Only two pages earlier, Bowering had rejected the "I" altogether: "To hell with the first person he was definitely he" (*Short* 54). According to the index, George Bowering is an individual who appears on pages 16, 101-3, 108, and 126, while "Wunder, George" is a person that emerges from the interjection:

> No Wunder.
> I'm probably not hiding anything from you at all. (91)

George Delsing and George Vancouver[57] also make appearances in *A Short Sad Book*, as they will in *Burning Water*. By serializing pronouns, namesakes, and pseudonyms in this way, Bowering invites readers to read the self through multiple frames of reference and thereby creates the ambiguity he cherishes.

However, in "Part Four: The Black Mountain Influence," Bowering is unambiguous about his antagonism towards critics such as Richardson and Mathews who villainized him as a traitor. In the same year *Poetry and the Colonized Mind* accused the Tish poets of a "lack of interest in Canadian culture" (Richardson 73), Bowering was putting the finishing touches on a book "full of Canadian content, it's all about me and Canada" ("1976 interview" 93). Using *A Short Sad Book* as a vehicle of counter-critique, Bowering mocks "the Canadian nationalist

professor from Ottawa name of Sparrow [. . .] paid by the CIA to give Canadian nationalism a

bad name" (113):

> Sparrow said we got to stop them Americans from getting the beautiful Okanagan
> Valley but he wrote it the way the Americans do in Washington, Okanogan, with
> an O.
> It was a dead give away. He went to college in the U.S. That's where he
> was recruited by the CIA. (114-5)

"Sparrow" is the pseudonym Bowering gives to Robin Mathews because "robins migrate and

sparrows never leave" (Blaser, "George" 16). As in Atwood's *Surfacing*, where the imperial

"Americans" prove to be Canadians, the voice of Canadian nationalism in *A Short Sad Book* ends

up espousing the protectionist and monocultural "American" values that it purports to deplore.

In contrast, Bowering stands by his record of commitment as a student and teacher: "I think it is

obvious, I love this country. Once I got a grant to spend two years in England but I went to

London Ontario instead. Another time I got a grant to spend a year in Austria but I went to

Vancouver, British Columbia instead" (*Short* 163). Although he is an ardent regionalist, few

Canadian authors have written as much about Canada, researched as much Canadian history,

championed as many new Canadian writers, or dramatized the process of becoming (as opposed

to conforming to a definition of) Canadian as Bowering has.[58]

However, I make this judgment with the benefit of hindsight, viewing Bowering's literary

output over a forty-year period. At first glance, the title and style of *A Short Sad Book* certainly

do suggest a colonized imagination. Bowering makes this anxiety part of the story: "& people

say why are you doing archaic avant-garde writing. This is warmed over Gertrude Stein there I

said her name why are you doing it" (*Short* 154). Bowering's question is rhetorical, but a brief

consideration of *A Long Gay Book* suggests at least one answer.

Stein finished *A Long Gay Book* in 1913, but did not publish it until "1933, in a volume

with two other early pieces, GMP (*Matisse, Picasso and Gertrude Stein*) and *Many Many*

Women" (Dydo 151). The long prose piece begins with a discussion of why people procreate. At a certain age, Stein argues, people "lose their everlasting feeling" (*Long* 153) and counteract this sense of mortality by having babies. However, on "a trip to Spain with [Alice] Tolkas from May until the late summer of 1912, Stein discovered the concrete, sensual world in [lesbian] sexual fulfillment" (Dydo 152), and she rejected the vocation of motherhood for herself. Instead, the writer partakes of the "everlasting" by developing a new way of seeing that is intimately related to the art of Picasso and Matisse (dubbed Paul and Claudel in *A Long Gay Book*).[59] Ulla Dydo explains that, in particular, the last third of *A Long Gay Book* responds to the radical reorientation of the planar surface in the paintings of Picasso and Matisse:

> [It] confronts a world of magnificent, joyous chaos where no connections are given, no relations taken for granted, and everything is perceived anew every day in all its heterogeneity. There is no need for a totalizing system to explain the world. The old 'language [is] segregating' and a new way of saying is needed, which in turn becomes a powerful way of creating the new reality. (152)

Examining the impact of these disruptive techniques on Bowering's writing, Blaser notes that *A Long Gay Book* is "fundamental to an understanding of [Stein's] 'incongruous' and 'discontinuous' method. It was to be about her sexuality, that is to say, about her identity. It is a record of the famous change of style that leads to the later work" ("George" 17). Stein's development therefore offers clues to Bowering's own. *Autobiology* echoes, but does not parallel, the first part of *A Long Gay Book* – that is, Bowering embraces fatherhood. The series of portraits in the middle of *A Long Gay Book* sets a precedent for the portraits of poets in *Curious*. The "world of magnificent, joyous chaos" in the latter half of *A Long Gay Book*, finally, presages the outrageous and digressive narrative in *A Short Sad Book*. Taken together, *Autobiology*, *Curious*, and *A Short Sad Book* record two important changes of style that affect Bowering's later work: the development of the serial novel and the use of large-scale parody.

Just as Williams and Stein adopted the grammar of French painting to develop their "American" poetics, Bowering borrows from Stein's cubist syntax to deconstruct a Canadian

literary tradition he considers Eurocentric and biased towards realism and the East. He develops

a form of syntax that dispels the realist illusion of the mirror image, yet he breaks this imposed

code through parody, both in Hutcheon's sense of repetition with a difference and in the popular

sense of satire. [60] For example, *A Short Sad Book* is longer than *A Long Gay Book*. It is also

much more lighthearted than Stein's work. However, it is decidedly heterosexual. Bowering

claims to "half believe" this interpretation (of the sexual politics in his novel) and "half not"

("Plums" 101), but the inversion is plainly a consequence of his parodic technique. Parody

demands inversion, as Bowering explains in his discussion of *Caprice*, a Western featuring a

woman poet-outlaw:

> In order to create a Canadian western you have to do something that was not an American western. I had to have all the signs of an American western but there had to be irony—you had to turn them upside-down. Put it this way: you had to have (a) sign and (b) difference. ("Session 15"; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 85)

In *A Short Sad Book*, the American signs are in the chapter titles: "The Exile of Evangeline,"

"The Black Mountain Influence," and "The Pretty Good Canadian Novel" (a reference to

Williams's *Great American Novel*). Bowering articulates the differences in the body of the

chapters: Evangeline returns to Canada and falls in love; Al Purdy determines that the Black

Mountain Influence did not kill Tom Thomson or Canadian literature; the Canadian novel shirks

the modernist demand for all-encompassing greatness and gets published by a small independent

press run by "Stan" (Bevington of Coach House Press), an Edmonton Doukhobor turned Toronto

avantgardist. Thus, Bowering breaks the American codes he invokes and their disruption

energizes the narrative.

   This unframing also occurs at the syntactic level. Like Picasso, Stein rejected most

realistic conventions with the aim of developing a unique style and syntax. In this endeavour she

was so successful that given only a few lines of *Autobiology* one can immediately identify Stein's

trademark voice. However, over the course of Bowering's trilogy, he gradually moves beyond

the obvious Steinian echoes and explores new avenues in her style. Whereas Stein rarely modulates her tone, Bowering experiments with a range of tones: academic, satirical, burlesque, hard-boiled, lyrical, and so on. These tones correspond to Bowering's mix of genres in *A Short Sad Book*. Whereas *A Long Gay Book* is a long prose poem comprised of portraits interspersed with wordplay, *A Short Sad Book* is a serial novel that dabbles in the essay, satire, romance, detective story, lyric, and other forms. Bowering continues to employ Stein's looping patterns of repetition, which are modern variations of the sestina and terza rima, but he does not use repetition to produce mind-wandering monotony, as Stein does. Stein takes a set of words and repeats them in all their possible syntactic combinations before moving on to the next set, while Bowering maintains an equilibrium between narrative progression and digression in *A Short Sad Book*. He follows Stein in playing with syntax but he does not entirely derail the narrative. Thus, he initiates "the untying/ that frees the mind" (*Allophanes* n.p.) by diversifying Stein's medium. Stein is still a presence in *A Short Sad Book*, but as an echo within a chorus of echoes.

Bowering's diversified approach is partly due to the influence of Greg Curnoe, to whom Bowering dedicates *Layers* and *Another Mouth*. Kröller observes in her chapter on Bowering and "The London Scene" that *A Short Sad Book* "is ostentatiously connected to Curnoe's convictions" (*Bright* 54), which she characterizes as eclectic and "aggressively local":

> [H]e refuses to show work in New York [. . .]; he is co-founder of the Association for the Documentation of Neglected Aspects of Culture in Canada, and he objected to the University of Western Ontario's acquisition of manuscripts by Milton for a quarter of a million dollars, while the historic core of Curnoe's home town was in danger of being replaced by parking lots and office buildings. (55)

Although Bowering spent only a year in London, he claims that he learned "a lot about art from Greg Curnoe" ("1976 Interview" 88) while living in the East. For example, Bowering's Montreal poem "No Solitudes" credits Curnoe with teaching him a new way of seeing:

> From my balcony
> the other yards, cubist
> as taught this eye

by Greg Curnoe (*Concrete* n.p.)

This passage is particularly interesting given Curnoe's rejection of Picasso as "another Imperial

Centre" (Hale 12), as well as Stein's quest for a new way of seeing. It may refer to Curnoe's

collage *Bowering Westmount No. 4*, "created after a visit to Expo' 67" in which "Curnoe stayed

in the Bowerings' Montreal apartment, [and] collect[ed] trivia picked up on the site of the

exhibition, much as Kiyooka's photographs *StoneDgloves* recorded workers' gloves trampled

underfoot at the World Fair in Osaka" (Kröller, *Bright* 55). Or it may refer to the mural Curnoe

installed (with Bowering's help) at Montreal's Dorval airport for the Expo. Authorities

eventually ordered Curnoe to take down this mural because critics read it as an anti-Vietnam

War statement. The mural featured a quotation from Muhammed Ali, a figure resembling

President Johnson, and a fighter plane, despite commission guidelines prohibiting the depiction

of airplanes. Curnoe installed the mural alongside an escalator, implying that the viewers

themselves were caught up in the machinery of war (62). Furthermore, Curnoe pasted pictures

of his family and friends (including Jack Chambers and Tony Urquhart) into the composition so

as to underscore the personal impact of a public war (Curnoe 47). This is a theme that Bowering

takes up in *At War with the U.S.*, to which Curnoe contributed the cover illustration.

The cover of *A Short Sad Book* also features a drawing by Curnoe. It depicts Okanagan

MLA and British Columbia Premier W.A.C. Bennett reading Bowering's novel and laughing

heartily. The portrait is a caricature, of course, and it establishes the tone for the novel.

Formally, however, the book "resembles Curnoe's mixed media approach and presents a series of

possible openings and endings, offers a random selection of styles, and tries out various genres"

(Kröller, *Bright* 64). Just as Bowering writes poems in response to "Greg Curnoe's serigraph" in

Uncle Louis (*West* 127), he writes *A Short Sad Book* using the techniques of muralism that he

learned from Curnoe:

I was trying to get the sense of spreading the whole thing out on one big flat surface and then you might see something in the top right-hand corner that connects with something down at the bottom left-hand corner ironically or simply in order to rhyme with it or whatever[.] (Bowering, "Plums" 88)

Given the linear direction of reading and the limitations of the conventional page, however, Bowering cannot present the novel as an image which can be viewed at a glance and then analyzed in detail. Instead, he creates a mural of sorts by linking one fragment with another in a serial fashion and emphasizing the interrelations of each unit.

Blaser notes the serial architectonics of *A Short Sad Book* in his introduction to *Particular Accidents*, where he explains why he chooses to include sections of *Autobiology* and *A Short Sad Book* in Bowering's *Selected Poems*:

> *Autobiology* and *A Short Sad Book* appear to be prose. They are, however, antiprosaic and are written against the unconsciousness or innocence of ordinary prose. The style of them—and style is a great pleasure in this work, presenting a distance moved in the depth of the language and a freed verbal imagination—stands in extreme contrast to the "straight" prose of Bowering's novel, *Mirror on the Floor* (1967) and the short stories in *Flycatcher* (1974). Both *Autobiology* and *A Short Sad Book* have to do with transformations of self and place into imaginative structures, which derive from the discovery poem, *George, Vancouver*. For these reasons, I have considered them poems in prose. ("George" 14-5)

In fact, the question of genre in *A Short Sad Book* is much larger than the prose/verse question in *Autobiology*. The first section of *A Short Sad Book*, "Canadian Geography," follows Stein in connecting New World geography to a non-Aristotelian style of narrative: "What do you mean, this is no novel./ Novels have a beginning a middle & an end. But scenery doesnt" (26). Having complicated the passive role of setting in the novel, Bowering satirizes the pose of the objective narrator:

> This is getting so personal, it has to be a short story, novels arent that personal.
> This is an argument about structure.
> No an argument about form. (33)

Continuing to blur genre boundaries, Bowering places the power struggle between the author and language under scrutiny:

> (I mean I said it was a novel but did it say it was a novel. & if it didnt say so it can hardly be a novel because then it would have been something else calling itself a novel & I would have disagreed.)
> It may get to be a short sad book. (58)

Even more than the prose poem elements of *A Long Gay Book*, the single-line paragraphs and stanzaic structures that emphasize the important passages in *A Short Sad Book* suggest that "this is poem containing history, not a bloody romance" (*Short* 92). In addition to the visual clues that suggest poetry, Bowering attributes the liberties he takes with historical fact to poetic license:

> He sat at his desk & wrote history. What he wrote was George Bowering sat at his desk writing history. He didnt make the mistake, so something is playing games with history here.
> Maybe it is poetry. (101)

Giving reign to this power struggle, Bowering asserts that "history is filled with mistakes & most of them are written by poetry. The novel can only sit back & try to understand." (103). Yet Bowering stresses that this dynamic is a struggle between the push and pull of genre, as much as between authorial will and narrative whimsy:

> A poet is not a dealer in a card game. Not even a poet writing a novel.
> They all do in this country. (52)

The designation "novel" thus persists in the story, but these meditations on the novel's poetic dimensions clearly redefine the term.

Finally, in the opening section of "The Pretty Good Canadian Novel," Bowering declares unequivocally: "This is a serial novel" (*Short* 139). The declaration comes as a surprise, but in fact Bowering has prepared the reader for it all along. In Chapter 1, Bowering announces that he "was going to write a curious book about love" (16), and although he implies that he is writing something different from *Curious*, he establishes a theme that he repeats: "I woke up out of a curious dream & said I love this country" (95). The allusions to the serial poem are made explicit in the middle of Chapter 49 when Bowering interjects in the third person: "Forty-nine, he thought, this is longer than Autobiology or Curious" (164), which both have 48 chapters.

The similar style and structure of these three works is not coincidental. In a letter to Dennis Lee

dated 16 June 1971, Bowering states that *Autobiology* is "the first in a (at least) 3 book work"

(Bowering Papers, NL; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 34). Thus *Autobiology* narrates Bowering's growth

in its biological and familial context, while *Curious* builds on this narrative base by tracing

Bowering's growth as a poet through more experimental and poetic portraits of writers who have

influenced him. *A Short Sad Book* combines these two modes by intermingling prosaic

paragraphs and poetic stanzas, and by situating Bowering in his national context. In case readers

have not followed this development closely enough to recognize the pattern, Bowering states

baldly: "You learn it in writing poetry you tell it in writing prose" (*Short* 89). It is therefore

possible to consider each book in Bowering's trilogy as an installment of a larger serial novel,

particularly when one takes into consideration the structure of Stein's *A Long Gay Book.*

There are also more oblique and humorous references to serial forms in *A Short Sad*

Book. As in the section "Cereals for Roughage" in *The Catch* (1976), Bowering puns on the

phonetic similarity of serial and cereal by making "Flacons de blé!" (81) Riel's mock-battle cry

in *A Short Sad Book.* The pun recurs in Bowering's discussion of a computer:

> The small electronic box works in series. It is a serial box. That is how literature
> works, I mean that, not seeming to put that in front of your eyes but putting this
> next to your ear.
>   It's in speaking that ideas come to us. (140)

Bowering is in phonocentric mode here, but elsewhere he claims to have been influenced by a

different kind of serial box:

> An earlier invention of mine was the shoebox theatre: I would get a few months'
> worth of some comic strip such as "Steve Canyon," and glue them end to end, and
> make a reel to crank through a slot at one end of a shoebox. There would be a
> skylight right over the strip and a peephole at the other end of the shoebox. Most
> of the movies I saw when I was in grade three were showing in my shoebox
> theater. (*Magpie* 51)

These two examples echo Ondaatje's admiration for Muybridge, as well as underscoring the

segmented quality of Bowering's serial technique.

I propose, then, that the serial novel is Bowering's new answer to Olson's old question in "Projective Verse." In this essay, which greatly influenced Bowering's early poetics, Olson discusses ways of constructing "the sentence as first act of nature, as lightning, as passage of force from subject to object, quick, in the case [. . .] in every case, from me to you, the VERB, between two nouns" (153). The American poet proposes that the "poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge" (148). In trying to sustain this energy and keep objects in "their proper confusions," Olson runs "up, immediately, bang, against tenses":

> in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar generally, that is, as we have inherited it. Do not tenses, must they not also be kicked around anew, in order that time, that other governing absolute may be kept, as must the space-tensions of a poem, immediate, contemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem? (152)

The energy of Olson's prose in this essay (which greatly influences Marlatt's prose in *Zócalo* and *Ana Historic*) derives from its peculiar syntax. Olson uses commas to fragment the sentence and facilitate sudden shifts in tense. These shifts create tension by accelerating and then interrupting the "passage of force from subject to object," as well as building anaphoric rhythms. In his poetry, Olson attempts to shape poems that mimic the "*inertial structure of the world*" (Olson, "Equal" 181), and Bowering's earlier poetry follows Olson's lead in this regard. However, in *Autobiology*, *Curious*, and *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering abandons Olson's nebulous concept of poetic form in favour of a more concrete engagement with established forms of myth and syntax. In so doing, Bowering responds to the style of "Projective Verse," but does not necessarily adhere to the principles outlined in it.

Although, in *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering mischievously equates Olson with Van Horne (97), the American who engineered the Canadian Pacific Railway, and himself masquerades as Sir John A. Macdonald, the Prime Minister who ordered the railway built to bring BC into Confederation, Bowering's work from *Autobiology* to (at least) *Kerrisdale Elegies* (1984) is

primarily concerned with shaping serial forms that (un)frame famous literary models.[61] Trent Keough observes that between "the years 1968-69 Bowering became intrigued with the possibility that his interest in the writer's relationship with physical place could be exchanged or translated into an exploration of the metaphorical space constructed by language" (49). Bowering generates the energy he seeks by disrupting syntactic patterns, defying genre conventions, and playing on the tensions of parody, in which one reads both the original text and the adaptation.

This duplicity becomes a kind of triplicity in *Burning Water*. As in *A Short Sad Book*, Bowering "strips historical *tableaux* of their characteristics as static artifacts" in *Burning Water* "by translating them into the dynamics of parody" (Kröller, *Bright* 89). Bowering parodies a range of authors—such as Vancouver, Coleridge, Melville, and Shakespeare—in this historical fiction, but he also parodies himself. The novel is haunted by the shadow of the poem that he is overwriting. Bowering calls attention to this palimpsest in the prologue, where he explains that he is rewriting *George, Vancouver* because the serial poem did not satisfy his expectations for the theme:

> In the late sixties I was a poet, so I wrote a poetry book about Vancouver and me. Then a radio play about us, and on air we all became third persons. But I was not satisfied. The story of the greatest navigational voyage of all time was not lyrical, and it was certainly not dramatic. It was narrative. So I began to plan a novel. (n.p.)

In previous works, Bowering employed self-parody by repeating phrases from earlier publications or indulging in perverse wordplays: "Do they have beavers in British Columbia? I dont believe I have ever seen a beaver. This is getting to be dirtier & dirtier & I cant help it. It is beginning to parody itself" (*Short* 72). However, by completely overhauling a lyrical serial poem and converting it into a historical novel with a strongly comic dimension, Bowering takes self-parody to a new level in *Burning Water* and recuperates an etymological dimension of "parody" that relates to narrative poetry.

In his introduction to *Framing Truths: Parodic Structures in Contemporary English-Canadian Historical Novels*, Martin Kuester observes that "parody" derives from "the prefix *para* plus the verb *aidein* meaning 'to sing'" (Kuester 5). Kuester refines this definition to mean "'singing in imitation, singing with a slight change' [. . .] so that the stress in *parody* lies on the structural (and maybe even semantic) effect of doubling and completion" (6). For the Greeks, "*parodia* means an innovation in the technique of recitation of epic poetry: the poem is no longer recited in a singing fashion but in the normal tone of an actor speaking dialogue" (6). The etymological transition from long poem to drama is particularly poignant here because Bowering first transformed *George, Vancouver* into a radio play. Another origin of the comic dimension of *Burning Water* might be found in the Renaissance, when "the Italian Julius Caesar Scalinger repeats Greek theories of the origin of parody in his *Poetics*" and "sees a humorous element inherent in it":

> In the same way that satire developed out of tragedy, and mime out of comedy, parody stems from rhapsody. Whenever the rhapsodists interrupted their recitation, those entered the stage who jokingly, for the mind's relaxation, inverted everything that had previously been performed. For this reason they were called parodists, as they undermined the serious message by means of another, ridiculous one. Parody is thus an inverted rhapsody that is drawn towards a ridiculous meaning through a change in voices. (Kuester's trans. 8-9)

Kuester does not apply these insights to *Burning Water* in his chapter on Bowering, but if he did he would find a surprising analogy: just as Bowering built on the lyric to create a long poem, built on the long poem to create a drama, and built on the drama to create a comic narrative, the evolution of the term parody comes from the comic treatment of the lyric for a dramatic audience. These two developments are not parallel but serial. Bowering performs a variation on the etymological series of terms.

However, the architecture of the serial poem is greatly submerged in *Burning Water*. To a certain extent, Bowering continues to employ the segmentation of the serial form, thereby reinforcing a preference that he declares in *A Short Sad Book*: "I like literature I mean prose that

is cut into short sections. I will read more pages of literature that is cut into short sections before I turn out the light than literature in long sections like Samuel Beckett" (116). However, in *Burning Water,* the sections are longer than in *Autobiology* and *A Short Sad Book.* Bowering portrays the voyage of Captain Vancouver in 58 short vignettes, averaging four pages each. (As in *A Short Sad Book,* Chapter 52 is missing because Bowering is superstitious about the number).[62] The blocks of prose indicate that Bowering is writing a more conventional novel this time, although one of Bowering's pseudonymous characters, Delsing, appears in mid-story to inform the scientist Menzies that he is "preparing a long poem about our search for El Dorado and the Strait of Anian." The prosaic surgeon/botanist gives Delsing a surprising reply: "I am preparing a long poem, too [. . .]. It uses as its central metaphor the flora of newly discovered lands" (225). Bowering is being playful here, insinuating that the process of composition for *Burning Water* is not the one he outlined in the prologue. However, Bowering's jests are always half-serious and his ideas of genre are always in flux. For example, in his author's statement for *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991), Bowering casts doubt on the existence of the genre he used to champion: "Sometimes I agree with Edgar Allan Poe in his famous pronouncement that there is no such thing as a long poem. He said that even *Paradise Lost* is a number of short poems separated by prose passages" (352). Such statements unsettle generic boundaries and confuse critics, but ultimately there is little question that *Burning Water* is a novel.

To foster a narrative form that will satisfy his epic theme in *Burning Water*, Bowering recuperates key features of the realist novel that he had previously rejected: character, setting, narrative tone, and to a certain extent plot. In adopting these devices, Bowering moves closer to the "articulate British fictions of Robertson Davies & Margaret Atwood" ("Three" 31). This move is strategic and suited to the colonial context of the novel, as Kröller observes: "Realism is considered an instrument placed at the service of the conqueror to perpetuate the reflection of his world image as the only one possible. In other words, the colony is expected to duplicate, to

emulate even, the pattern set out for it by the colonizer" (*Bright* 85). At times, Bowering yearns

nostalgically for the "good old days, when the realist novelist just had to describe the setting and

introduce into it the main characters" (*Burning* 23), but the writer dispels the illusion of the

mirror image through such authorial intrusions into the narrative.

Particularly in the latter half of *Burning Water*, the prose follows the cause and effect

trajectory of the conventional historical novel, but this flow is constantly interrupted by the

figure of the author rewriting his story in far-flung locations. Bowering surrounds each vignette

with commentary on the circumstances of its composition in Italy, Central America, and

Vancouver, thereby shaping a series of metafictive frames around the units of his narrative.

Each one of these discrete units is shown to be a fictional artifice, and this artificiality heightens

the comic dimension of the novel. In their discussion of comic strips, McCaffrey and Nichol

explain why framing has this effect:

> The frame is the sign of its own containment, and while elements within the frame
> have pictorial reference to external realities [. . .] they remain essentially self-
> contained. In conventional writing signifiers refer outward to their respective
> signifieds. However, in comic strips the signified is contained within the strip.
> Write the word "tree" and the signified refers to a space outside the page.
> Surround the word with a speech balloon and have it spoken by a man staring at a
> tree, then the signified moves in, to become interiorized as a specific drawn tree.
> We hover here on the edge of banality, but what we stress is that there is no such
> thing as "realistic" writing. Eventually any writing (novel, history, poetry) begins
> to circle around itself and the recurrence of words leads them into self-
> signification. When the word "tree" appears twice, it has already begun to refer
> back to itself; its referent is not a tree in the external world but the word "tree"
> cited in that particular book. (121-2)

Thus the frame outlines the realist window at first, but by multiplying frames Bowering

effectively paints over the windows he constructs.

Similarly, Bowering obscures his self-portrait in *Burning Water* by blurring the identities

of his characters. The author states in his prologue that the story he is writing branches out from

associations with the name "George":

> When I came to live in Vancouver, I thought of Vancouver, and so now geography involved my name too, George Vancouver. He might have felt such romance, sailing for a king named George the Third. What could I do but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place? (n.p.)

Because these Georges are enigmas of long-standing fascination for Bowering, the George writing Vancouver is not singular. In addition to the king and the mariner, "George" refers to the middle-aged novelist who finds the Age of Exploration romantic, the lyric poet who "wrote history stuff because [he] didnt know any history and wanted to learn some" (*Magpie* 78), and the youthful anti-royalist: "In grade ten I got expelled for walking to the water fountain when they played 'God Save the King,' and for sticking anti-King notes in the library books. I figured this was an example of virtue: I was sticking up for a free Canada" (*Magpie* 47). Recognizing the inappropriateness of the first person voice in this case, Bowering writes in the the third person, but alerts his reader in the prologue that the third person pronoun is meant to accommodate a number of viewpoints:

> So we Georges all felt the same sun, yes. We all live in the same world's sea. We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you. But in order to include you, I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying *I* to a second person. Therefore let us say *he*, and stand together looking at them. We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction. (n.p.)

By writing the prologue in the first person voice, as well as presenting the writer writing in the body of the text, Bowering dispels the omniscient authority of the third person voice.[63] However, Bowering also claims in the prologue to be writing *Burning Water* in order to get away from his "lyrical self" (n.p.) and this first person voice comes close to the conventional stance of the lyric poet who "always says 'I' and recites to us the entire chromatic scale of his passions and appetites" (Nietzsche 37). Therefore, Bowering strives to occupy a zone between the two voices, merging Georges, playing one perspective off the other, and revelling in the dissonance.

At the same time, one should always be wary of Bowering when he claims to have left his lyrical self behind. "The most characteristic attribute of Bowering's postmodern writings is a preoccupation with his metonymic existence as a literary project" (Keough 45) and the author loves to perform variations on his established repertoire of forms and influences. Although *Burning Water* stays the course of linear narrative for longer stretches than Bowering's two previous novels, it is also heterogenous in form. Chapter 3, for example, consists of a pseudo-academic digression on the career of Vancouver's contemporary, William Blake. In contrast, Chapter 30 (note Bowering's numerical games) indulges in a long flight of fancy in which Vancouver's ships take to the air and sail to Hudson Bay. The more "he" meditates on the Romantics and Romantic theories of the imagination, the more lyricism insinuates itself into the novel. The change is noticeable in Vancouver's log entries, which begin as rudimentary navigational notations and evolve into paeans to the Northwest Coast (237-8). As Bowering's Vancouver grows acquainted with the landscape and falls in love with Quadra, the Peruvian-born Spanish Commander, those around him feel compelled to comment on his "enheightened language" (195). Thus, while Vancouver initially treats the *Discovery* as "a fact factory" (186), he gradually comes to appreciate the narrator's viewpoint that the "ship is the vessel of metaphor, a carrying across as they say" (166).

The metaphorical dimension of *Burning Water* comes to the fore in the editorial debates surrounding the novel. These debates also reveal the importance to the structure of the novel of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—itself a hybrid text, published in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), that employs a frame tale:

> The working title for my novel *Burning Water* was *The Dead Sailors* [. . . because] most of the famous literary stories about sailors are about dead sailors: Coleridge, Shakespeare, Melville, I said. You'll have to come up with a new title, the publisher [Musson Book Company] said. My previous publisher [McClelland and Stewart] had told me I'd have to come up with a different ending. That would have been worse. (*Errata* 88)

Bowering "was thinking of 'Burning Water' as the Aztec term for the imagination" (Miki, *Record* 63) when he composed the final title, but the term undoubtedly comes from a passage in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "The charmed water burnt alway/ A still and awful red" (l. 270-71; see also ll. 130, 171). An echo of this passage resonates in the opening lines of *Burning Water*: "Whatever it was, the vision, came out of the far fog and sailed right into the sunny weather of the inlet" (13). A young Indian witnessing this "vision" mistakes the sailing ships for "two immense and frighteningly beautiful birds upon the water" (14), inviting associations with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* that Bowering had made explicit in two of his rejected titles, *The King's Albatross* and *The Mariner's Trance* (*Errata* 89). Although an Indian elder informs the youth that the "giant swans" (*Burning* 16) are boats, Bowering sustains the initial vision by periodically inserting into the text a drawing of a swan-winged sailing vessel that comes from the notebook paper (first shown to Bowering by Blaser) on which Bowering wrote the novel (*Magpie* 37). The vital place of the ship/bird image in the narrative is clarified at the end of Part One, where Menzies kills an albatross for scientific purposes and Bowering concludes:

> In case anyone was wondering: yes, this happened on the same day that the English poet was composing his Christian ballad.
> In any event, Dr. Menzies seldom read verse, though he did write commendable prose. (87)

Compounding this synchronicity, there is some factual basis for associating Coleridge with Vancouver's search for *The Northwest Passage*—or *The Northwest Passion*, as one of the rejected titles for *Burning Water* would have it (*Errata* 89). In composing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge drew from the journals of Luke Fox (Marsh, "Hudson" 843), whose "report of impenetrable barriers" north of Hudson Bay "cancelled the last hope of a Northwest Passage and abated the zeal for arctic exploration for almost 200 years" (Marsh, "Fox" 685).[64] Vancouver performed a similar feat by disproving Cook's theory of a passage to the Great Lakes.

Thus, when Musson asked Bowering to rewrite the original introductory section, he did it with an eye to enhancing the Coleridgean echoes. The result, "Bring Forth a Wonder," satisfied his editors and, incidentally, so appealed to Ondaatje's taste for myth, history, and the absurd that he included it in his 1990 collection of short stories, *From Ink Lake*.

The second and third sections of *Burning Water*, "The Devil Knows How to Row" (a Coleridge quotation, *Rime* l. 569) and "The Dead Sailors," deepen the introduction's Coleridgean echoes. At one point, Delsing even claims the Ancient Mariner's tale as his own:

> Once when there was a German poet stalking around the vessel while they were tied up at Capetown, a sailor named Delsing told him that he had once as a lad thrown a belaying pin at a perching albatross, killing the bird on the spot. The older sailors, he told the German poet, had seized him and compelled him to wear the albatross around his neck untill it dropped off. (162)

Delsing is ridiculed by his audience because of the improbability of his story. However, the seriousness underlying Delsing's humour explains the fierce attachment Bowering has to the conclusion of *Burning Water*. Allusions to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* symbolically rescue the novel from total dissolution when Vancouver the epicist and Menzies the satirist kill each other off at the novel's conclusion. Just before Vancouver takes Menzies's bullet, he shouts: "Will you want me round your neck till I fall?" (258). Then, having wrecked Menzies's Edenic garden and doomed him to be the new Mariner, Vancouver "seem[s] to be lifted by some strength unwitnessed, over the rail and into the unsolicitous sea" (258). This shooting is ahistorical but, as Kröller explains, "Vancouver's story closes with a death mythologically more fitting than his historical end: like Narcissus and Ahab, Vancouver drowns in the sea that he tried to make the reflection of his own self" (*Bright* 89). The novel thus criticizes the colonial impulse to quantify and control, whether the objects be people, land, or plants.

It is certainly ironic that *Burning Water* won the Governor General's Award in 1980 because the novel is "suspected, and rightly so, of sabotaging the enterprise of a cohesive Canadian mythology, hence a cohesive national identity, a concern much fueled by the activities

of the Centennial decade" (Kröller, *Bright* 118). However, the motivations driving Canadian nationalism and the promotion of Canadian literature are frequently contradictory, as Bowering remarks in an interview with Miki: "In *Particular Accidents* Robin Blaser is working like crazy to make me a Canadian, but here [in the introduction to *West Window*] Sheila Watson is working like crazy to make me an internationalist" ("Session 6"; qtd. in Miki, *Record* 66). The jury committee in Ottawa is working like crazy to convert the "Failed American" (Bowering, "Confessions") into a monarchist, but, at this point in his career, Bowering is adept at negotiating multiple ideological frameworks.

Although I have traced, in a chronological fashion, Bowering's evolution from lyric poet to novelist, it would be misleading to read this movement as a climactic progression. Bowering's "post-realist" novel is only one in a series of genre experiments that he performs. In fact, *Burning Water* serves as a departure point for several other important projects. It begins a trilogy of historical novels set primarily in Western Canada that includes *Caprice* and *Harry's Fragments*.[65] It also leads directly to the long poem *Smoking Mirror* (1982), which is a series of ten lyrical meditations on the metaphor of the smoke-framed mirror. Although the name of the series recalls *Mirror on the Floor*, Bowering states in the title poem that "This moment was brought to me/ on the burning water," and titles such as "The water flame" and "Smoking mirror in Alberta" make it plain that the series indulges the impulse to perform lyrical variations on the latter novel's central metaphor—an impulse which Bowering had suppressed in his experiment with realist narrative. In addition, Kröller observes that the original manuscript version of *Burning Water* "featured extensive quotations in German from [Rilke's *Duino*] *Elegies*" and "may be called an *étude* for the *Kerrisdale Elegies*" (*Bright* 99). It would be a mistake, therefore, to view the serial poems as merely an apprenticeship for the novel, because the novel can equally be read as a study for the later long poems. Instead of achieving a formal perfection—a trademark formula or definitive voice—one sees, in Bowering's writing, recurring

symmetries in continual flux. Like the Heraclitean river to which Bowering so often refers, the forms in this continuum evolve, devolve, and spawn new variations. The serial novel is a large vortex in this river that absorbed all the neighbouring whirlpools in the 1970s and released them in new directions.

However, many of the directions Bowering takes in his writing are problematic. For example, Bowering is fond of a form of humour that he calls "tapinosis": "I have always favoured tapinosis. I like to commit it and I like to be an audience for it. Tapinosis is a sneaky kind of rhetoric—it means the saying of very serious things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang. When I lecture, I even like to lecture *en tapinois*" (*Errata* 61). Tapinosis works better in a burlesque such as *A Short Sad Book* than it does in a historical fiction such as *Burning Water*. For example, the First and Second Indian in *Burning Water* perform comic functions as they act out romantic stereotypes of the Indian brave and elder. However, they do not alternate between allegorical and realist roles in the way that their counterparts Vancouver and Menzies do. The Indians go without names and are trapped in their allegorical context as mouthpieces for the Romantic worldview. Although Ondaatje praises "Bowering's outrageous version of the explorer George Vancouver—who in his travels is surrounded by Indians who speak like eighteenth-century Englishman" (*Ink* xvi)—the manner in which Bowering's comic tone denies the Native characters the right to tell their stories is often disturbing.

Although some critics praise Bowering's flippancy for its anti-authoritarianism (Fenton 131), Glenn Deer observes that his treatment of history does not, finally, undermine its own authority:

> Bowering's "heracliteanism" and serendipity-approach to history is rendered problematic by his deliberate focus on certain types of male competition and power conflicts. Bowering's interest in exposing certain types of power conflicts, by targeting the male will-to-power, is teleological, argumentative, and didactic; and this is an interest that fits uncomfortably with the postmodern aesthetics of *ludism.*

> Rhetorical scrutiny of *Burning Water* shows how shot through with power
> this work is, how it really mobilizes a serious critique while posing as ingenious
> play. The postmodern rhetoric of liberation and open-endedness here does
> involve the inscription of new authority and new belief. (Deer 371)

Compounding this gender bias is the fact that ludic approaches to writing work best when the author deals with known personages, events, and myths. As I shall demonstrate in the subsequent chapters, this strategy is not necessarily effective for minority groups and women whose stories have been suppressed. Both Kogawa and Marlatt create historical fictions with characters modelled on real subjects from archival research and find their own ways of challenging the status quo. In the following chapter, I will examine how Joy Kogawa combines serial and realist elements in *Obasan* in order to give voice to a minority group who have suffered undeserved persecution by white British Columbians. Marlatt, in turn, will explore the oppressive effects of patriarchy on the heterosexual relationships that Bowering presents in a lighthearted manner. However, Marlatt also claims that Bowering's voice and sense of play in his serial novels influenced her own efforts to develop a lyrical prose form ("Connexion" 30), and his contribution to Canadian literature as a stylist and critic should not be underestimated.

CHAPTER 4

Joy Kogawa: (Un)framing Euclid

> The first draft of *Obasan* was written in the same way that I wrote poetry, that is just following the dreams, not knowing where I was going, one thing after another. I had not taken any courses in novel writing and didn't even read a lot of novels. I didn't know what writing a novel meant at all. I just did it. When I was finished that first draft, I was told to forget it. I didn't. (Kogawa, "Journey" 14)

This chapter will examine Joy Kogawa's transition from poet to novelist by identifying the formal and thematic connections between her first published long poem, "Dear Euclid" (1974), and her first novel, *Obasan* (1981). Both these works make use of concentric narrative structures that are circumscribed by the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the moon. Kogawa identifies the moon with female fertility and situates her stories of sacrifice and trauma within a narrative framework that builds out of associations with this symbol of regeneration. In "Dear Euclid," for example, two sequences in which the mythic Moon discusses immortality encompass the narrative of a woman who has an abortion. Kogawa treats the abortion as a "holocaust," in the archaic sense of ritual sacrifice, and counterbalances the speaker's sense of loss by situating the story within a symbolic framework connected to the regenerative Moon. The moon and its elliptical orbit also shape the narrative framework of *Obasan*. Like *Coming Through Slaughter*, *Obasan* is written as if it "were part personal memoir and part historical reportage, but a memoir/history as recounted by a lyric poet attuned to resonant details and patterns of recurrent images and verbal echoes" (A. Davidson 55). In the novel, a 36-year-old schoolteacher named Naomi reflects on her experience as a 5-year-old girl caught up in the evacuation, internment, and deportation of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. The novel is a story of mass exodus, but it is also a meditation on motherhood, as Naomi compares the parental roles of her mother, whom she lost following the nuclear holocaust at Nagasaki, and her Aunt (or Obasan), who adopted her. Kogawa situates this story of holocaust and internment within a series of concentric frames in which the moon

imagery symbolizes the emotional rebirth of Naomi. Thus, although "Dear Euclid" and *Obasan* differ in their treatment of the holocaust theme, Kogawa (un)frames the narrative structure and symbolism of "Dear Euclid" in order to reconfigure the outcome of her story of internment.

Kogawa's lunar symbolism can be traced back to her first collection of poems, *The Splintered Moon* (1964). The moon makes its first published appearance in "No Worms on my Hook," a short lyric about faltering Christian faith:

> There are no worms on my hook
> no bait on my line
> I am inexpert
> in catching fish.
> The sea is the sound of my needing
> the fish my objects of love
> and I have no taste
> for seafood. (3)

This poem provides the first example of the sexualized relation to religion that is often found in Kogawa's characters, such as Naomi, who falls in love with Father Cedric in *Itsuka* (the sequel to *Obasan)*, or Rev. Shelby, who is embroiled in sex scandals in *The Rain Ascends*. Unable to catch the icon of Christ on her figurative hook, the speaker in "No Worms on my Hook" laments:

> I trusted the moon to glow for a spell
> and show me
> the living waters
> but there is only a rippling
> and the moon is a splintered shell. (3)

Conventionally, the living waters are a dispensation of Christ that is promised to the faithful in both the Gospel of John (4.10) and the Book of Revelation (7.17). However, the desired influence of the moon on the living waters in "No Worms on my Hook" suggests the female tides, streams, and menstrual cycles that figure prominently in the conclusion to *Obasan*, where the moon's "reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing" (247). The moon symbolizes fertility for Kogawa, but this fertility is spiritual and creative, as well as physical.

Furthermore, Kogawa often treats the fertility theme negatively, meditating on the absence of faith, inspiration, and/or family.

The Splintered Moon makes an appropriate title for Kogawa's first collection because it underscores the theme of fractured wholeness that runs throughout the book. For example, "Divisions," the penultimate lyric in *The Splintered Moon*, echoes the title image in its depiction of exploded "centres":

> We explode ourselves
> Lurch from our centres
> Split ourselves into endless splinters
> Releasing waves of consciousness
> That swell a cohesive bind
> Midst our separate parts (12)

This brief lyric illustrates a crucial contradiction in Kogawa's writing. The form of "Divisions" exhibits little of the decentring and fragmentation advocated by the lyric's content. The poem consists of a single complete sentence punctuated with line breaks instead of commas. While the absence of standard punctuation is a modest kind of verbal emancipation, the conventional syntactic model of subject-verb-object remains intact. There is no radical decentring of the subject, as there is in Marlatt's poetry and prose. Nor is there any challenge posed to word order, as there is in Bowering's work.[66] However, Kogawa does resemble the other writers in this study in that she turned to the long poem as a means of creating narrative through a series of lyrics. Although her technique is more conservative than that of the others, she also splinters her narrative into distinct generic fragments that she binds together by performing variations on a theme.

If the abortion experience described in "Dear Euclid" is autobiographical, it has had profound emotional and psychological repercussions on Kogawa, judging by such short lyrics as "Erasure," where the speaker wakes up weeping and "asking if after all it is/ maybe ethically and morally/ right to abort" (*Jericho* 51). "Dear Euclid" represents the author's first extended

treatment of the subject and the poem establishes a basic narrative that Kogawa transforms into a subplot in her third novel, *The Rain Ascends*. Politically, Kogawa is pro-choice and her stance can be summed up in Millicent's defiant statement in *The Rain Ascends*: "If I had to choose, I would do it again. I would take the leap of faith out of the edifice of the patriarchs and into the blessed company of pro-choice" (176). However, in every treatment of the subject by Kogawa, the abortion represents an enormous source of pain and regret.[67]

"Dear Euclid" consists of 15 stanzas or blocks of verse that are sometimes mere fragments and other times freestanding lyrics. The first and last of these stanzas consist primarily of pronouncements made by the mythic Moon. Kogawa presents Moon's statements as reported speech and, at least initially, distinguishes Moon's voice from the voice of the woman that narrates the bulk of the poem. Inside the concentric framework of the moon sequences are documentary-style lyrics that establish a temporal framework within the mythic one. The lyrics in this section describe the woman's experience of abortion from a physical standpoint and are marked by the journalistic devices of dating and reportage. Inside both these concentric frameworks, at the core of the long poem, is a series of lyric meditations that are concerned not so much with recording the passage of time and events as examining the complex psychological, emotional, and ethical ramifications of abortion. The touchstone for this meditation is the Bible, which sets up an interesting intertextual dynamic because it "is sometimes said that, next to the Bible, [Euclid's] *Elements* may be the most translated, published, and studied of all the books produced in the Western world" ("Euclid" 590). If the Bible is the key reference for moral questions raised in the poem, the *Elements* is the inspiration for its form. In addition to the concentric structure of the long poem, the thirteen stanzas dealing with the abortion of the fetus (Euclid) correspond to the number of books in the geometer's *Elements*, although there is no connection between the stanzas and books in terms of theme. The two Moon sequences that frame the Euclid stanzas draw the narrative full circle, as the poem proceeds from an assertion of

fertility, through the negation of that fertility, to a conclusion in which the Moon reaffirms its power.

The opening stanza of "Dear Euclid" takes advantage of the flexibility of the long poem format to introduce a dramatic element into the author's predominately lyric repertoire:

> Moon announces at the end of my dream
> "Dear Euclid
> I am indestructible
> I am star." (88)

Moon's boast of indestructibility acts as a countervailing influence on the ensuing description of abortion by the female speaker. The statement sets up a complex apostrophic arrangement in which both Moon and the woman address Euclid, her aborted fetus. He is the focus of an address, yet he is absent and cannot centre the discourse. This paradoxical arrangement heightens the enigma surrounding Moon's statement about indestructibility which is repeated (with a slight difference) at the conclusion of the long poem.

Inside the frame provided by the bookend arrangement of the Moon sequences, the second stanza of the long poem establishes time and place and moves into the quotidian world of facts. The stanza opens with the shot from an airplane familiar to anyone acquainted with documentary films:

> July. Thursday. 1971. New York.
> From the airplane we drop
> Ant powder on entire continents of bloodless ants
> Like rain on Dolly's parade
> The ticker tape confetti turning ash white
> It's just a matter of time now
> The cars crawling like paramecia
> In drying drops (88)

Despite the expectations of documentary narrative created by the dating device, the speaker refuses the straightforward role of reporter. The extended metaphor of nuclear holocaust in mid-stanza quickly nullifies the journalistic tone of the opening lines. Invoking the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese Canadian writer summons a complex set of emotions as

her speaker travels to the United States for aid in what she styles as her own personal holocaust. This appropriation of holocaust imagery is galling because the speaker's personal loss cannot possibly compare to the anguish of the bomb victims, but the stanza is noteworthy because it anticipates the more balanced treatment of personal and collective suffering in *Obasan*. It moves through scales of technologized vision, from the macroscopic airplane shot to microscopic paramecia, and seems to re-enact the dropping of the A-bomb "Little Boy" on Hiroshima by the Enola Gay. Although Kogawa initially shrouds the speaker's purpose in mystery, she creates an ominous atmosphere through the echo of the eternal, "indestructible" Moon transformed into "ticker tape confetti turning ash white." Plainly, the "matter of time" here is more complicated than the linear, journalistic model implied by "July. Thursday. 1971. New York." The documentary model, rather than establishing a rigid narrative frame, in fact provides a foil for the poem's lyrical digressions.

The (un)framing of the documentary format can be clearly seen in Kogawa's treatment of the chronological frame in the third stanza. This stanza situates the speaker even more precisely in time and place, but the factual language of reportage quickly yields to metaphor and verbal play:

> 9:40. Sleepwalk into hot muggy New York
> Stew people leaping from pot to pot
> Swim through stop lights, computer talk
> Please detach and retain this stub
> For your personal use detach please
> Your personal stub and retain your use
> Do not fold staple or mutilate
> Mold not do stupilate faple and
> Give name age serial number
> Ride up elevator. Salute. All that is
> Tinier than Tom Thumb is not human
> It is written on the screen of our understanding.
> East Side Clinic. 11:00 a.m. (88)

The details of time and place here establish an illusory ground. The real locus of the poem is the speaker's body as it stews in the urban environment. The speaker does not record this

environment impassively, but rather manipulates its language with associative logic and nonsense words to convey—yet conceal—her traumatized state. Instead of remaining on the factual plane of documentary, the speaker's thoughts gravitate inward, approaching the dreamstate of the mythic frame.

At the last moment, the speaker pauses to consider the ethics of her decision to abort. Her decision in this passage supplies the title for Kogawa's second collection of poems, *A Choice of Dreams* (1974):

> I had the choice—the dreamer has
> His choice of dreams—I have
> The choice still to turn about
> In this tight tunnel ant corridor
> Carrying my huge white ant egg. (89)

Realms of consciousness overlap in this passage as the surreal image of the "huge white ant egg" resonates with the Moon in the speaker's dream. However, the speaker does not exploit the surreality of the situation to shirk responsibility for her actions. She does not place blame solely on "this/ Italian doctor, my accomplice, your father,/ My accomplice" (94). She insists that "we are/ Victim by choice, our victory only that/ We can choose" (89). On the other hand, she laments the "constellations I reached and denied/ With the denial by which I am denied " (91). Throughout Kogawa's writing, the author presents the decision to abort as a judicial choice in which her political conscience reaches the verdict of not guilty, while her lyric voice continues to register guilt.

The description of the operation is essentially complete by the end of fifth stanza and from this point onwards the speaker's narrative turns speculative:

> For how many days did you
> Grow wildly hopeful until your heart
> Barely beating in an entirely new sky
> Died. Black. My star child. I would
> wish for you another age, another mother. (90)

The celestial spheres of Euclid's classical universe have been eclipsed here by regret. To cope with the "sorrow" (89) of her body, then, the speaker interprets her pain through a series of biblical frames. Kogawa is the daughter of a minister and her writing is greatly influenced by the Bible. However, her interpretations of the Bible in "Dear Euclid" range from the unconventional to the heretical. For example, the speaker legitimates her actions in New York by interpreting the mythology of Genesis as a description of aborted parenthood:

> Once did God
> Flood away his imperfect creation
> And now the imperfection remains
> And an arc full of regret.
> My small Noah, it is to another world
> You must go (90)

The living waters here transform into a flood of death. Less than divine, the human ark is not a vessel of salvation for the speaker's "small Noah." The divine covenant sealed by the rainbow is now "an arc full of regret" and the arc of the narrative reflects this fact.

The absence of the divine also permeates Kogawa's revision of the story of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22.1-19) in "Dear Euclid." Ordered by Yahweh to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a test of faith, the biblical Abraham is released from the sorrow of his trial when, at the last moment, Yahweh provides a ram to take Isaac's place. Unlike his namesake, Kogawa's Isaac receives no pardon:

> I have burnt you on many altars
> Offered you to the village elders
> For their evening meals, my ram-child,
> My Isaac without a saving God (93)

The speaker's abortion becomes a biblical allegory gone awry precisely because the holocaust (or ritual sacrifice) was not, through divine intervention, aborted.

Kogawa returns to the Abraham story in *The Rain Ascends* (1995), where Millicent uses the accusative case to insert herself into the role of the patriarch:

> Time without measure, in a Middle Eastern land called Moriah, you are walking along [. . .]. You are Abraham, that patriarch, that trusting servant of God, with a child, your son, the light of your life, walking beside you [. . .]. This is Isaac by your side, the not-yet-strong, not-yet-powerful dreamer of your dreams, trusting but confused, trudging towards an altar where death and sacrifice are waiting. (3-4)

Far from adhering to the moral and narrative constraints of the biblical story, Millicent's version of the myth portrays her as wielding a pen instead of a knife and invoking the Goddess of Mercy and Abundance instead of Yahweh. She is poised to sacrifice her pedophile father instead of her son when the Goddess intervenes:

> The ram, the sacrificial, ever-present ram, is stirring in the thicket of your mind and beckoning you to turn away from the harshness of a bloodless sky.
> "Blessed and timely ram, what is your name?"
> "My name is Fiction. I am your Fiction."
> Thus is the name of the ram revealed by the Merciful One. Where the will to truth meets the will not to harm, a struggling fiction is found trapped in the thicket and the brambles and the dense underbrush. By the sword of your pen, you are to slay your life-long lies, your necessary deceptions, your subterfuge and inventions. You will grope among small white stones and through a house of bones, until you find your way to Mercy's throne. (71-2)

This prophecy is in fact a kind of subterfuge. The accusative "you" addresses both Millicent (the metafictional author) and Kogawa (the actual author), for whom the series of events described in the prophecy has already taken place. Kogawa arrives at Mercy's throne in *The Rain Ascends* by groping among white stones in *Itsuka* and *Obasan*, and these stones, in turn, develop out of the Moon symbolism in "Dear Euclid." Furthermore, the moon symbolism in *Obasan* involves an elaborate revision of a biblical text, which Kogawa undertakes for the first time in "Dear Euclid."

To the charge that she is playing God by having an abortion, the speaker in "Dear Euclid" seems to reply that she is putting the absence of God—"a saving God"—into play. Instead of alleviating her guilt, however, the speaker's crisis of faith intensifies her longing for meaning:

> What are we
> Doing here, Toby, Sandra
> Hiding from what menace, sharing our
> Microscopic nightmare, offering these cells

> These souls, these bodies, to be a reasonable
> Holy and living sacrifice to whom for what? (89)

Contravening the Bible's prohibition of abortion, the speaker feels caught up in the "maelstrom

of Leviticus" (92)—although, strictly speaking, there is no maelstrom in the Book of Leviticus.

The third book in the Old Testament, Leviticus is a legislative, not narrative, work. It details the

codes and taboos governing various Jewish rituals, including those related to sacrifices and

childbirth. Communicating with the people of Aaron through Moses, God threatens drought,

dispersal, and conquest on those who contravene his ordinances (26.14-40), a calamity

paramount to Kogawa's "maelstrom." Yet her maelstrom involves a confusion of biblical laws:

> I am cut off I have
> Trampled a universe I have
> Transgressed the law of holiness
> I have eaten the blood
> It is *my* blood (92)

This cultural calamity, like the "rush of mud over Pompeii" (92), marks the end of a particular

moral age. However, doubt continues to haunt the new age as the speaker asks: "Is it not my

blood?" (92)

The speaker's existential crisis results from a loss of faith that she finds debilitating. The

speaker sees the abortion as an expression of this malaise:

> It is my faith that died
> Long before you were conceived
> And my ice covered legs move more
> Slowly now it is the love law
> We must yet obey and how have I loved you? (94)

The speaker apparently loves her child, yet she has destroyed him. In fact, she does not express

her love until after the abortion has taken place. Fiction intervenes here as the saving power for

the speaker. Her Euclid inhabits a fictional world in which mother and child can rise above the

quotidian sphere marked by the covenant of imperfection:

> Baby baby it is finished now
> But stay with me in this

> Perfect world let me keep you
> Alive let me hold your warm
> Body let me baby keep you
> From the arguments this time, the schools, the
> Newspapers (93)

Despite the echo of a pop song cliché here, the narrative at this point has largely disengaged from the quotidian world.

The twelth and thirteenth stanzas of "Dear Euclid" abstract Naomi's experience into a mythic natural realm:

> We swam upstream and discovered
> The river was an eddy in a larger stream
> The choices were ripples in a waterfall
> The ripples fell like Niagara
> How many stars drowned today
> How many possibilities have been denied (95)

Here, the rippling waters from "No Worms on my Hook" resurface in a different context as Kogawa refines the mythic vision of "water and stone dancing" that will conclude *Obasan*. Out of the biblical symbol of the living waters, Kogawa develops a discourse on feminine fertility that foreshadows the transformation of Christ's holy water into the "amniotic deep" (n.p.) of the proem in *Obasan*.

Following this baptismal passage down a mythic river, the speaker defines the new covenant of her perfect world by grafting the narrative structure of the Book of Revelation—creation, holocaust, new creation—onto the regenerative symbol of the feminine moon:

> The rainbow was a promise of fire
> But new signs follow the holocaust
> There are patterns more hidden than our patterning
> Deaths more lasting than our murdering
> There are celebrations still in the surety of death
> And more resurrections than I have known
>
> Friday. July 71. Ottawa.
> "Dear Euclid," the dead moon has announced
> "I am indestructible.
> I am star." (95)

These final lines appear to portray a resurrection of faith—one whose "love law" retains strong elements of Christian teaching, but which is connected to the moon, a pagan fertility symbol. Judging by the dates, the long poem's narrative takes place between Thursday and Friday, tracing a diurnal cycle marked by the appearance, disappearance and reappearance of the regenerative moon. This pattern also corresponds to the speaker's movement from Canada (presumably Ottawa), to New York, and back to Ottawa.

However, as the speaker hints, there are patterns deeper than this surface patterning. The concentric structure is jeopardized by the speaker's unusual choice of name for her unborn son: Euclid. In one of the long poem's final stanzas, the speaker addresses the historical Euclid (circa 300 BCE) noting that the "place of [his] birth is uncertain" (94):

> Euclid was it child of your spirit
> Hovering round my moon hollowed night
> Is it your ears I have deafened
> And your dead universe now
> In which I pray (94)

Naming the aborted son after the Greek pioneer of plane geometry poses a problem for the geometry of Kogawa's narrative because the fetus, the apostrophic centre of the poem, has been enucleated. The geometer's universe of celestial spheres and mathematical precision is now a "dead universe." Euclid's spirit orbits the speaker in her "moon hollowed night," circumscribing her thoughts like the "dead moon" at the conclusion of the poem. When the speaker confesses to Euclid, "I could not have stood/ Your craving for perfection" (94), the poem's intricate geometry, the whole redemptive structure of the speaker's perfect world, implodes like a dead star.

Yet Moon is not properly a star, as it claims. Delving deeper into the Euclid reference, a second contradictory pattern emerges. In addition to the geocentric world model of antiquity, the long poem's concentric structure alludes to Euclid's doctrine of reincarnation. Euclid was famous in antiquity for his belief in reincarnation and, consequently, his vegetarianism. Having denied the reincarnation of the Greek Euclid, the woman appears to have broken the cycle of rebirth.

This "denial by which I am denied" also has repercussions for the Christian doctrine of incarnation. The speaker characterizes her "baby" as a "small fish struggling for three minutes/ On the prongs of a well aimed hook" (95). Contradicting the wish expressed in "No Worms On My Hook," the speaker in "Dear Euclid" throws the fish back into the ocean and "the beaches/ Fill with harpooned whales" (95). Even within the "Euclid" stanza, the speaker rejects the redemptive myth of the holocaust:

> [C]ould you not through
> The long wrestling night of excuses and lies
> Shout down the executioner with his
> "Life must die that life might live"
> Was it you, Euclid, arguing with the moon?
> Do you weight me now? (94)

The regenerative moon appears to be an "executioner" in this passage, while Euclid, who "died so easily" and seemed "[u]ninsistent on life" (94), suddenly becomes insistent. Perhaps the "star child" has been reincarnated as the new Moon. However, it seems more likely that the revivified Moon speaks for the revitalized woman at the conclusion of the poem. In any case, the more Kogawa gestures towards closure and the more she wraps framework around mythic framework, the more her geometry disappoints her. In the end, the speaker's meditative exercise in "Dear Euclid" fails to resolve her contradictory feelings towards abortion, but it does give Kogawa a network of symbols for addressing questions of life and death in *Obasan*.

Obasan also uses a concentric narrative structure that is framed by moon imagery. However, the structure of the novel is much more elaborate than that of the long poem. The principal narrative in *Obasan* is surrounded by an epigram, proem, frame tale, and postscript. As Erika Gottlieb argues in "The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in *Obasan*," each of the opening frames "contains a riddle: in the first, the hidden manna; in the second, the hidden voice; in the third, the hidden reason for the pilgrimages" (36):

> The novel sets up these multi-dimensional questions as puzzles arranged in a
> concentric pattern—container hidden within container within container—creating

> a sense of mystery and tension. The deliberate visibility of the concentric
> structure compels the reader to search for a central meaning at the core of the
> multi-layered texture of Naomi's narrative. To enter the psychological, political,
> and universal dimensions of Naomi's dilemma, the novel provides three openings,
> three distinct, yet interrelated landscapes. (34)

Although "Dear Euclid" also featured multiple openings and puzzling statements, the novel

expands on the themes established in the long poem. For example, *Obasan* adheres to the

narrative movement from holocaust and resurrection that one finds in "Dear Euclid," but in the

novel the holocaust really is nuclear and the resurrection is the emotional rebirth of the narrator,

who loses her mother after the bombing of Nagasaki. The crisis of motherhood in "Dear Euclid"

becomes, then, the crisis of an absent mother in *Obasan*.

The theme of the rebirth presents itself immediately in the biblical epigram to *Obasan*.

The epigram, which introduces the story of a Japanese Canadian woman's struggle to come to

terms with her traumatic memories of the Second World War, derives from the opening section

of the Book of Revelation, a series of letters to the Churches of Asia:

> To him that overcometh
> will I give to eat
> of the hidden manna
> and will give him
> a white stone
> and in the stone
> a new name written . . . (n.p.)

The future tense of this epigram provides a prophetic framework for the unfolding of Naomi's

narrative, as Miki explains: "the epigraph can be read [. . .] as a premonition that the narrative

conflict of *Obasan* will be resolved. The implication is that the protagonist, Naomi Kato, will

emerge with a new identity after she has made her descent into her repressed history and

memory" (*Broken* 139). Miki strongly objects to the naming role of the epigram, yet, ironically,

it is he who misnames Naomi in this passage. Miki mistakenly calls Naomi by her mother's

maiden name, Kato, despite Naomi's extended elementary school lesson on the pronunciation of

her surname, Nakane (*Obasan* 5-6). Miki's mistake does not detract much from his observations,

however, because it confirms importance of the matrilineal connections between characters in

Obasan.

While this accidental renaming in the feminine complements my own argument, I want to

focus first on Miki's objections to the biblical frame:

> When read as a reaction to racialization, the same biblical frame reverses into a doubled discourse of white supremacy and reveals itself as a mechanism (as Christianity was used in colonization) of enforced assimilation. The "othered" racial "object" undergoes translation into whiteness; her former subject identity, already under erasure by the racism of the past, is abandoned for a new name written on "white stone." (*Broken* 139)

Miki oversimplifies the spiritual dimension of Kogawa's writing here, which attempts to

combine Buddhist ritual with the "love law" of Christianity (Gottlieb 50-53; Willis 243; A.

Davidson 27-8). More importantly, in assessing Kogawa's "complicity" with European-

Canadian society (*Broken* 144), Miki underestimates the novelist's transformation of the biblical

passage. However, the pressures of assimilation that he describes play a crucial role in the novel

and are worth considering first.

Kogawa frequently addresses the pressures of assimilation. For example, the narrative

lyric "What Do I Remember of the Evacuation" (1974) foregrounds the kinds of social pressures

that produce a desire for "whiteness." It also rehearses scenes that appear in *Obasan*, such as the

flying of the Union Jack:

> And I remember the puzzle of Lorraine Life
> Who said "Don't insult me" when I
> Proudly wrote my name in Japanese
> And Tim flew the Union Jack
> When the war was over but Lorraine
> And her friends spat on us anyway
> And I prayed to the God who loves
> All the children in his sight
> That I might be white. (*Choice* 55)

As the language of this poem indicates, however, the desire to change skin colour magically is a

childish wish. At times, in *Obasan*, the adult Naomi also grows tired of her heritage and wants

"to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness" (183). But Naomi recognizes that there can only be change by altering the perception of the given (skin colour, racial heritage), not by denying its existence.

From this perspective, the found poem presaging a "new name given" makes for a difficult starting point for Naomi's cross-cultural negotiations. As Miki points out, Christianity has often had deep ties to colonialism and conflicts of church and state affected the earliest relations between Japan and the West:

> [In] 1614 [an] edict not only ordered all foreign priests to gather in Nagasaki and then to leave Japan for good, but also ordered all churches to be demolished and native Christians to renounce their faith. Christianity was held to be wholly subversive: the foreign priests were accused of "longing to disseminate an evil law [. . .] so that they may change the government of the country and obtain possession of the land" [. . .]. Only the Dutch were allowed to have any contact with Japan after 1641 and they were confined to Deshima, a small island in Nagasaki harbour, their activities placed under close surveillance. (Adachi 3-4)

Kogawa's selection of an epigram from Revelation, then, is strategic because message of love that John the Evangelist ordered the Churches of Asia to spread contrasts sharply with the horrific American bombing of Nagasaki, a disaster that would sever the bond between Naomi and her mother.[68] Once again, Kogawa documents the separation of mother and child by holocaust. The 1945 bombing of Nagasaki disfigures Naomi's mother and she dies secretly, in shame over her appearance, sometime afterward. Her sacrifice is to withhold the secret of her disfigurement from her children and abandon the hope of seeing them again. The nuclear bomb thus also explodes Naomi's nuclear family, but the young woman compensates for this loss by looking to her Aunt Emily and Obasan for role models. As polar opposites, these two women represent the behavioral extremes of Naomi's Japanese-Canadian identity. Obasan is an Issei (first generation) who retains a tradition-bound silence in the midst of tragedy, whereas Emily belongs to the Canadianized Nisei (second generation) who voice their demands for justice to the Canadian government. The contrast between Naomi, who struggles to maintain family ties and a

sense of tradition, and her brother Stephen, who rejects his Japanese background in favour of a

cosmopolitan way of life, mirrors the Aunts' conflict. By incorporating all of these influences

into her writing, Naomi aims to reclaim the diverse aspects of her heritage and thus bridge the

cultural divides.

However, Miki's suggestion that Naomi possesses a "former [Japanese] subject identity"

is problematic. Naomi's given name is already the product of Christian colonization, as she

explains in *Itsuka*:

> I was named after Miss Naomi Best—large-boned English Canadian missionary
> to Japan. She was a loud woman, severe and authoritative, and when she spoke,
> she boomed.
> [. . .]
> In her early dauntless days, Naomi Best, matriarch of the marginalized, was on
> hand at the docks in Vancouver. (7)

Born into a situation of enforced assimilation, Naomi is not compelled to conform to the

whiteness of the biblical frame at 36 years of age. On the contrary, Naomi translates the biblical

frame—in particular its "white stone"—into her own personal symbolism.

Instead of receiving "a new name" on a white stone, Naomi transforms the prophesied

stone into a feminine moon. At the conclusion of Naomi's narrative, she observes that "[a]bove

the trees, the moon is a pure white stone" (247). This metaphor does not fulfill the biblical

prophecy in any literal sense, but the visual analogy and the repetition of "white stone" connect

the epigram to the conclusion of the frame tale in an elliptical orbit that encompasses Naomi's

history. Of course, the new symbol does not entirely erase the biblical icon. There is an echo of

the biblical white stone in the papers of Aunt Emily's package that "are piled as neatly as the thin

white wafers in Sensei's silver box—symbols of communion, the materials of communication,

white paper bread for the mind's meal" (182). However, Naomi takes Emily's package (an "Aunt

egg" comparable to the "ant egg" in "Dear Euclid") and as a result embeds its facts, quotations

and journal entries into her text, and produces a narrative that modifies biblical codes, rather than

being assimilated by them. Kogawa's lunar symbolism transforms the white stone, which is

"Christ's amulet" (Hartdegen et al. 1429), into an icon of maternity. Yet, for Naomi as for her

"word warrior" (*Obasan* 32) Aunt, maternity is a literary act. In *Obasan* the moon and its phases

are continually linked to the ebb and flow of life as it is embodied by menstrual cycles and the

ovarian egg, but for Naomi these cycles are allegories of writing. The novel is "a circular

Künstlerroman, the story of how the protagonist/narrator finally became an artist by reaching the

point where she could produce the novel we have just read" (A. Davidson 76). This fecund

moment arrives with Naomi's sighting of the full moon/white stone at the conclusion of the

frame tale.

The white stone continues to metamorphose in Kogawa's subsequent novels. The symbol

develops serially in Kogawa's works, changing meaning slightly with every appearance but

always developing associations with speech, silence, and women. Searching for a feminine role

model in *Itsuka*, Kogawa exchanges the white stone's biblical context for an ancient Greek one

when Naomi asks: "What would a dryad do if she were trapped in a battle of words? Would she

transform herself into a tree, perhaps, or a snowdrop? Or a small white stone?" (175). In *The

Rain Ascends*, Kogawa abandons the mute European wood nymph and invents her own high

deity, the Goddess of Mercy and Abundance,[69] who dispenses words as white stones:

> She came to me that spring in a dream and touched me in her evanescent way,
> saying that she, the Goddess of Mercy, was the Goddess of Abundance. Mercy
> and Abundance. One and the same. The statement shone in my mind with the
> luminosity of an altogether new moon.
> What I am trusting, this pen-holding moment, is that it is she, the abundant
> and merciful one, who is both guide and transport for the journey. She is map,
> road and travelling companion, moving through light and shadow, dancing the
> direction. And what I realize just now for the first time is that it is not I on my
> own who seek her, but she who seeks me. It is she who in the act of flinging
> stones onto the forest floor—white stones, stepping stones, word stones—it is she
> who weaves the way towards herself. She draws me through the miasma of the
> day-by-heavy-day sad morning wakenings to her as yet unknown glad rising. (2)

As in *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, Kogawa connects the white stones here to the act of writing and a process of overcoming. The stones are also feminized as the property of the Goddess and accompanied by a "new moon" whose dance of light and dark underscores the capacity of lunar signs for reversal. Kogawa underscored this capacity earlier in the lyric, "The Signs Were Everywhere":

> moon
> creatures sleep at noon and
> lunar signs reverse their shadows
> through every revolution of light. (*Jericho* 80)

By reversing assumptions of race and gender invested in the "white stone," Kogawa's moon symbolism creates—to reconfigure Miki's objection (*Broken* 139)—a "doubled discourse" that undermines codes of "white supremacy" rather than submitting to them. Thus the symbolic transformation of the white stone (patriarchal Word) in *Obasan* comes full circle in *The Rain Ascends*, where Millicent uses white stones (the Goddess' words) to expose the lies of her father, Rev. Shelby, who has molested her son.[70]

In *Obasan*, Kogawa extracts a prose passage from the Book of Revelation, lineates the prose passage as lyric poetry, then quotes the white stone in the amniotic context of the prose poem and makes the symbol function otherwise. Kogawa's choice of an archaic translation of Revelation is thus a calculated one because it allows the biblical "him" to transform into a contemporary "her," and for the white stone to become the moon. Modern translations erase the gender specification of "him" and render "white stone" as "white amulet": "To the victor I shall give some of the hidden manna; I shall also give a white amulet upon which is inscribed a new name" (Revelation 2.17). The archaic translation also underscores the fact that Naomi partakes in a process of overcoming, as opposed to achieving a final victory.

Kogawa's feminizing of a patriarchal mythology continues in the novel's other key biblical quotation: "Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2" (*Obasan* 31). This

quotation, written on a piece of paper that falls out of Aunt Emily's package, derives from the

Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament. In the opening section of this book, Habakkuk

performs the unprecedented act of challenging Yahweh over his governance of the world (see

Hartdegen et al. 1020):

> How long, O Lord? I cry for help
>   but you do not listen!
> I cry out to you, "Violence!"
>   But you do not intervene. (1.2)

Habakkuk's countrymen are being besieged by the Chaldeans, an "unruly people,/ That marches

the breadth of the land/ to take dwellings not [their] own" (1.6). The prophet's theme holds

obvious appeal for Naomi, who has witnessed the confiscation of her family home, her uncle's

fishing boat, and the dispersal of her community by white Canadians. Feeling betrayed,

Habakkuk challenges God's authority—"Why [. . .] do you gaze on the faithless in silence[?]"

(1.13)—then calls out "O Rock," "an ancient title celebrating the Lord's power" (Hartdegen et al.

1021), in an effort to win a response:[71]

> Then the Lord answered me and said:
>   Write down the vision
> Clearly upon the tablets (2.2)

In heeding Aunt Emily's commandment to write the vision and make it plain, Kogawa

takes the Bible's masculine metaphors of stone (God the Rock) and inscription (writing on

tablets) and converts them into the feminine. The voice of God the Rock becomes the voice of

Aunt Emily (who gives commandments) and silent Obasan (whom Naomi portrays as "turned to

stone" [198] and composed of "ancient rock formations" and "long-extinct volcanoes" [78]).

The act of writing on tablets becomes the act of writing "the silences that speak from stone"

(111) and recording the grievances of "the despised rendered voiceless" (111). In short, Naomi

does not ask to be given a name by some all-powerful patriarch, but rather takes control of her

own self-creation.

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Kogawa dramatizes this creative act of naming-as-birthing in the proem. Stylistically similar to "We had not seen it," the concluding prose poem in *The Splintered Moon*, the proem is "a complex prose lyric from which emerge most of the image patterns of the book" (Merivale 72). The proem builds on the epigram's keywords and converts its prophetic vision of writing into a present-tense portrait of the writer writing. This short, unpaginated lyric could be considered a second epigram, but I will follow Magnusson (59) and Miki in calling it a "proem written out of the depth of the writer's struggle to dispel the silences that haunt her" (*Broken* 116):

> There is a silence that cannot speak.
> There is a silence that will not speak.
> Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.
> I admit it.
> I hate the stillness. I hate the stone. I hate the sealed fault with its cold icon. I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes.
> Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.
> If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word? I ask the night but the silence is steadfast.
> There is no reply. (n.p.)

Etymologically, *proem* derives from the Greek *pro* (before) + *oimē* (song), but this proem does not precede a song, either lyric or epic. On the contrary, the proem underscores the absence of song in the ensuing prose narrative. Where songs and nursery rhymes do occur in Naomi's history, they are generally parodies of "White sound." For example, the passage "my own, my native land" in "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" (39) casts an ironic light on the national anthem and its invocations of "home," "own," and "native land." Generally, Naomi's lyrical moments

come when she withdraws from the narration of historical events and reflects on her identity and writerly performance.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Kogawa's "proem" is a "prose poem" because it is in this and subsequent contractions that "the writing of *Obasan* [. . . is] 'born'":

> Alongside the overt narrative of the central character, Naomi, as she unravels the riddle of "herstory" as a Japanese Canadian, is the covert drama of the writer, herself the product of historical injustices, creating a fictional vehicle to recover, through documents, memories, and tales, the interior consequences of abuse and betrayal. The construction, then, is itself a movement into the inhibitions, ambivalences, and erasures that have underwritten the writer's psyche and which threaten, at each point in the unfolding narrative, to suck her back into silence, i.e., into the nothingness of non-speech. Much of the provisionality of *Obasan* inheres in the writing itself, in the very textuality through which the silenced history of Japanese Canadians is imagined and re-configured. (Miki, *Broken* 114)

Silence is the flipside of creation for Kogawa. Thus the traumatized speaker in "Dear Euclid" moves "Farther away and farther always now to/ Silences" (91) following her operation. She "seek[s] the silences" (91) before she articulates herself and announces that "the waiting will return to the silences" (95) towards the conclusion of the poem.

This dynamic between speech and silence takes on added dimensions in *Obasan*, where Naomi explores the philosophical silence of the Issei, as well as the prohibitive silence imposed on the Nisei. Naomi recognizes that, while the bombing of Pearl Harbor cloaked the Canadian government's expropriation and displacement strategies in the garb of military necessity, these policies were in fact determined by parties interested in maintaining a racialized hierarchy of voice. While the newspapers of the period framed Japanese Canadians as "The Yellow Peril," the federal government elaborated on an established policy of villainizing ethnic groups for profit. During the First World War, Ukrainian Canadians (a particularly large and well-established community on the prairies) were interned and forced to labour on Canadian infrastructure projects, such as Banff National Park. This policy proved so profitable to government coffers that forced labour continued for two years following the end of the First

World War (Kokodyniac, Pawlowsky). When war later broke out between the Allies and Japan, the precedent was set for the internment of Japanese Canadians. However, this time the government policies included mass expulsion:

> In Feb. 1942, the Canadian Government ordered the removal of all Japanese Canadians from an area within 160 km of the Pacific coast, justifying its actions on the grounds that the Japanese Canadians threatened Canada's security. The senior members of Canada's military and the RCMP opposed the action, however, arguing that the Japanese Canadians posed no threat to security. In fact, no Japanese Canadian was ever charged with being disloyal to Canada. Later, the government claimed that it removed the Japanese Canadians to protect them from the mobs in BC, despite the fact that they had received only 150 letters and anti-Japanese resolutions. (Sunahara 914)

Obviously, the displacement of 21 000 Canadians of Japanese descent in response to 150 letters of protest from white citizens entirely undermines the fundamental principle of democracy: one citizen, one vote. Rather than state the obvious, Kogawa demonstrates that the obvious was stated at the time and ignored. Kogawa cuts through the obfuscating rhetoric of William Lyon Mackenzie King and his insistence that there "would have been riots at the polls at the time of the election when any of those Japanese presented themselves for that purpose [to vote] and certainly it was taking the part of wisdom to see that nothing of the kind should take place" by quoting CCF opposition critic Stanley Knowles: "What is at stake here today is [. . .] the basic concept of democracy and our belief as a nation so far as our belief in the franchise is concerned" (41). The racial hierarchy informing Mackenzie King's argument is unmistakable, as Ukrainians and Germans born in Canada retained their voting privileges during the World Wars, whereas the Nisei were not granted the vote until 1949.

To unframe the construction of Japanese Canadians as the "Yellow Peril," Kogawa must create a new context for her history. In addition to the mythic epigram and proem, therefore, Kogawa surrounds her history with a frame tale that links Naomi's identity to the Canadian landscape. Set off spatially and temporally from the principal narrative, the frame tale takes place in a coulee half a mile away from Obasan's house near Granton, Alberta. The coulee

sequences occur before and after the events of the principal narrative, and thereby function as liminal spaces through which the reader enters the principal narrative in Chapter 1 and exits it in Chapter 39. Like the moon sequences in "Dear Euclid," this frame tale negotiates the unstable edges of the narrative:

> The frame as material reinforcement of this edge functions first and foremost as a device for distinguishing or setting off a certain kind of space—aesthetic space— from the surrounding area. Constituting a limit or boundary between the 'inside' and 'outside' of an art-form, it demarcates a perceptual field within which what is being looked at signifies differently. (MacLachlan and Reid 23)

In *Obasan*, this aesthetic space functions as an agonistic space in which Naomi metaphorically changes the rules of "the Yellow Peril game" (152). The perceptual field demarcated by the frame tale stresses connections between Naomi's family and the prairie landscape in order to illustrate Aunt Emily's dictum that "[w]hat this country did to us, it did to itself" (33).

The first coulee sequence opens in much the same way that "Dear Euclid" concludes, with documentary dating followed by an image of the moon:

> 9:05 p.m. August 9, 1972.
> The coulee is so still right now that if a match were to be lit, the flame would not waver. The tall grasses stand without quivering. The tops flop this way and that. The whole dark sky is bright with stars and only the new moon moves. (1)

Kogawa revives the "dead moon" from "Dear Euclid" here (a year and one month later) and incorporates it into a ritual honouring the dead. Uncle brings Naomi to this coulee every year on Nagasaki Day to pay mute homage to her mother. For the sake of the children, Uncle and Obasan have withheld details of Mother's horrible death at Nagasaki; but, at thirty-six, Naomi is growing suspicious of Uncle's reticence. Uncle's only comment, pointing at the prairie grasses, is "Umi no yo [. . .]. It's like the sea" (1). Little occurs on these ritual pilgrimages, except that Naomi "always pick[s] at least one flower before [they] go home" (4). The pair sit in silence, "watching as the contours of the coulee erode slowly in the night" (4). This stillness, combined with the silence described in the proem, creates an expectation of revelatory speech for the

ensuing history and foregrounds the objects that become Naomi's key symbols: the moon, the coulee, and the wild rose.

As in "Dear Euclid," the passage of the moon establishes a strict temporal framework in *Obasan*. The "new moon" (1) that begins the frame tale reappears one month—that is, one moon—later, at the conclusion of the frame tale. Having mourned an entire month for Uncle, as well as for her youth and for Mother, Naomi awakes "in the pre-dawn stillness" (246) and impulsively drives out to the coulee to "wade through the coulee grass" (246) and inch her way "down the steep path that skirts the wild rose bushes, down slipping along the wet grass where the underground stream seeps through the earth" (247). "Above the trees," Naomi observes, "the moon is a pure white stone" (247). The hate she professed in the proem for "the stone" and "the sealed vault with its cold icon" has turned to love over the course of her month-long meditation. The diurnal cycle in "Dear Euclid" thus becomes a full lunar cycle in *Obasan*.

The reflection of the moon "rippling in the river—water and stone dancing" (247)—echoes the surreal baptism scene in the previous chapter (#38) in which Naomi imagines her mother as a "tide rushing moonward" (241) carrying Naomi away with her. There is an echo in this passage of the tides and stream from the conclusion of "Dear Euclid" (95), but the moon in *Obasan* has a Japanese association particular to Naomi's story. The reflection of the moon plays on stereotypes of Japanese female physiognomy to connect Naomi—elsewhere characterized as having a "heart-shaped face" (236)—to the maternal "moon face" (14) of Uncle's mother. Early in the novel, Naomi wonders if her dead Uncle managed "to swim full circle back to that other shore and his mother's arms, her round moon face glowing down at her firstborn" (14). At the conclusion of the frame tale, Naomi stares at the moon's watery reflection and realizes that her story has come full circle. The face of the moon glows up at Naomi from the amniotic river (a "drowned star" revived) as she celebrates her symbolic rebirth—and, implicitly, the completion of her first novel. She has converted the Old Man River (introduced in conjunction with Uncle's

ailing refrain "[t]oo much old man" and later tainted by its phonic connections to the rapist Old

Man Gower) into a fertile feminine stream. But the face of the moon glowing on this river also

has a foreboding aspect. Kogawa earlier juxtaposed the "moon face" of Uncle's mother with the

death mask of Obasan: "She leans her head back to look up at me and her cheeks sink into the

cavity of her mouth making her face resemble a skull" (14). Deprived of a husband, and having

lost two children in stillbirths, Obasan wanders around the house with a *momento mori* visage

muttering "[e]veryone someday dies" (11). The face of the moon thus reverses, reflecting both

life and death.

Ambivalence also inflects the symbol of the wild rose. The scent of roses distracts

Naomi as she stares at the moon's reflection and the frame tale closes with the remark, "If I hold

my head a certain way, I can smell them from where I am" (247). The flower that Naomi picks

embodies contradictory associations with wild prairie landscape, provincial iconography, British

Empire, and the Buddhist funerary ritual envisioned in Naomi's dream: "Uncle stands in the

depth of the forest. He bows a deep ceremonial bow. In his mouth is a red red rose with an

endless stem. He turns around slowly in a flower dance—a ritual of the dead" (30). Naomi also

performs this imaginary "flower ceremony" (227) for her mother. The sight of the rose in

Mother's mouth reminds Naomi of an ideograph for "'passionate love' [. . .] formed of 'heart,' 'to

tell,' and 'a long thread'" (228), which inspires her to conclude that Mother's "tale is a rose with a

tangled stem" (229). Mother's tale, "knotted to Obasan's twine, knotted to Aunt Emily's package"

(228) and umbilically linked to Naomi, thus grafts the provincial flower of Alberta onto its

tangled stem. The stone then bursts with telling and the seed flowers with a kind of cross-

pollinated symbolism.

While the conclusion of the frame tale alludes to an official government symbol, the

opening coulee sequence carefully links Naomi's experience to the historical struggles of other

dispossessed minorities in the West, in particular Native Canadians. The coulee's location is a

mile east of "an Indian buffalo jump" (2) and Naomi notes that "Uncle could be Chief Sitting Bull squatting [t]here" (2). Naomi solidifies the Native-Japanese connection by commenting that some of "the Native children I've had in my classes over the years could almost pass for Japanese, and vice versa" (2). Naomi's adult role as educator reciprocates her lesson from Rough Lock Bill, a Native[72] who tells Naomi the story of his people's exodus (145-6) and later saves her from drowning in a baptismal scene replayed in the tidal episode with Mother in Chapter 38. Kogawa's references to Natives—connected as they predominantly are to images of "virgin land" (2)—construct a textbook example of a process that Terry Goldie calls "indigenization":

> The character gains a new awareness of self and of nationality through an excursion into the wilderness. The transformation is often something akin to a sea change, in which the character plunges into the natural and in some association with indigenes partly removes the civilization which is seen to be inimical to his or her indigenization. (46-7)

Although the coulee is not a wilderness, it does facilitate a sea change[73] in Naomi's character. Naomi transforms Uncle's perception of the coulee grasses as a link to the ocean and Japan into her own perception of the prairie as mother country. She emphasizes this transformation by making reference to indigenous contexts. In order to challenge the prejudiced assumption that people of Japanese descent were intrinsically incapable of becoming Canadian because of their skin colour, a prejudice that made the Nisei of Aunt Emily's generation "desperat[e] to prove themselves Canadians" (32), Uncle's "root-like fingers pok[e] the grass flat in front of him" (2) and they seem to blend into "the knotted mat of roots covering the dry earth" (3).

However, for an author telling a story about the dispersal of Japanese Canadians and the seizure of their property, Kogawa leaves herself open to charges of cultural appropriation. Kogawa uses exemplary figures that often reinforce negative stereotypes, as in her essentializing portrait of Inuit motherhood in "Dear Euclid":

> I am Eskimo mother pursued by starving
> Beasts by night and howling blizzard
> And I abandon you, here, here, in the

White numbing coldness (90)

Kogawa's references to Indigenous peoples are less demeaning in her novels, but she continues

to invoke them as a means of stressing her connection to the land. Thus, in *Itsuka*, Naomi falls in

love with Father Cedric, who is descended from "a Métis woman" (107) and a French Canadian

priest that worked as a missionary to the Haida and Japanese on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Naomi's eventual choice of Cedric as a lover is significant because French Canadian

culture also informs the structure of *Obasan*. The coulee setting of the frame tale gives shape to

an important etymology: "coulee" derives from the French Canadian term "coulée," meaning a

shallow ravine. According to *Le Petit Larousse*, the verb "*couler*" (from which "coulee" derives)

possesses three meanings that are pertinent to Naomi's experience. The first is "to go from one

place to another," as Naomi and her family are constantly doing in *Obasan*.[74] The second is "to

flow," as in the flow of water in the coulee and the stream-of-narrative flowing between the

banks of the frame tale. The third is "to drown" or "to go to the bottom of," which directs the

reader's attention back to the proem and Naomi's descent into "the stream down and down to the

hidden voice." Submersing herself in the "sensate sea" of repressed memories stored "beneath

[her] dreams," Naomi emerges from this "amniotic deep" at the conclusion of the novel in a

symbolic rebirth. The geography and etymology of the coulee thus function as structural

principles in Kogawa's storytelling technique.

While the coulee sequences frame a larger narrative, the history at the core of the novel

involves a metafictive author unframing one. For example, Naomi's "genealogical reflections

are set off by the framed family photographs" (Merivale 69) and to describe these private icons

she must first unframe public portraits of Japanese Canadians. Citing a statistic-filled newspaper

clipping entitled "Jap Evacuees Best Beet Workers," Naomi reacts to a photograph of Japanese

Canadians accompanied by the caption "'Grinning and Happy'" (193):

> Facts about evacuees in Alberta? The fact is I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory [. . .].
>
> There is a word for it. Hardship. (194)

Using her personal memories of beet farming in Alberta to overturn a misleading public image, Naomi refuses the title of "Grinning Jap Evacuee," just as she refused to be framed as the "Yellow Peril." However, by assembling a narrative from "[f]ragments of fragments. Parts of a house. Segments of stories " (53), Naomi begins to formulate the name that she will accept.

Because she is a woman and a Japanese Canadian, Naomi's identity is inextricably linked to her body and the metaphors of dismemberment that she uses to represent it. Naomi feels her separation from Mother as a physical wound, a body consciousness which may be perceived within the larger context of Naomi's relationship to the maternal body:

> Absence, displacement, humiliation, deferral, desire, and the disfiguration of the maternal body—literal or figurative—are at the centre of her story. These conditions determine her silence, but they also show that silence to be ambivalent, to both sustain and traumatize her. Naomi's childhood memories help us to understand how this asymmetrical relationship of silence to speech is brought about, and how it relates to the history of her community in Canada. (Kamboureli, "Body" 177)

Naomi consistently defines the traumatic experiences of her childhood—for example, the confiscation of their house in Vancouver—in terms of the way they distance her from her mother. The most poignant example of this separation occurs in the nightmares that follow Naomi's rape at the hands of Old Man Gower: "In my childhood dreams, the mountain yawns apart as the chasm spreads. My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half" (65). Citing passages such as this one, Marilyn Russell Rose argues that rape is "the novel's central metaphor" ("Politics" 222), while, less drastically, Gottlieb maintains that the "metaphor of rape and the victim's ensuing shame and paralysis works [. . .] on the level of political allegory" (45). The metaphorical division of Naomi's body into separate parts distances her from Mother and Japan and jeopardizes her hybrid Japanese Canadian identity.

At the same time, Naomi's body is the focus of numerous discourses pressuring her to assimilate, marry a Caucasian, and procreate. In a series of remarks meant to reflect the community's perception of her, Naomi identifies her marital status as "Old Maid" (7) and then explores the derogatory language used to identify her: "Spinster? Old maid? Bachelor lady? The terms certainly apply. At thirty-six, I'm no bargain in the marriage market" (8). Voicing anxieties Naomi has internalized from the community's gaze, Naomi asks: "Why indeed are there two of us unmarried in our small family? Must be something in the blood. A crone-prone syndrome" (8). Merivale characterizes Naomi as "at a dead end of barrenness" (68) in *Obasan*, and, in *Itsuka*, Naomi feels anxiety about having "walked a narrow and barren path all [her] dusty long life" (208) as her "child-bearing years fl[y] past" (115). In both books, Naomi compensates for this sense of loss by substituting literary for physical conception. But before her "seed flowers with speech," she must overcome the spectre of abortion—the inference that what is made can be unmade.

Like the recurring image of the scar on Naomi's scalp that will not heal, abortion is one of the "erasures" that remain half-lisible in *Obasan*. Traces of this psychological scar appear in Naomi's dreams, which are full of puzzling egg images (*Itsuka* 49, 169) and dying babies:

> The kitten cries day after day, not quite dead, unable to climb out and trapped in the outhouse. The maggots are crawling in its eyes and mouth. Its fur is covered in slime and feces. Chickens with their heads half off flap and sway upside-down in mid-air. The baby in the dream has fried-egg eyes and his excrement is soft and yellow as corn mush. (*Obasan* 158)

In Kogawa's semi-autobiographical writing, themes from her poetry (in particular the poem "Erasure") resurface in her prose through allegory and metaphor, although they do not strictly belong to the storyline. The adult Naomi does not have an abortion, but abortion is none the less one of the issues on her mind as she contemplates a mother country that has rejected and expulsed its own children. For example, Naomi invokes abortion in an extended metaphor describing her experience of writing "the vision" (31) that Aunt Emily demands of her:

> Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filing cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face, but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over Aunt Em? (194)

Kogawa's diction here is carefully ambiguous: the growth could be either a tumor or a fetus.

Like the inexplicable abdominal pains that Naomi suffers at the thought of physical intimacy in

Itsuka, the cause of her bodily trauma goes unspecified here. None the less, Russell Rose

interprets this scene as an abortion and argues that the growth represents the "evil seed planted

by that symbolic rape so many years ago [. . .]. The sterile center, the false pregnancy, the stone,

must be removed—by re-experiencing history—so that life may be restored" ("Politics" 223).

Erasure thus becomes part of the metafictive process for Naomi, a prelude to conception, an

articulate silence.[75]

Kamboureli's analysis of "unwriting" in the white hen scene demonstrates this double

movement of writing and erasure. As a child, Naomi unwittingly places a hostile white hen in a

box with a group of newly hatched chicks. To her horror, the white hen begins to peck the

yellow chicks to death. The hen's violence foreshadows the treatment of the "Yellow Peril" by

white Canadians after the Pearl Harbor bombing, but "to see the scene as simply racial allegory

is to miss its deeper significance: the hen's behaviour suggests that in all animals there exists,

alongside an impulse to nurture, an opposite impulse, to destroy" (Willis 244). The scene is

meant to illustrate the nurturing virtues of "Japanese motherhood" (*Obasan* 59) as Mother deftly

rescues the surviving chicks and undoes Naomi's sense of guilt with the phrase, "'It was not

good, was it [. . .]. Yoku nakatta ne.' Three words. Good, negation of good in the past tense,

agreement with statement. It is not a language that promotes hysteria. There is no blame or

pity" (60). By "unwriting Naomi from her sentence as the agent of the action that was not good,

and thus by allaying Naomi's fears" (Kamboureli, "Body" 178), Mother teaches Naomi to

negotiate crises through language and to convert negative experiences into bearable memories. However, if one follows Kamboureli in accepting this scene as a stylistic paradigm, then one is forced to acknowledge the erasures, concealments, and elisions that history, as a form of storytelling, entails.

Perhaps because of these gaps, the spiderweb is a recurring motif in Naomi's history (24, 226). Like *Coming Through Slaughter* and *Ana Historic, Obasan* is an archival novel that draws together a range of overlooked details, fragmentary documents, and oral histories in order to tell a story that has either been ignored or suppressed. And like Ondaatje, Kogawa uses the spiderweb as a metaphor for the shaping act of the novelist who weaves these disparate threads into a story, yet works with absence and gaps in the manner of a poet. Just as Webb drew together the various characters in *Coming Through Slaughter,* Naomi mediates between characters in *Obasan.* She brings her family together as she attempts to solve the mystery of her mother's disappearance and organize evidence for the Japanese Canadian Redress Movement. However, unlike Webb, Naomi is reluctant to perform this task and she complains:

> [W]e're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spider webs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in the old and complex puzzles. (26)

Naomi's brother Stephen suffers from similar nightmares in which "a metallic insect the size of a tractor [. . .] web[s] a grid of iron bars over him" (220). Being a classical musician, Stephen shows his sister how to overcome her fear of entrapment through art: "Later, [Stephen] told me he had the same nightmare again, but escaped the web by turning the bars into a xylophone" (220). Stephen's taste for classical forms perhaps inspires Naomi to give the outer edges of her narrative web a distinctly Euclidian structure reminiscent of Kogawa's long poem.

Gottlieb stresses the cyclical quality of the frame tale that encompasses Naomi's history by pointing out that the "first and last chapters [. . .] are symmetrical like book ends" (37).

However, the structure of the novel is not as stable as she depicts it. In fact, Gottlieb never mentions the final chapter, the "Memorandum Sent By The Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians," because the memorandum stands outside the frame tale, positioned in asymmetric relation to the concentric circles described by Gottlieb. Critics frequently omit this final document and Miki suggests that the reason they ignore it because it undoes the closure of the frame tale:

> Academics who analyze the novel in detail, despite differences of approach, all tend to incorporate a resolutionary (not revolutionary) aesthetics in their overall critical framing of the novel. The agreement seems to be that Naomi resolves her silenced past, so establishes peace with the human rights violations that caused such havoc and grief to her, to her family, and to her community. (*Broken* 115)

Although Kamboureli makes the memorandum and Miki's quotation the starting point for her essay on "The Body in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," the silence of most critics is telling because the asymmetry of the memorandum prevents the tidy resolution that makes a tidy essay. The memorandum works against the concentric structure of Naomi's history by placing an independent chapter outside the bookends. The final coulee sequence is not the end of the book because the story exceeds Naomi's personal narrative.

A corrected diagram of the concentric mapping described by Gottlieb would position the memorandum as a kind of satellite threatening to shatter the concentric worlds at the point where their elliptical orbits converge. Although the lyrical climax in which the "white stone" of the epigram, the "underground stream" of the proem, the rose symbolism of the frame tale, and the conclusion of Uncle's wake converge in Naomi's epiphany suggests a harmonic resolution, the unacknowledged human rights violations outlined in the memorandum jeopardize Naomi's symbolic reconciliation. The 32-year gap between Naomi's personal epiphany and the official statement of protest jars the reader and prevents Naomi from assuming the role (which she initially rejects but periodically assumes) of an exemplary figure for her community. Rather

than close the novel, the memorandum reminds the reader that Naomi's symbolic resolution is fictional, momentary, and personal. Her revelation is re-veiled in lyricism, a concealment concealed by the ellipsis of the epigram: "I shall also give a white amulet upon which is inscribed a new name, which no one knows except the one who receives it" (Revelation 2.17). Naomi's secret cannot heal her community and this discrepancy between public and private precludes any greater sense of resolution, creating an ellipsis instead of a full stop. The novel is thus framed by indeterminacy and irresolution, moving from the typographic ellipsis of the epigram to the structural ellipsis of the memorandum, while the banks of the coulee "erode slowly in the night" (4). An ellipse, in turn, is the proper description of the moon's orbit, and the memorandum seems to initiate a new narrative cycle. With the benefit of hindsight, the memorandum can be read as the epigram to *Itsuka*. *Obasan* proves to be a novel destined for a sequel, because its ending is an emphatic reminder of what has been left undone.[76]

Itsuka, on the other hand, attempts to close the narrative frames left open in *Obasan*. The quality of writing in the sequel is greatly inferior to its predecessor because of the sequel's preachy tone, and Kogawa herself claims to be "really afraid to read *Itsuka*. I wish it didn't exist" ("Journey" 16). The title of the sequel ("someday" in Japanese) comes from the oft-repeated Issei reply to Naomi's frustrated expectations. In *Obasan* the word enacted a constant deferral, but in the sequel "someday" finally arrives. The story proceeds in linear, diaristic fashion, chronicling Naomi's participation in the redress movement and the achievement of a settlement with the federal government in 1988. The government's cash settlement included an "Acknowledgement" of its human rights violations, which Kogawa places at the end of *Itsuka* to add a full stop to the ellipsis of the memorandum. The sequel does not repeat the first novel's intricate system of introductory frames, but its conclusion does invoke the coulee sequences from *Obasan*. The separate parts of Naomi's life achieve a cohesive bind as she stands together with her lover on Parliament Hill:

> I hand the ["Acknowledgement"] to Cedric and he reads it aloud as we stand, looking out over the shadowy trees and bushes on the slope, to the Ottawa River below [. . .].
>
> This hill is not unlike the slope to the Old Man River near Granton, though it's steeper here and the river is more wide. Sixteen years ago I stood with my uncle on the Granton coulees in the coolness of the night like this, looking down at the ocean of grass, and he said, as he always did, "Umi no yo." It's like the sea.
>
> It's like the sea tonight, Uncle. A busy bubbling trembling sea of the almost sighted and the sometimes blind, the swimmers, the drifters, and those who don't know how to swim. We are here together, and it's enough. (278-9)

While one can sympathize with Naomi's satisfaction upon achieving what often seemed like an unrealizable goal, the notion that the government settlement "is enough" diminishes the ongoing struggle for equality by minority groups in Canada. Miki explains that the "redress settlement [. . .] offered to many JCs a symbolic narrative closure to the historical trauma of victimization at the hands of their own government" (*Broken* 11).[77] Naomi certainly feels this symbolic closure as she reformulates her national identity: "'I'm a Canadian. A Canadian.' [. . .] Sometimes it's been a defiant statement, a demand, a proclamation of a right. And today, finally, finally, though we can hardly believe it, to be Canadian means what it hasn't meant before. Reconciliation. Liberation. Belongingness. Home" (277). However, despite the speechifying tone and the abundance of full stops in this passage, the struggle for minority rights in Canada continues.

The scene on Parliament Hill also draws a number of timeframes to a close, as Naomi observes: "Sixteen years ago this month, my uncle died. And two years later, so did my Obasan" (279). No significant timelag between the closing narrative frames disturbs the symmetry of the moment, as the "Acknowledgement" passes directly from Naomi's hand to Cedric's hand to the reader's hand on the following page. The concluding found document registers harmony with the narrative it follows, rather than discord. In place of the dispersive lyricism at the end of the frame tale in *Obasan*, Kogawa concludes *Itsuka* with a moment of epic unity. The protean language of the proem in *Obasan*—"There is a silence that cannot speak./ There is a silence that will not speak"—yields to an Apollonian idea of speech in which Naomi is "Song itself" (*Itsuka*

87) . Abandoning the linguistic concealment drama of *Obasan* in favour of a more transparent notion of speech, Naomi explains that there "is in life, I have learned, a speech that will not be hidden, a word that will be heard" (83). Her new song is "seamless" and is "indivisibly" linked to her thoughts. There is no gap between thought and word, speech and self. Whereas Naomi writes in a visceral manner in *Obasan*, in *Itsuka* she contains the world with her mind.

However, among the grandiose claims that Kogawa makes in *Itsuka*, there is one that she modestly omits. In the scene where the redress bill is passed in the House of Commons, New Democratic Party leader Ed Broadbent, who was once married to a Nisei, rises to make a historic speech (275). In the actual speech, Broadbent read a passage from *Obasan*, but in *Itsuka* his words trail off into an ellipsis. His reading of Obasan would have made a complicated but interesting contrast to the conclusion of Obasan, because Miki protests that the "last word is written in the rhetoric of dominant language" (*Broken* 116) and that "Japanese Canadians are still spoken for" (117).[78] However, Kogawa staves off the clash of her private and fictional lives by retreating into a problematic silence.

Despite this concealment, *Obasan* has since been recognized nationally and internationally as "a major instrument in creating political consciousness and in winning government redress and compensation for the Japanese-Canadian community" (Dvorak 1). The early novel's elliptical structure offers a productive and hopeful contrast to the violent closure of Bowering's novella *Concentric Circles* (1977), about a political radical who carries around a bomb of nuclear strength. The structure of *Obasan* also recalls the split ovals in the collages that Roy Kiyooka contributed to *The Man in Yellow Boots*, but Kogawa is more emphatic in her conversion of the geometry of destruction into a symbolic egg.[79] Like Marlatt, who transforms a symbol of emotional internment (a wedding ring) into a narrative of birth (her son's) and rebirth (her own) in *Rings*, Kogawa explicitly links her network of symbols to women's bodies. This

association of physical with literary conception, in which writing is a kind of birthing, is also a major theme in Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Daphne Marlatt: (Un)framing the Quest Narrative

> what is fact? (f) act. the f stop of act. a still photo in the ongoing cinerama.
> (Marlatt, *Ana* 31)

In the ongoing cinerama of Marlatt's poetry and prose, her first book, the long poem *Frames of a Story* (1968), establishes a narrative framework that reappears in her novella *Zócalo* (1977) and her novel *Ana Historic* (1988). These works perform variations on the heterosexual quest narrative that Marlatt finds in the source text for *Frames of a Story*: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (1884). Taken together, the erotic plots of *Frames of a Story, Zócalo,* and *Ana Historic* map a lesbian quest narrative, departing from a scene of heterosexual dissatisfaction and moving towards one of lesbian climax. Although not strictly autobiographical, these narratives fictionalize Marlatt's own development of a lesbian identity—and her relationships with Alan Marlatt, Roy Kiyooka, and Betsy Warland—in order to criticize the framing of female sexuality in traditional quest narratives. Her development of a lesbian identity is full of detours and setbacks, but it evolves towards an ecstatic state that overcomes social constraint and homophobic fear. In order to track Marlatt's efforts to integrate her "feminist reading" and sexuality with "a largely male-mentored postmodernist poetic" (Marlatt, *Labyrinth* 1; see also 135), I will provide some biographical context to Marlatt's works while examining the way in which she unframes the heterosexual bias of the quest narrative.

From her beginnings in the *Tish* movement, Marlatt has emerged as one of the leading voices in Canadian women's writing. Thus, in "Language Women: Post-anecdotal Writing in Canada" (1987), Bowering celebrates her position at the forefront of "the avant-garde in English Canadian writing" (103) and praises her practice of "feminist difference" in place of "feminist equivalence" (105). However, his enthusiasm for her writing in this essay glosses over the controversy that surrounded Marlatt's work during the *Tish* years. Marlatt was among the

"second wave of writers who continued *TISH*" (Wah, "Introduction" 8) after four of the original

editors left Vancouver, but her writing did not entirely meet the standards established by the

"first wave." As Marlatt reminds Bowering in the 1979 interview "Given This Body," she

clashed with Frank Davey, who refused to publish some of her early work[80]:

> [Davey] accused me of falling into my imagination & failing to sort of live up to
> the Williams criteria of literalism, & precision, & accuracy to geography & place.
> GB: He thought you were being sort of smarmy or . . .
> DM: . . . yeah, romantic. ("Given" 35)

In the charge of romanticism one also hears the charge of being too effeminate, of writing what

Bowering calls in this interview, "lady poems" (55). Marlatt retained the more idiosyncratic

elements of her writing in spite of the prevailing editorial mandate at *Tish*, but she recalls that

her status as a woman within the group initially hampered her literary ambitions: "I wanted to be

taken seriously as a poet (o that passive voice!) but was taken more seriously as a woman, the

object of a few love poems, one or two about my deficiencies as a 'beauty'—'belle' in its

conventional sense" (*Labyrinth* 145). Marlatt's gender and sexuality were thus inextricably tied

to her writing from the start, whether she wanted them to be or not.

However, in order to chart her own literary course, Marlatt's post-*Tish* writings laid

increasing stress on sexual difference, first in terms of gender and later in terms of sexual

persuasion. For example, Marlatt's acclaimed long poem *Steveston* (1974) bears a strong

resemblance to Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1960), but "Olson's poetics [. . .] are a result of his

equation of the body with freedom, openness, and insight" and, as Marlatt "illustrates in

Steveston, a woman's experience of her body is not always as optimistic or as open as Olson's"

(Reed 133). To distinguish herself from her male mentors, therefore, Marlatt focuses on the

ways in which language and social relations restrict her speech and bodily freedom, as she tells

Bowering: "I have to be in my body. And I have to be in the inarticulate. The inarticulate is

ground" ("Given" 59). Over the years, Marlatt has made it her life's work to fashion an idiom

that speaks through her body and articulates "the unsaid, the yet-to-be-spoken, even the unspeakable" (*Labyrinth* 15).

At the same time, Marlatt's own statements on poetics are frequently contradictory—although her poetry is richer for the contradictions. For example, meditating on Creeley's slogan "form is never more than an extension of content" in a 1968 journal entry, Marlatt embraces open form poetics:

> a thought is an act: moves all of itself (out of desire towards completion) & the desire is only completed when the thought stands/ in (no other) words, at rest
>
> poetics then consists of attention to extension (implication unfolded)—no more the notion of filling up a form—but the *act*, out in the open. (*What* 23)

Marlatt rejects the notion of poetic form as a pre-cast container here, but elsewhere she stresses her abiding interest in architectonic forms. In 1979, she tells Bowering that she consistently feels a need to "go back to a very early sense of what the poem is, & that [i]s a house that one constructs, with doors & windows & different rooms & perspectives inside it, that any reader can walk inside":

> If the poem stands, it stands like a house. That one can walk inside of & look out this window, look out the door, look thru the halls, into this room, into a whole vista of rooms. But the reader has to be able to move around inside it, & the solidity of that structure is the work of the imagination. ("Given" 87-8)

Oscillating between her attraction to mythic structure and her desire to allow language to flow uninhibited, Marlatt works to reconcile the linguistic tropes of open-form poetics—tone leading, metonymy, wordplay—with myths and conceits that give her narratives an overarching structure. For example, several of Marlatt's early works are open-ended syntactically but structured thematically according to the Kwakwaka'wakw myth of the end of the world (Marlatt, "Given" 49; Silver 90-101). To balance the rival imperatives of structure and improvisation, Marlatt employs a complicated syntax that dismantles the conceits she constructs. Thus a typical Marlatt poem, "Mokelumne Hill," concludes by unframing its own rhetoric: "The whole set, false front,

the frame, go up in flames" (*What* 35). Marlatt's poetry is "pervaded by images of entrapment and containment" (Cole 7). She undermines this rigidity through wordplay, but, as in Ondaatje's work, the interplay between the preformed and performed is fundamental to her poetics.

According to Miriam Nichols, Marlatt achieves a balance between structure and indeterminacy through a process poetics in which "form unfolds *behind* the poet as s/he moves through a poem or a life, rather than before her as a thesis to be explicated" (Nichols 116). However, I am skeptical of the assertion that there is no thesis to be explicated in fiction-theory such as *Ana Historic*, where argument plays a vital role in structuring the text. Nichols observes correctly that in *Ana Historic* "the narrative line is complicated through an excess of connectives, to the point where it begins to change form" (Nichols 112), but the author's wordplay works these transformations back into the line of argument in a perpetual feedback loop.

On closer inspection, Marlatt's preoccupation with framing reflects a concern for situating subjects and language in a liminal space. Deborah O advocates such positioning because the "lesbian body signifies in space through a defiance of the sexual economy of gender. It does this through a proliferation of gender configurations that lie outside the restrictions of a compulsory heterosexuality" (76). Marlatt's first book, *Frames of a Story* (1968), is a fine example of how the author negotiates these different configurations. Marlatt's book-length poem articulates her burgeoning feminism by rewriting Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* in a lyric voice that works against the thrust of the heterosexual plot. Like many feminist authors, Marlatt seeks to reconfigure the power dynamic between girls and boys in fairytales.[81] However, Marlatt goes beyond balancing power relations in *Frames of a Story* and, at least briefly, derails the heterosexual plot. The dense and allusive qualities of Marlatt's lyricism are particularly important to this task because they all but conceal a lesbian encounter embedded within the heterosexual quest narrative.

The preface to *Frames* outlines Andersen's story in a two-page synopsis that, like the coda to Ondaatje's *the man with seven toes*, gives a narrative structure to an otherwise indiscernible plot:

> Once there was a girl & boy who lived, with their families, in attic apartments whose window boxes were full of roses. They were playmates, & often Gerda would go to Kay's place to hear stories his grandmother told. One winter she told them about the Snow Queen. Soon after, Kay's heart & eye were pierced by slivers from a mirror, so that he grew cold towards Gerda, & wanted only to be outdoors racing his sled in the square. He would hitch it to big sleighs that went by, & one day he never came back.
>
> Gerda was lonesome. Finally she decided to leave home & search for him. (*Frames* 1)

The rest of Marlatt's preface highlights the major events in Gerda's quest. The heroine leaves home in search of Kay, is mesmerized by an old storytelling woman, and then escapes.[82] She discovers a prince who "seems suspiciously like Kay" (2); gets kidnapped and almost murdered by robbers; escapes with the help of a young robber girl who mistakes Gerda for a princess; finds the Snow Queen's palace with the help of two women; discovers Kay "black with frost & absorbed in his puzzle" (2); and brings him back to consciousness through the warmth of her tears.

However, Marlatt fails to explain the origins of the cursed mirror, which is an omission that effectively razes the outer framework of *The Snow Queen*. Andersen's prologue explains that Old Nick, the "wicked imp," fashioned "a looking-glass which had this about it—that everything good and beautiful that was reflected in it shrank up into almost nothing, whereas everything useless and ugly stood out worse than ever" (2). When this mirror was held up to heaven it shattered into more than a billion pieces, the majority of which "got into people's eyes [and] stuck there" (3). The fantasy element of Andersen's story thus stems from a dystopian premise. Only Gerda's love and perseverance can restore the proper appearance of the Good. In Marlatt's version, on the other hand, the narrator is not so quick to reproduce the Christian

allegory of the Fall and the Resurrection. Instead, Marlatt splinters and fragments her narrative even further.

Bowering argues that there are "at least three strands running thru" *Frames*: "There's the Snow [Q]ueen story of Gerda & Kay; there's [Marlatt's] personal, or getting to be personal, love story; & [Marlatt's] growth or fall from fairytale sense of love to that adult sense of love that includes the possibility of death. Plus all the contradictions. It is an elaborate structure" ("Given" 40). The last two strands are really just two ends of the same thread, as the story shifts between sections of lineated poetry, which primarily sustain Gerda's story, and stanzas of poetic prose, which primarily relate Marlatt's own. To a certain extent, these two strands alternate, with Marlatt's prose meta-commentary interrupting the lyrics she fashions out of Andersen's prose. Thus *Frames* begins with a lyric passage about Gerda in her room and then Marlatt interrupts: "which names my state of containment (not content—) where doors are lockt . . . or more precisely, this room has none" (4). However, this alternating pattern is full of contradictions, as Bowering observes, and Marlatt weaves the strands together such that they are often indistinguishable. A merging of characters takes place through Marlatt's empathetic process of composition because Marlatt was trying to read herself in—and write herself into—Gerda's story: "I'd been reading Jung's analysis of fairytales. I was convinced about the reality of myth. I was trying to interpret what the reality of that fairytale [*The Snow Queen*] was for me in terms of my own daily life" ("Given" 37). The weaving technique that Marlatt develops in *Frames* becomes typical of her narrative writings and several critics have compared her to another mythic weaver, Penelope (Bowering, "Language" 102; Cole 6). This comparison works well if one considers weaving in its artistic context as a pictorial medium developed primarily by women. However, unlike Penelope, Marlatt's women characters work their way out of marital relations with men and embark on their own quests. Thus Marlatt breaks down the distinction between paragraphs and stanzas because "'[s]tanza' comes from a root meaning 'room'" ("Given"

44) and she refuses to confine herself to one in which the syntactic and symbolic doors are

locked.

Marlatt derails the plot of *The Snow Queen* by inserting her own story into the tale of

Gerda and Kay such that the fairytale appears in glimpses, serialized moments of import, as if

Marlatt were working from illustrations of Andersen's story and not from the text. In order to

connect her craft to the visual arts, Marlatt invokes all the visual media conventionally

associated with the lyric and lyric sequence: "camera obscura" (37), "photograph" (5),

photographic series (38-9), "tableau" (37). Furthermore, the titles that Marlatt gives to the seven

sections of her long poem create a serial commentary on the gradual development of her literary

canvas:

> [The speaker] is found, static, in (I) "white as of the white room," moving
> cautiously through (II) "shadows doors are" into colour and sunlight, where she
> experiments with poetry as painting in (III) "primarily colours," gradually
> employing (IV) "light effects," and realizing (V) "visual purple." In (VI) "eye
> lights," the eye is defined in a play upon the painter's word "highlight." But in the
> last section, "Out a rose window," Marlatt renunciates all claims to what she
> herself saw as progress, admitting that her art, which depended largely upon a
> voice at second remove, never managed to progress beyond a semi-real word
> encounter with experience. So the image of the window and "containment (not
> content—)" is reinstated as Marlatt confesses to a lingering predilection for rose-
> coloured vision. (Lecker 59)

However, Marlatt's conclusion is not as romantic as Lecker implies. Nor is Marlatt uncritical of

visual media, in particular photography, which Lecker contrasts to painting and valorizes for its

verisimilitude. For Marlatt, in *Frames*, a photograph is "a flat remembrance, echo," and the one

of her husband strikes her as "false" (5). Elsewhere, Marlatt argues that photographs are "unreal

because the real is the constant streaming of time, & they try to take a fix on it" ("Given" 46).[83]

Even when placed in a series, Marlatt is suspicious of the emotions invested in individual

photographs: "And when you find yourself thus salted, when the photographer strokes his

moustache satisfied at capturing you, do you feel luminescent? Or do you disappear at the outer

edges of the negative?" (*Frames* 39). Rather than elide the problems of photography and the

arrested image, Marlatt incorporates them into her critique of heterosexual gender relations. She deconstructs visual media even as she offers a less idealized vision of heterosexual relations than the fairytale romance.

The writing of *Frames* followed a period of writer's block for Marlatt that lasted from the summer until the winter of 1966. Her inability to write arose from her feelings of dislocation in Indiana, her lack of an occupation there, and the resulting strain on her marriage:

> I was there on no particular visa. I mean my category there was basically as [Alan's] wife—I couldn't study, I couldn't get a job—and again it was ideal for writing and I couldn't write. That Christmas we came up to Canada, to Montreal, and I felt so good about coming back: I'd never realized until that point that I did identify very strongly as a Canadian. And so when I went back to Indiana, I said, "O.K., I'm going to forget everything I learned in '63 and '62 [at UBC] and I'm going to go back to my own sources" and the earliest sources I had were fairytales. Of course reading [Robert] Duncan allowed me to go back, I mean right back to childhood, because he is constantly stressing the importance of that. So I went to Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale of the Snow Queen and just started from there. This gave me a structure, a story line I didn't have to worry about because it was already "told," so I could then move into the writing out of what was simply coming up each day in the act of writing. (Marlatt, "Connexion" 29)

Marlatt considers the introduction of her first person voice into *Frames* as a revolution for her that ended her writer's block and affirmed her vocation as a writer. This intrusive voice is an assertion of authorial presence, an act out in the open that enabled her to give expression to her domestic discontent. She uses this active voice to articulate her resentment at having to play the role of the passive female: "*here's* the lie. Here where I sit waiting, forced, the female, to abide" (7). To counteract this passivity, Marlatt changes Andersen's storyline instead of simply repeating it. Her autobiographical intrusions into the narrative are surprising because "the poets from whom she learned so much at the beginning of her career wrote against the 'confessional' mode" (Barbour, *Daphne* 19). Whereas Olson vowed to get "rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego" ("Projective" 156), Marlatt interferes with the momentum of the narrative by using the lyric voice to disrupt Andersen's storyline. Her interventions thus set a precedent for

Ana Historic, where the metafictional author, Annie, decides to write her own story instead of researching history for her husband, Richard Anderson.

In *Frames*, Marlatt scrutinizes the sexual underpinnings of narrative in the grandmother section. The husband's grandmother sees Marlatt "as part of her story" (27) and she teaches the young woman "history"—that is, family history and how the men in the family "have all been alike" (25). The narrative line is thus a family lineage in which the men are the agents and the women are the media. For Marlatt, narrative is a performance of gender, and as she listens to the grandmother's stories she reflects on how women become complicit in their own oppression: "Who doesn't know [men] knit a thicket of thorns about you? Don't move, for fear of skin pricks. Thus interred, mummified, like bodies found in bogs, certain women grow old in the tea service trot daily from kitchen and to bedroom where she waits for the accustomed cup" (28). Uncomfortable with this role, Marlatt (like Naomi) receives the old woman's story as "a ball of/ dead string" and remarks that she is "stuck with it/ here at the end or/ entrance, where/ ever entranced [Kay and Gerda] sit" (10). This thread leads Marlatt into a labyrinth of gender and generational differences. To convey her sense of confinement in this labyrinth, Marlatt stresses the architectural images of rooms, doors, and stages that frame the plot that she yearns to escape:

> Out? I can't imagine it, left here holding the thread of our story, knotted in remembrance, not . . . seeing. Is flat as this room with its kitchen chair, table, a cardboard place whose exits never go far. Doors? lead off to a blind alley of dreams. & the white lights onstage (do you know what it's like being always onstage?) invent shadows for depth, in a false frame of reality. (*Frames* 15)

Unwilling to further the grandmother's lineage, the speaker "beats a hasty exit, allowed at last, having broken through walls of her trance" (29). However, as Marlatt's pun indicates, every exit is an entrance, and having unframed the inherited narrative line, Marlatt embarks on a quest for her own story.

Several critics have noted Marlatt's preoccupation with quest narratives (Beddoes 87; Nichols 113; Knutson, *Narrative* 53-65), which typically pair a romantic quest with an artistic

one. For example, a decade before Marlatt published the story of Annie Torrent in *Ana Historic*, Lecker identified the formal dimension of her quest narrative in *Frames*: "Marlatt is involved in a quest for words which will give access to the truth of sight, reflecting not only the moment, but also the dynamic nature of experience and cognition. She arrives at a torrent, but not overnight" (56). The "truth of sight," for Marlatt, has to do with process and not a particular perception. Like Bowering, she sees the universe in Heraclitean flux, and, consequently, she aims to register images "in a serial light, a series of other takes," as she later states in a love poem for Kiyooka (*Tremor* 28). However, both the power and weakness of Marlatt's early poetry resides in "the tension between a tentative, frightened spontaneity, and an ambitious, robust control. So that in her first book, *Frames*, we find her resistant about the plunge into this riverine experience, content at first to watch this movement called Life from the sidelines, as if it were a show" (Lecker 56). Like Bowering in his early work, where he "peer[s] thru a crenel at the passing show" (*Catch* 9), Marlatt's tone is initially disengaged as she contemplates her domestic situation. However, her increasingly critical appraisal of her sexual identity enables her to "rewrite the traditional quest structure while foregrounding the gender of the fundamental plot positions" (Knutson, "Metanarrative" 29). Her version of *The Snow Queen* thus tailors the original narrative structure to fit her changing sense of the erotic.

The role that the plotlines of children's literature have in shaping heterosexual relations is an ongoing preoccupation for Marlatt. In a 1988 journal entry, for example, Marlatt is still mulling over questions she first raised in *Frames* about plot, heroism, and gender roles in fairytales:

> so why do i still balk at the notion of action? the hero?
>
> early forms of story: adventures for children—i read them avidly, but except for the *Swallows & Amazons* series they were all boys adventuring—Jim Hawkins, Tom Sawyer. Alice, yes, but look what happened to her—those distortions of body-size, distressing transformations—she <u>suffered</u> her way back home, & all because she was curious. (*Labyrinth* 60)

While this is a fair appraisal of children's stories in general, it does not apply to *The Snow Queen*, which perhaps explains Marlatt's attraction to the story. Although Kay adventures into the square, he gets abducted by the Snow Queen and thenceforth plays a passive role in the story. He is the prize in a contest between two women and the principles they represent: the domestic warmth of Gerda and the icy seductiveness of the Queen. Males are largely absent from the original story (except for Kay, his double, and the animals), and the main human characters (Gerda, the Snow Queen, the robber wife, the robber girl, the Lapp woman, the Finn woman) are women.

Although Gerda's quest operates within the confines of patriarchal codes of femininity (the virgin and the whore), it is a quest narrative none the less. As such, it is useful to read her quest in relation to Teresa de Lauretis's essay "Desire in Narrative" (1984) because the essay formulates many of the issues that Marlatt engaged with intuitively in *Frames*, and Marlatt uses it as the basis of her 1998 essay "Old Scripts and New Narrative Strategies" (*Labyrinth* 62-7). De Lauretis argues that a major function of narrative is to produce differences between identity groups, in particular between men and women. She asserts that the role of the male in the quest narrative is to be the hero, to act, to create momentum in the story, to anchor its point of view. In contrast, the female represents "what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119). The edges of this plot-space are, furthermore, marked by monstrosities, such as Medusa and the Sphinx, who are closely linked to women and/or sexual deviance. Looking forward to the discussion of the hero and monster in Carson's *Autobiography of Red,* one should remember that the "stark Platonic opposition of man/non-man" conceals a "painstakingly rich articulation of sexual difference" (109) in the ancient texts. However, at least for the quest narratives that have been passed down from antiquity and attained canonical status in the present, these "monsters stand for [. . .] the

symbolic boundary between nature and culture, the limit and the test imposed on man" (109).

Thus, in considering the fairytale narrative in *Frames*, as well as those fairytales invoked in

Zócalo and *Ana Historic*, one must ask: What happens when a heroine crosses the plot-space of

female characters who aid and/or delay the attainment of her prize? How do Gerda's quest and

Marlatt's adaptation of it map sexual difference?

The chapter entitled "The Robber Girl" in *The Snow Queen*—"visual purple" (40) in

Frames—provides an example of a type of Heroine-Woman encounter that becomes

increasingly important in Marlatt's later prose narratives. In *The Snow Queen*, Gerda fears for

her life when she is kidnapped by robbers. A young robber girl rescues Gerda because she

believes Gerda is a princess, but this rescue from physical harm brings with it a sexual threat.

(Marlatt spells the appellation "robbergirl." Say it fast: robbergirl, rob-a-girl, rub-a-girl). The

girls bed down together and the robber girl falls asleep with her arm on top of Gerda. The

narrative tension thrives on homophobic fear, as Gerda dares not move lest the robber girl stab

her with a knife for being restless. When the frightened heroine finally departs, the robber girl

keeps Gerda's muff (the symbolic counterpart of the robber girl's knife) as a token of

remembrance. In *Frames*, Marlatt makes the sexual undertones of the fairytale explicit and

Gerda's encounter with the robbergirl plays a crucial role in the narrative. In Marlatt's version,

the robbers threaten Gerda with rape, not murder. They demand "some hair some thigh/ some

eyes some breast" (43) and Gerda is rescued only because Marlatt shifts to her personal

narrative. Here, Marlatt's tentative sexual encounter with a woman transforms the tension of the

moment into a power that she can either accept or refuse: "You wanted power. All this time

calling for it. Well I'm here, she said, what more? Called up the black depths of an embittered

eye. In the light how you bleach to white (rods, cups, cones), but night comes black with

purple—of flesh, of a feast long interred" (46). The unusual chapter title "visual purple" thus

indicates an intimate glimpse of flesh, in this case female. This erotic encounter offers Marlatt

the possibility of committing an act out in the open in place of the thought: "You see what doors are for now? Come, offer yourself. (Steady furtive odour reducing me to earth.) But no, but what for? Out of love" (47). Marlatt is frightened to open this door, just as Annie is frightened to open the door of the wardrobe in *Ana Historic*. In both cases, the heroine encounters "fears that are crystallizations of space, because they erect walls which are not only enclosures for the sake of comfort, home, say, but barricades against what lies beyond them" (Marlatt, "Connexion" 32). And in both cases, the narrative tension thrives on a mixture of desire and homophobia.

More than anywhere else in *Frames*, the contemporary and fairytale narratives overlap in "visual purple," as do dreams and consciousness. The sexual scenes are veiled in innuendo, obscured by pronominal uncertainty, and rendered in a kind of dream state in which Marlatt, or possibly Gerda, asks herself:

> lie to my
> eye's dead eye
>   this
> is my love? (48)

Marlatt does not inform the reader whether this eye/I is dreaming of Kay or dreamily eyeing the woman beside her. In any case, the dreamer immediately "comes back down through light to ground" (48) and resumes the socially approved heterosexual quest. Marlatt/Gerda feels compelled to continue Andersen's line because she is unsure how to channel the power of the torrent welling inside her:

> Taps run, water. To tap again, at the still centre of the story, power that is conjuring—but who of who? Who tells letters to fall by the wayside? Or wayhouses to merely swing their doors?
>
> I can see, in the woods, a pair of doors through which I lept as the trap of the story. Shut of her, I thought, to a new place. (50)

Discussing the many meanings of this "trap" with Bowering,[84] Marlatt names one that is particularly suggestive: "My fear is that I'm being seduced. I'm being seduced by something that

is not giving me the information but is seeming to" ("Given" 50). Marlatt does not give any more information about what this "something" is, but for the moment it is more important to note that she thinks of the narrative in terms of forces of attraction. Although the story is full of erotic detours, the pull of linear narrative initially overcomes the other forces of attraction: "And all these fragments spun from every direction freely oppose her who moves, can move, only in one—forward, to lodestone" (*Frames* 52). However, the power of this masculine lodestone diminishes steadily as Marlatt's story strays from the course of Andersen's plot.

While, in *The Snow Queen*, Gerda and Kay reunite and are miraculously transformed into an adult couple that live happily ever after, in Marlatt's version the couple's reunion lacks the fairytale ending. Marlatt's final section, "Out a rose window," gently satirizes the heterosexual quest theme: "Once there was a girl & boy etc. Once roses exfoliate surrounded them. Thus unpeeled, they stand nude in the luminous centre of themselves. Back to back to the room. Where windowboxes with roses border their image of the world" (62). The couple's situation is tense, as they "transfix each other, in each, see the room & themselves contained" (62). Their rapt gaze is a painterly conceit, because the attention that the couple pays to each other mimics the attention that the viewer pays to the literary portrait. This triangular state of affairs is disrupted by the return of "the robbergirl who 'confirms' them [i.e. Kay and Gerda]" (*Frames* 2) before setting out on her solo journey into the wide world:

> Only one interesting event occurs on their return: they meet the robbergirl, who has freed herself at last. Was out to see, so she said, the wide world. Signpost, had sped Gerda on her way. And this (with only a shadow of you see!) is Kay. Ah! She is happy for them, she smiles over their joined hands & utters the word: "Snip-snap-snurre-basselure." Sound of connexion breaking (its bas allure). Progressively Kay & Gerda drift further into summer. (62)

Other translators render the robber girl's words as "snip, snap, snout, your tale is out" (Andersen 94), but Marlatt changes the rhyme in order to underscore the forces of attraction that are drawing the couple apart. In Marlatt's copy of *The Snow Queen*, a child has "print[ed] firmly in

red, they lived happily ever afterwards comma to the end of their summer" (62; see also "Given" 40-41), but the adult speaker cannot reach the same idealized conclusion: "Here we must step back from the frame, the delicate tracing of willow. Not to see through glass shades distort" (63). The reason for unframing Andersen's mirror conceit becomes apparent in this scene. Whereas pieces of Old Nick's demonic glass are "used as windowpanes" (3) and "fitted into spectacles" (4) in *The Snow Queen*, in *Frames* the rose-coloured glass distorts the actual status of the couple by making a bad situation look good. Dedicated to Alan Marlatt, *Frames* in fact documents the beginning of the end of the Marlatts' marriage.

Having pursued the narrative line to its terminus "close to the railroad track," Marlatt finds that her story does not fit Andersen's narrative template: "Doors hang askew in their frames & will not close" (63). Marlatt responds to this crisis of order by abandoning his-story: "Time to give up, history as his or theirs & even knowing—where they came from, why they did, who do you love . . . Long hoot of a train that echoes into the walls pursuit. Is crackt already" (63). In a slightly ambiguous conclusion, the couple step out of this cracked matrimonial room: "And some minutes after: You're sitting on the back steps in the dark with cigarette, absorbed, watching the shapes of boxcars travel night. Or I think you do & don't ask, Stars or boxcars? Step out of the doorway too, step out & sit, down" (63). On the one hand, these lines might indicate that the couple are taking the necessary steps to break out of their routine and have reunited as they sit together. On the other hand, their dejection colours this scene in anything but an optimistic hue. With the benefit of hindsight, one could argue that "Out a rose window" hints at Marlatt's coming out as a lesbian—Stein's motto "a rose is a rose," which recurs at the conclusion of *Ana Historic* (152). This allusion would explain the strange capitalization of "Out" in the otherwise uncapitalized chapter titles. However, with the exception of the scenes centring on the robbergirl, a lesbian reading of this poem remains largely conjectural.

While the fate of the couple in *Frames* is uncertain, Marlatt's own marriage foundered soon after publication of the long poem, as she explains in the preface to *What Matters: Writing 1968-70*:

> In 1968, my husband Al & i were living in the Napa Valley in California, each of us having finished several years of graduate work at Indiana University & supposedly heading for home, Vancouver, BC. [. . .] In the fall of that year a job came through for him from the Psychiatry & Psychology Departments at UBC. We returned home as we always knew or imagined we would. Our child was born there but the job didn't fit & by the fall of 1969 we were back in the States, in Wisconsin, where he was teaching in the Psychology Department at UW. I was writing about Vancouver, watching our son grow, & wondering what i was doing on a tobacco farm in the American Midwest. By the end of 1970 i had come home to Vancouver with Kit for good (as it has since been). (*What* n.p.)

This period of Marlatt's life is documented in *Rings* (1971), a sequence of poems which is also full of images of matrimonial containment. However, in voicing her marital discontent, Marlatt transfers the ring symbolism, which shapes the narrative structure, from the wedding band to the birth canal—a theme Marlatt returns to in *Ana Historic*, where the "mouth speaking flesh" (126) in a birthing scene is characterized as an "angry powerful o" (125).

Marlatt also wrote shortline poems in the late 1960s—for example, *leaf leaf/s* (1969)— but the complex syntax of *Rings* and *Our Lives* (1975) appealed to her more.[85] Marlatt recalls that she consciously built her poetic line into a prose form:

> [I]t was the [longline poems], which i thought of as 'prose poems,' that engaged me most, most gave me room to play around. I wanted to build syntactic structures that i could sustain far longer than i could in verse, & i wanted to build looser & more complicated rhythms. It wasn't just a case of extending my lines. I had to really believe i was writing prose, tho with a poet's ear on the pulse of language. ("Measure" 90)

Marlatt's poetry thus directly shapes her prose style. In contrast, Marlatt wrote a short novel, *The Sea Haven*, for a creative writing course with Earle Birney at UBC in 1962, but she "never did anything with the novel" because she felt it "wasnt very good" ("Given" 36). On Birney's recommendation, *The Sea Haven* was published in the journal *Evidence*, but it was never submitted to a publishing house. The early novel anticipates her later work in the respect that "it

was a serial story with two central characters, a girl & a boy. They went thru all these adventures, & every night it would be the next installment of the story" (Marlatt, "Given" 36). However, *The Sea Haven* followed realist conventions in its use of language and description, and Marlatt was not satisfied. Her longline experiments in the 1970s, on the other hand, generated an enthusiasm for prose that laid the groundwork for her later novels.

Marlatt has never accepted a strict division between verse and prose," but the boundary becomes particularly obscure as she moves into the territory of the novel. In 1975 Marlatt published *How Hug a Stone*, which her publisher advertised as a novel, but which she maintains is "a cycle of prose poems" (*Labyrinth* 55). The quest theme driving the narrative is Marlatt's wish to reconnect with her dead mother, who is identified with the circles of standing stones in her mother's beloved England—hence the question in the title, "how hug a stone (mother)" (184). However, as Marlatt has remarked, a serial poem "has certain obsessions" that "reappear in motion within the poems as you're reading them" ("Given" 80), and one of the obsessions in *How Hug a Stone* is the function of narrative itself. For example, in the early poem "departure," Marlatt asks a question that recurs throughout the collection in various forms: "without narrative how can we see where we're going? or that—for long moments now, we happen" (*How* 131). Later, in the poem entitled "narrative continuity," Marlatt shifts her focus from the future to the past: "without narrative how can we see where we've been? or, unable to leave it altogether, what we come from?" (135). Towards the conclusion of the sequence, as Marlatt approaches the "limit of the old story, its ruined circle " (182), she offers one answer to the questions she has raised: "*narrative is a strategy for survival*. so it goes—transformative sinuous sentence emerging even circular, cyclic" (184). Her inquiry into generational cycles thus furthers her established interest in recursive prose, as well as laying the groundwork for her treatment of mother-daughter relationships in the influential essay "Musing with mothertongue" (1982-83), where she asks: "how can the standard sentence structure of English with its linear authority,

subject through verb to object, convey the wisdom of endlessly repeating and not exactly repeated cycles [a woman's] body knows?" (28). Applying this logic to the constraints of conventional "English lady plots" in *How Hug a Stone*, Marlatt responds by obeying another imperative: "so as not to be lost, invent: one clear act in all that jazz" (131). The alternative format she "invents" is a cycle of prose pieces whose serial format hybridizes the travel journal and photographic sequence.

How Hug a Stone is a photograph album of a lost family, snapshots of the "hereditary home" (139) that existed more in the language and imagination of Marlatt's mother than in the fact of Marlatt's childhood homes in Australia, Malaysia, and Canada. The narrative Marlatt uses to tell the story of her visit to England thus reflects her established interest in photography and the photographic sequence. In addition to her celebrated collaboration with the photographer Robert Minden in *Steveston*, many of her books feature photographic inserts and covers by artists such as Cheryl Sourkes, to whom *Ana Historic* is dedicated. Indeed, Marlatt's poetry "books are progressively characterized by an application of photographic principles" (Lecker 65), but her most extensive meditation on photography is found in her novella, *Zócalo*.

Zócalo relates the experiences of a Canadian couple vacationing in Mexico. The work is dedicated to the photographer and poet Roy Kiyooka, with whom Marlatt lived from 1975 to 1981. Although Marlatt and Kiyooka "forsook the rites of marriage" (Kiyooka, "Pear" 199), they sustained a caring relationship that lasted even after Marlatt came out as a lesbian in the early 1980s. Kiyooka's *Pear Tree Pomes* (dedicated to "Daphne & Kit") documents the artist's acceptance of Marlatt's decision, as well as his profound sense of loss. Marlatt, in turn, published "A Lost Book" of love poems in *This Tremor Love Is* (2001) that are dedicated to Kiyooka and date from 1974 to 1999.[86] Although critics frequently read *Zócalo* as autobiography because of its dedication and identifiable characters, Marlatt explains that, in contrast to *Frames*, she found it liberating to write the novella in the third person:

> What intrigued me about writing [*Zócalo*] was how much more easily i could
> remember in the third person. As if this Yucatan journey had not only occurred in
> another place but to another person. [. . .] As if this she, through whose eyes and
> nerves and skin everything filtered, could open onto the streets of Merida or the
> pathways of Uxmal like a camera lens, a performing eye/she whose active
> perception brought alive the feel and texture of these places populated by
> strangers walking and talking there on the brightly lit stage of the text. (*Labyrinth*
> 202)

The woman in *Zócalo* goes unnamed, which complicates the first name of her photographer

companion: "She was there in those streets with Yo, who is himself a combination of first and

third persons (*yo* meaning "i" in Spanish as well as a shortened form of Yoshio, a Japanese given

name)" (Marlatt, *Labyrinth*, 202). The absent autobiographical "I" is thus othered in the

perceptions of the woman and the identity of the male companion. This pronominal confusion

blurs the boundary between the narrative eye/she and the camera eye/he, fostering a kind of

gender confusion that recurs throughout the text. The merging of first and third persons also sets

a precedent for the merging characters of Annie/Ana/Ina in *Ana Historic*.

    Zócalo begins with an epigram from *Visions of the Night* (a work of dream interpretation)

that establishes the mood and setting of the novella: "Among the Aztecs, dream interpretation

and divination by dreams were the prerogative of the priestly class 'teopexqui,' the Masters of the

Secret Things; and among the Maya of 'cocome,' the Listeners" (*Zócalo* 1). Marlatt's divination

theme endorses the Freudian tenet that "every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which

has a meaning" (Freud 57), as well as supporting Warren Tallman's view that reading is a

process of "divining" (Marlatt, "Given" 41). The epigram encourages readers to seek out the

latent Secret Things concealed by the manifest content of the dreams and prophecies in the

woman's story. Although Marlatt stresses the potentially damaging effects of psychiatric therapy

on women in *Ana Historic*, *Zócalo* is heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theories of dream

interpretation. Marlatt regularly attended a Jungian dream analysis group in the early 1970s

because she was having "recurrent dreams about the sea" ("Given" 47). She kept a dream diary

during this period, which undoubtedly influenced the writing of *Zócalo*, where the sea plays a symbolic role in a Mayan prophecy.

The narrative in *Zócalo* begins with a traffic jam at the USA-Mexico border. The woman and Yo are lined up at the border in separate vehicles. Impatient, the woman follows an official-looking truck that pulls out of the line ahead of her, thinking it will lead her to a newly opened inspection gate or perhaps another border crossing. She follows the truck into the countryside, absorbed by her love of speed, and enacting Marlatt's whimsical desire, also expressed elsewhere, to be "a racing car driver": "For me it's a solitary pleasure, loving the way the road unfolds, and writing prose approximates it as i lean into the sentence, feeling it slant in unexpected ways, take me in its momentum towards the next tilt, pushing thought-in-syntax to the limit of its stretch" ("Writer" 28"; see also "Given" 77). The opening chapter thus allegorizes Marlatt's impatience with conventional prose, even as she yearns (like Ondaatje in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*) to cross the border into that genre. It also introduces the prophetic theme that gives the novella an overarching structure. When the female driver gets lost and stops to ask a Native family for directions, an elderly woman replies cryptically: "I will tell you now is the time, now, when man's powers are coming to the full. [. . .] The power of the sea and the power of the dwarfs are acting together—that's what my mother would say" (6). Here, as elsewhere in the first chapter, the text is vague to the point of inscrutability. In fact, one could almost read the young woman's strange flight from the traffic jam as a daydream because the Mayan family behaves in a symbolic manner and the woman circles back to the lineup where she started.

However, an important event occurs on the woman's return that grounds the narrative and suggests that the subtext of Chapter 1 is a "Journey" that is intimately tied to her sexuality. Confused by the Mayan's prophetic statement, the young woman turns her car around and, realizing that she has lost Yo, drives back towards the border crossing. Along the way, she sees

Yo's truck pulled over at an abandoned garage. The prophecy acquires another cryptic symbol when the woman approaches the truck and finds Yo in the passenger seat:

> He says quietly, I can't drive, and indicates the seat beside him. On it, a parcel trussed up in rope sits in front of the driver's wheel, bulkily in front, leaving no room for him.
> I followed you when you first left the line, he says, I trusted your sense of direction. I thought you were following the sea. (6)

Yo's comments cause her to "remembe[r] what was said" (6) by the old woman and for some reason she is haunted by the mysterious package:

> The parcel sits there, malevolent and unmoving. It almost emanates its own presence, not a sign but, more inexplicably, a knowledge of itself in front of them. She doesn't ask him how it got there.
> We must go back. Now. (6-7)

Where did the package come from? Why can Yo no longer drive? And why is this incapacity so significant that the phrase echoes in the woman's mind? (34, 61). The answers to these questions are not immediately forthcoming. *Zócalo* "is a sensuous journal-novel which, like *Frames*, charts perception after perception, looking to find a way" (Wah, "Introduction" 14) and what answers Marlatt supplies are communicated through the way she structures the narrative rather than what the woman directly says.

The woman's journey gets underway again in "Progreso," the Mexican town which gives its name to the title of Chapter 2. In Progreso the couple pass through their first *zócalo*, or central square.[87] The *zócalo,* in Mexico, is at once the hub of social activity and the place where "the stone cathedral looms" (8) alongside the major government buildings. In the original Spanish, *zócalo* means "pedestal stand," thereby confirming the phallic authority of the place. As a tourist, the woman admires the square and the buildings, but it is the moral exigencies of church and state that the narrator struggles with in her own life. A part of her yearns to maintain her straight relationship with her male lover, but her physical desires lead her elsewhere. Thus, in the slang of the period, she must decide whether or not to be "square."

Like the given in a serial poem, the *zócalo* is the dictated image around which Marlatt's narrative orbits. Over the course of their vacation, the couple sit in many different public squares because Yo isn't "as romantic as [the woman], nor as young" and the "square is just about [his] speed (i can't drive, he said[)]" (34). Although Yo likes the atmosphere of the square, however, it "isn't her way, she is running back to this island in the dark of the sea, to the sea running yes to a limitless horizon" (34). Marlatt's prose in *Zócalo* attempts to reconcile these opposing aesthetic principles, as her longlines did in *Steveston*, where the confinement of the town and cannery contrasts with the flow of the Fraser River and the ocean. Reflecting on this tension in her prose from the 1970s, Marlatt writes in "The Measure of the Sentence" (1982):

> I had definitely abandoned the textbook notion of sentence as the container for a completed thought, just as writing open form poetry had taught me the line was no box for a certain measure of words, but a moving step in the process of thought [. . .]. Our word "sentence" comes from L. *sentire*, to feel, think—the muscularity, the play of thought that feels its way, flexive and reflexive, inside the body of language. In short, a proprioceptive (receiving itself) prose. ("Measure" 91)

Part of the spectacle of the narrative is thus to watch Marlatt open the "box" of grammatical usage even as her heroine struggles against the moral limitations represented by the *zócalo*.

Like the photograph/empty frame in *Billy* and the canvas/white room in *Frames*, the public square in *Zócalo* is a tropological space in which the woman develops her photographic narrative over a number of exposures. Each visit to a *zócalo* provides the couple with a means of measuring change in their deteriorating romance. For example, as the couple discusses their visit to the *zócalo* in Mérida, the woman senses that their relationship is falling apart. The conversation amplifies the feeling of separation that the woman had experienced on a beach earlier, when she went swimming and communed with the sea while Yo remained in the shade to photograph:

> & she won't let them harden onto separate benches (we have to get out of here, she said) & in despair reaches toward him, her hand encountering his shoulder's bony firmness in the dark, persisting: are we really as different as that? you love

> water, he laughs shortly, i like earth, isn't that what our signs say? it's true, she had told him that, but she didn't want to play with their signs, she didn't want to play. (34)

Marlatt, in contrast, plays with their signs throughout the novella as she mixes their respective media and gender markers.

For example, the woman attempts to bridge the emotional divide between herself and Yo by studying his preferred medium: photography. Like Kay, who enjoys playing in the square, Yo enjoys photographing people in the *zócalo*. Like Gerda, who followed her male companion on his adventure, the woman accompanies Yo on his artistic quest. Also like Gerda, she encounters impediments to her liberty that stem from her status as a woman. Staring through Yo's camera, the woman experiences the (to her) male gaze of the camera as liberating, until this gaze is returned and she is reminded of her own sexual identity:

> she fingers the camera with its telephoto lens she wants to move into the street, through an eye that is an extension & even impertinent accessory to the act of her seeing, she wants, not to see but to be—him? impossible. The young man on the seawall knows she is aiming at him though she pretends to follow the wavering movement of the orange vendor, & she focuses, carefully, his dark glance which is both *for* her & *at* her. (10)

The woman's use of the telescopic lens stresses the artistic potential of photography in a scene that "opens and closes like a camera shutter in a text where one micro-event flows into the next, pushed by paragraph length, run-on sentences that move incrementally through a global experience of sight, sound, and intellect" (Nichols 113-14). However, the young man's "dark glance" also makes her acutely aware of the politics of the gaze: "the female tourist finds herself shut out from a culture that is not hers and is forced to see herself as a foreigner in the eyes of locals" (113). Yo also admonishes the woman for her use of the lens, on the grounds that "people who don't know cameras think you're taking their soul" (10-11):

> [Yo] says, you're snooping, that's what you like about that lens isn't it, that's what it allows you to do. & she says yes, laughing, almost joyously, yes, she wants to see, into them, into their hearts as if that might let her know them but he persists, half-joking, it's like looking into people's windows at night, you're spying. (10)

However, Yo shows no restraint in taking his own pictures of Mexicans, and he also has a tendency to see the world as "a moving movie lens" (27). The woman confronts a double standard both verbally and visually in this scene because of her gender. As Nichols observes, the "familiar script" of the wealthy tourist photographing a poor merchant "is complicated by a gender binary that cuts across race and class. The orange vendor [the young man, actually] about to be photographed poses '*for* her' but also looks '*at* her'" (113). Despite these discouragements, the woman covets the male gaze and defiantly "continues to peer through the camera, focusing, shifting as the people's movements shift, but now they are only elements of a visual image, they have closed down into visual integers, hermetic & hidden as perhaps, they have always been" (*Zócalo* 11). The woman even risks becoming hermetically sealed in this mode of perception herself when she arrives in Puerto Jaurez and declares: "this, this is a picture, here is the bluegreen they'd seen on paper" (22). Her photographic mindset impedes her ability to connect with her environment and she briefly acquires what she later describes as the masculine "distancing eye" (44).

Although Marlatt genders photography as male in *Zócalo*, she defines the "aperture" as feminine in "Impossible Portraiture" (*Tremor* 97) and, in fact, uses the language of photography to distinguish herself from an earlier generation of Canadian writers preoccupied with "myth and symbol":

> i'm more interested in focussing the immediate, shifting the experience of distance and dislocation through the use of montage, juxtaposition, superimposing disparate and specific images from several times and places. I want to see the world as multidimensional as possible and ourselves present within it. (*Labyrinth* 24)

While the photographic metaphors guiding Marlatt's pen do distinguish her style, it would be a false distinction to say that myth and symbol do not interest Marlatt. Throughout *Zócalo*, the woman reads aloud to Yo from her guidebook and the myths she relates frame her perceptions in

the same manner that the telescopic lens frames Yo's perceptions.[88] For example, in a crucial

scene at Uxmal, the speaker relates to Yo the myth behind the construction of the Pyramid of the

Magician:

> [The myth] begins with a dwarf whose mother was a witch & hatched him out of
> an egg (so far back in time it can't even be told with any probity). She sent him
> off to challenge the king & the king said build a palace overnight or I'll kill you.
> His mother helped of course with magic [. . .]. So the dwarf got to be king of
> Uxmal & she went off to live with a serpent in a waterhole. (40-1)

This quest narrative puzzles the woman because she cannot understand why the Mayans would

"name the pyramid after a woman" when they "didn't even have a goddess creator & destroyer"

(41). However, when the couple enter "the bodily cavity of [the] huge stone being" (41) and the

woman sees "the oval stone body of this giant" (42), she becomes convinced that "its contours

[are] surely female" (42). The way that the narrator genders the setting is important because her

interpretation of the pyramid's myth shapes the context that she will use to interpret a crucial

dream of her own towards the end of the novella. According to Freud, "[r]ooms in dreams are

usually women" (471), as are window-sills and balconies (492), and "[b]oxes, cases, chests,

cupboards [. . .] ovens [. . .] hollow objects, ships, and vessels of all kinds" (471).[89] The woman

is not dreaming in this scene, but the two women she meets in the Pyramid of the Magician will,

I argue, reappear in her final dream.

On a staircase near the top of the pyramid, the woman meets two female tourists "who

smile at her, the smile of outsiders who recognize their shared alieness" (43). The two women

prove to be from Calgary, but there is the suggestion that they share something more than

nationality. The Vancouverite and the "Prairie girls" (43) engage in a discussion about caves and

the woman "feels a drop, a slight tremor" (43) that is both fear and attraction. The Prairie girls

are travelling Mexico without guidebooks or chaperones and they ask the woman to explain

some Mayan masks. The woman informs them that the masks are the faces of Chac, the male

rain god, although she notes to herself that "[s]omehow the witch persists, chaotic mother,

though all the images are male" (43). The woman suddenly notices that Yo is well ahead of her on the staircase, however, and she "hurries to catch up" (43) and announce: "I met two Calgary girls, she laughs, jubilant now, they said there were caves. You climbed to the top of a pyramid to find out about caves? She grins, abashed, where else?" (43). The encounter on the stairwell is brief but significant from a psychoanalytic standpoint. According to Freud, dreams of climbing or descending stairwells represent fantasies of sexual encounters because of "the rhythmical character of both activities" (490). Marlatt expands on the stairwell symbolism later in *Zócalo*, but for the moment the encounter with the Prairie girls functions as a double of the robbergirl encounter in *Frames*. Both scenes supply a moment of erotic intrigue that is broken off when the woman feels compelled to resume her heterosexual journey.

The Prairie girls return later to confirm the narrator's choice of mate, but for the moment the woman sublimates her lesbian desires. The Vancouver couple enter a windowless vault near the top of the pyramid and Yo proposes that the vault is a "burial chamber," but the woman disagrees:

> The door's too big. She's seeing him framed there, one hand cradling his camera (what he will *make* of it), the other in a back pocket twists his body, single & resistant in the doorway there, the better to see. Man, she thinks, men with their distancing eye. She feels a pang of envy for that clarity, & leaning forward, you're standing in the light you know, bites his ear. (44)

This scene enacts a number of gender reversals. Yo is clearly identified as a man, with his "distancing eye" and suggestively positioned camera. However, implicitly, the narrator recovers the etymology of "camera" in the word "chamber" and frames Yo as an object of desire. The word-photographer's portrait of Yo resembles Billy's "photograph" of Angela D in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (21), as well as Bowering's portrait of a lover in his poem "Frame," from *In the Flesh*:

> Her frame in the doorway
> replaces the door; he can never leave
> thru her, he may only enter by her leave. ("Frame" 42)

Having framed Yo as a love-object, the woman toys with the focus of her desire. The woman projects her desire for the Calgary girls onto Yo, which causes Yo to make jokes about her wanting to become a nun:

> As his hands disengage themselves to enclose her, she sees over his shoulder the grassy courtyard their cave looks out on & the small figures of all the others. So you've found a use for it (his teasing tries to meet her), & in The Nunnery too. She wants to say they didn't have nuns, but doesn't. His body feels warm & resilient against her skin already chill from the mould. Do you think these rooms were here for their doorways? she murmurs into his neck. Are we in one? he asks, withdrawing, & she thinks he feels framed. I'm trying to seduce you. You're playing with the idea of being a nun. But there weren't nuns here! Nevertheless—he grins, you're irrevocably christian. (44-5)

Yo's sarcasm ends the romantic moment and the couple walk "down the steps into the heart of the quadrangle" (45) where they briefly separate: "Having drained his visual curiosity, [Yo] lays the camera aside & lies down in the grass. Aren't you going to walk through that arch? vaulted like the rooms below, but leading onto bush, a genuine passageway. No, I've had enough. I'm just going to see where it goes. He nods" (45). Despite her denial, the woman explores the passageway and stumbles upon "an ancient square" (46) and a "path [that] leads into a hollow" (46). In place of the phallic pedestal stand at the centre of the modern *zócalo*, the woman discovers a vaginal hollow in the ancient square—another example of Marlatt's equation of the prehistoric with the feminine and the "genuine" (45).

In a deeply sexualized passage, the speaker explores the Freudian landscape and momentarily overcomes her fears:

> [S]he feels very visible walking down the path, she shuffles her feet, she makes a noise for the snakes to hear, so they can get out of her way— although she knows it isn't her way but theirs. The ruin, in all its monumental silence, says nothing to her, only stands, stands at the edge of an earth she descends, she chooses, between two paths, she keeps her eye on the mound as best she can, through the increasing foliage. And then as the path turns at the bottom of the hollow, across & to one side she sees a hole. Powdery white limestone opens on the dark, mouth—enough room for one person to slip into, lowering herself down.
> She thinks of the Calgary girls. (46)

The speaker seems to make a choice here in favour of caves over serpents—that is, for female genitalia over male, the Calgary girls over Yo—but she is immediately stricken with guilt: "The end of the story, she thinks, I didn't tell him how the witch exchanges water for children she feeds to the serpent. That is a sacrifice she can't understand & struggles away from. Perhaps he is right, she wants her individual soul—'irrevocably christian' after all" (47). As in the lesbian scene in *Frames,* where the seduced narrator thinks "Noster. Nostra. Dame. Help us" (47), the narrator in *Zócalo* grapples with her inherited sense of ethics and continues to repress her sexuality.

However, after her experience in the ancient square, the woman finds it difficult to return to her heterosexual relationship. Restless in bed, she lies awake and contemplates the meaning of hell: "hell, is the square, 'in the middle of,'" (48); "hell is having to be here, she thinks, suddenly seeing him" (48); "hell is this/ constraint" (48-9). Her restlessness wakes Yo and they discuss the shoeshine man they had seen in the *zócalo* in Mérida. The shoeshine man fascinates the woman because he is "letting himself go," as Yo suggestively observes:

> the shoeshine man's busy dreaming himself. she knows what he intends— you too, likewise—but does he know what the words imply, in that one dreamily decisive comment, you mean, we only *dream* ourselves? & she is frightened because it is there, the absence she wants to stay this side of, but how does he know? & how can it be? (50)

Neither Yo nor the reader possesses the telescopic lens that will allow them to see directly into the woman's heart, but, as she suspects, both can glean from her language to what this "absence" refers. However, Marlatt resists clarifying this fear/desire and, instead, superimposes one example of it on top of another.

When the couple travels to Chichen-Itza, Marlatt replays a variation of the Prairie girls encounter. The couple visit a limestone sinkhole, which is a "word [that] keeps echoing" (57) throughout the novella because it provides an analogy for the woman's emotional state: "the water just drips & drips & the cave gets bigger & bigger & then one day, boom, there's a hole—

you can see how they'd think it was magic. Not magic, she wants to say, no, not magic" (56).
While contemplating this torrent, the woman overhears a Mexican guide explain that young
maidens "dressed in fine clothes like brides" (56) sacrificed themselves by jumping into the
sinkhole and bearing messages "down to the house of Chac" (56). "[T]wo girls in shorts" (56),
who are not the Prairie girls but echoes of them, protest that no woman would jump in
voluntarily. "All legend" (56), Yo concurs, but his partner, who thinks of Chac as a woman, and
who has the memory of sinking in the hole at Uxmal fresh in her mind, can only agree in part.

The woman's thoughts and coded language find another architectural analogy at El
Caracol, a "shellcoiled observatory" (58) where the priests "watched the movements of the
moon, of Venus" (59). A guide leads them through the building and "point[s] upward to a hole
she had missed" which was "covered by a cloth & reached by a small ladder" (59). Unfortunately
for the tourists, they cannot climb the ladder because "it was forbidden to all but the priests to
enter this most sacred heart" (59). Listening carefully to these words, the woman "feels suddenly
trapped in the peopled air, the containment of this stone" (59) and she runs outside to gain a
different vantage point:

> & looking back, [she] sees suddenly that the four outer doors must face the
> cardinal points, & the inner ones some points between, while what is left of doors
> or starholes at the top look also north east south west—the outer sphere of the
> building keyed one way, the way the world lies, the inner keyed another.
> Those inner doorways form, not a
> cross then but an x, x marks the spot, that point, points outward on the horizon,
> sunrise, sunset, summer zenith, winter descent, converge: four zones of the earth
> turned green at their meeting, that fifth point, visible only as a hidden stairwell.
> (60)

This passage clearly associates the town Mérida with its echo in the English word "meridian,"
which means "a great circle on the surface of the earth passing through the poles" ("Meridian")
or a similar circle in the celestial realm. Marlatt maps this circle in her chapter titles once the
couple arrive in Mérida in Chapter 3: 1-NIGHT (MERIDA; ISLA MUJERES; 2-NIGHT (ISLA
MUJERES; UXMAL; 3-NIGHT (MERIDA; CHICHEN-ITZA; 4-NIGHT (MERIDA; MERIDA.

Whereas the "key technique in [*Steveston*] is the labyrinth of unclosed parentheses" (Ricou 207), in *Zócalo* Marlatt closes the circle by joining the four quarter-circles in the chapter titles. She thus converts the numbered corners of the masculine square into a feminine circle. Moreover, each numbered section in the chapter titles is followed by an unnumbered subsection, marking an inner series of coordinates within the outer series, like the inner doors concealed by the outer ones at the observatory. All this geometry converges on a point, a fifth point or hidden stairwell, where the "Secret Things" of the priestly class are marked by the chromosome signature "x,x."

The penultimate chapter, "4-NIGHT (MERIDA," begins to close the narrative circle by replaying the cryptic passages from the opening chapter and interpreting them through the woman's experiences in Mexico. For example, the couple recall the Mayan frieze of the four *bacabs* (dwarfs) who stand at the corners of the earth and "something slid[es] quietly into place" as she "begins to remember . . . (i can't drive)" (61). Marlatt also embeds these parenthetical echoes of the package scene into Yo's dialogue when the discussion turns to the shoeshine man: "he's not *my* fascination you know (a package wrapt & tied on the driver's seat), he's yours, you're the one who remembers him (a package in her lap)" (62). Next, the woman's thoughts turn to the "unfamiliar road" by the border and she decodes the old woman's prophecy:

> she'd thought they simply marked the ground of her dream, that native family who said she'd better go—the power of the sea & the power of dwarfs, they said, are working together—now she knows who they are, how they preside over the sun's going & initiate her in her own departure, lords of the turning of light to dark who live where absence is, at the mouth[.] (62)

The woman does not explain exactly where she is going, but over the course of the narrative she characterizes Yo (47) and the Mexican boys (40) as dwarfs and identifies the sea as her element. These forces work together in the woman's imagination to "initiate her in her own departure." Marlatt's prose here encounters the difficulty of reconciling feminism with tourism, as well as the pitfall that had previously distinguished her proprioceptive writing from that of Olson. Whereas Reed criticized Olson for aestheticizing a sense of bodily freedom that women cannot

share, as a tourist in Mexico, the woman—with her Canadian money, rented cars, and bus

tickets—enjoys a mobility and lifestyle in which the Mexicans cannot partake. Vendors such as

the hammock salesman pander to her in hope of making a sale and she responds to her elevated

status by positing her self as the locus of all action and perception. Strangers, lovers, and the

elements all conspire to "initiate" her symbolic journey. Like Olson, she creates a "scopic

regime" in which the "locus of perception" is anchored in a privileged body, "a regime that

creates a world from a central and exclusive subject" (Derksen 156). She converts Yo and the

Mexican boys to dwarfs and harnesses the power of the sea for her own purposes. She puts the

world in service to her subjectivity and becomes the zenith (another meaning of meridian) of all

actions and energies. As she reads her desires into the Mayan ruins, she even feels at liberty to

change the gender of Chac to suit her symbolic purpose.

However, even with all the energies of Mexico pressuring her, the woman still resists

departure. She fears the "absence" and the "mouth" because "she isn't ready, no not yet, she will

cling to numbers, to any evidence of their presence to each other, she will not be tricked, she will

stay where the world is & they are all together" (62). Her departure is inevitable, however,

which Yo realizes: "he laughs at her need to be here, laughs to make her realize the impossibility

of what they nevertheless give their otherwhere up to: the laughing insistency of skin, warm to

each other, the only reply she might make, wordless, is in the weight their bodies do press

against the dark" (63). They consummate their union, but the narrator is haunted soon

afterwards by a nightmare that she characterizes as a "descent" (68):

> into the night. fall (apart) into that flesh self creeps from. no, NOT to feel it, run,
> run straight through (home?) to get away from
>   i am running, running, it runs behind me, that horror (it will touch) get
> home, get home, through, the door & into, humming, house (no house i recognize)
> is full of relations—mother!—& the place is dark,
>   they come out to meet me, twins in yellow dresses, so you've
> come, cousins, smiling, you've come to the party after all—they thought i
> wouldn't, they thought i would stay up where they haven't—just, fresh, raw with it
> (don't touch me) pushing by to reach her, mother, who is busy with them all who

come, i see from the doorway, who stay here, the dead, she queens it over them,
this is her house & i have come in error—
turning to steal away, i hear her voice move out of that cavern to stay me,
warning "I don't want to lose that one too." (64)

This dream operates on a number of semantic levels. On one level, the woman later tells Yo that she dreamt of a party at her mother's house where "twins of [her] cousin" came to greet her. In this family context, sex is taboo and the fresh, raw touching in the dream contravenes the extreme propriety of the queenly mother. On another level, the dream enacts a descent into the sinkhole to the house of Chac, "chaotic mother" (43), where the woman encounters maidens who substitute for the Calgary girls/tourist girls. On both levels, the dream is fraught with sexual tension as the twins in fine dresses offer the flesh that the woman "creeps from." Both the puritanical and lesbian elements claim a part of the woman's psyche and one fuels her homophobia ("that horror") even as the other arouses ("it will touch"). The next morning the woman resolves that "she must not, step into that house again" (66), but the comma splice preserves the dream's semantic duplicity. As in the conclusion to *Frames*, Marlatt will end her narrative by holding two possibilities in suspension.

The morning after the dream, the couple sit in the *zócalo* and attempt to interpret its manifest content. As in the conclusion to *Frames*, the couple have reunited and broken out of their routine. The day is auspicious because the couple sits "on the side of the square [they] never sit on" (66). Like the Roman augurs who sat in sacred squares to judge the flight of birds, the couple interpret the dream that intimates the woman's departure. However, a sadness and desperation colour the scene as she explains to Yo that "it seemed to take an extraordinary effort to get back into myself, to get back beside you & wake up" (68). Yo seems unaware of the significance of the dream and simply replies, "so you went to visit your mother" (68). He then revises this assessment by stating that her "descent" was a "voluntary" return to "mother earth" (68). To a certain extent, a cosmology centring on mother earth does develop over the course of

the narrative, as the *Norteamericanos* leave behind the cars and buses of the early chapters and try to get in touch with the land and its inhabitants. However, the woman insists that the mother was a specific person. When Yo suggests, in Freudian fashion, that the mother represents someone she had just met, "the falling begins": "o the horror of falling into, earth, in that we are alone—she had wanted him to pave it over, into nothing more than leaf play on paving stone, a surface she or anyone might walk across—she hadn't wanted to be alone" (68). This revelatory moment is interrupted by a young man selling hammocks. The vendor teaches the woman the word for "house" in Spanish, but he misspells it as "donmicilio," which the woman interprets as "'don,' gift, house [. . .] this house you fight up through, at centre, dark, hole at the heart of the field" (73). The handwritten word reproduced in the text, like Ana's handwritten signature in *Ana Historic*, is a sign that anchors a larger symbolic chain—in this case, the house of Chac theme. The man selling beds is a messenger bearing a gift that, like the package in the truck, emanates a certain knowledge. Rather than lay bare the contents of this semantic package, however, Marlatt invokes another sign that displaces a determinate conclusion. Whereas Kogawa avoided closure in *Obasan* by breaking the concentric structure of her narrative, Marlatt disappears into the absence at the "Merida" point of her narrative circle in *Zócalo*.

Marlatt frames the final paragraph in *Zócalo* with the words from of a Spanish road sign that the woman had seen earlier and translated: "El Mayab (something to do with the Mayans) is the earth . . . mysterious & ancient . . . in which (I think) . . . everything speaks in the silence" (18). Marlatt inserts these words into the beginning, middle, and end of the novella's final paragraph in parenthetical echoes:

> Or their day (*El Mayab*) out in the square (*es la tierra*) the men with xmas tree lights have got them down & left, the others stay, much as they have done, slumped on benches or halfturned watching passersby. Sun falls silently all around them. From the sky advanced to noon the whitewashed trunks of indian laurel bear up masses of glossy leaves against—four corners light & shadowy, these trunks make of themselves, among, light bearing down (*mysterioso y antigua*), she sees Yo coming from across the square, she sees him walk, quick &

> almost light, almost disappearing into the ones he walks among, this man with
> whom she shares the day, whose face, alight with question, singular in that field
> that lights all ways—she takes her eyes from his, embarrassed by the distance—
> not them, the dark against its lighting—eyes slide back to, making of them in the
> way dark lights them, shining, showing forth what each one is, each of them in the
> night they also rise up from, *in which everything speaks*—well? he will say, did
> you learn any Mayan?—*into the . . . (silence).* (74)

The Christian façade (the Christmas tree lights) comes down in this passage and the woman follows a different "light bearing down" into the mysterious, ancient earth. Yo's dark eyes have somehow guided the woman along this path, but she is now embarrassed to look at him because of the distance between them. The woman leaves Yo's final question unanswered. However, in *Ana Historic*, Annie resolves to "break the parentheses and let it all surface" (150), such that *everything speaks*, unbracketed.

Ana Historic documents the process of a woman "writing her desire to be, in the present tense, retrieved from silence" (*Ana* 47). In this full-length novel, Marlatt weaves together the stories of several women of different generations in Vancouver. The sense of history in the novel adheres to the body-centred definition of the "(f)actual" (139) alluded to in the epigram from Susan Griffin: "The assemblage of facts in a tangle of hair" (n.p.). Annie, the metafictive author of the book, tangles these (f)actual strands together into a personal and political history of lesbian desire. Annie describes herself as "a middle-aged woman who hasn't held a job for twelve years" (59) because she ended her "graduate career by getting pregnant and marrying Richard [Anderson]" (16), her history professor. While doing research for her husband, Annie becomes fascinated by a nineteenth-century schoolteacher, Mrs. Richards, whom Annie calls "Ana" because history has not recorded her first name. Mrs. Richards is remembered only because of the history that she wrote herself: a journal that "years later would be stored in the dustfree atmosphere of [the Vancouver] city archives" (29). Although "there is no image of Mrs. Richards" extant (31), Annie fashions an imaginative portrait of her from the scant details available. According to the archival record, Mrs. Richards travels from England to colonial

British Columbia in 1873, gets a teaching job, "buys a piano and afterwards marries Ben Springer, as if they were cause and effect, these acts" (*Ana* 48). Like the grandmother in *The Snow Queen*, who captivates Gerda, but whose storyline Gerda must resist, Ana fascinates Annie, but Annie does not want her life to follow the same path because Ana disappears from the record after she marries Springer.

The disappearance of Ana also compels Annie to reconsider the history of her own mother, Ina. Frustrated by her marriage and the provincial atmosphere of Vancouver in the 1950s and 1960s, Ina descends into madness and disappears into a lobotomized silence. Marlatt explains in *Readings from the Labyrinth* that *Ana Historic* is composed of "her attempt (Annie's) to find a way of speaking her reality without going mad, as her mother does, or fading into silence as Ana Richards does" (26). Annie is again the centre of this text, which "contains mental dialogues between Annie and long-dead Ana, Annie and recently dead Ina, Annie and her new lover Zoe; it sets out to represent these women either as subjects themselves or as speaking through the subject (Annie)" (Green and LeBihan 432). In reading her own desires through these women, Annie takes liberty with the limited historical record and imagines a lesbian affair for Ana, as well as speculating on the relation of Ina's madness to Ina's stifled sexuality. The resulting book contravenes Richard's historiographical method, but Annie justifies her speculations on the grounds that Richard's method has edited out women, and in particular lesbians, from history.

Marlatt calls *Ana Historic* "a fictional autobiography" (*Labyrinth* 116). She marvels that in the writing of the novel "whole phrases came back to [her] that were [her] mother's" (116), and there are echoes of Marlatt's first marriage as well in the relations of Annie and the professor. In a 1968 journal entry, Marlatt expresses her fear of becoming the sort of "faculty wife" that Annie is: "not 'struggling students' anymore, as Al said. now he's a faculty member & I'm a 'faculty wife' (part-time English teacher too). it doesn't fit & yet it's what we've worked for,

or he has, to return successful—home town boy makes good" (*What* 43). Both Alan Marlatt and

Kiyooka were UBC professors, but Kiyooka bears no resemblance to Richard and Marlatt

cautions that "Annie isn't me though she may be one of the selves i could be" (*Labyrinth* 125).

Ana Historic is thus a fiction that performs a variation on the faculty novel, which is rarely told

from the perspective of the "faculty wife," especially one who abandons her husband for a

woman.[90]

In this fiction, Marlatt establishes distance between herself and her characters through the

Annie's metafictive role. Yet, at the same time, Annie's editor, Zoe, rejects this distancing

practice. Discussing the book that Annie is writing, Zoe criticizes Annie's use of personae:

"'characters.' you talk as if they were strangers. who are they if they aren't you?" (140). Thus, as

in *Zócalo*, Marlatt's novel both invites and inhibits an autobiographical reading. I am not

concerned to establish the autobiographical verity of these works, but I do want to stress the

continuity of the authorial process which, as Marlatt reminds the reader, creates the interpretive

framework for the facts. Marlatt defines a fact as "the f stop of act[,] a still photo in the ongoing

cinerama" (*Ana* 31), and she insists that the facts be interpreted as significant points in a larger

process. For my purposes, I am interested in the way narrative events in *Ana Historic* stand in a

serial relation to her earlier works and participate in an ongoing reconfiguration of the narrative

paradigm articulated in *Frames of a Story*. Each frame in this literary cinerama depicts a new set

of fictional circumstances, but draws from a common set of narrative motifs. In *Frames* and

Zócalo, the male protagonist embarks on a physical and intellectual journey from which the

female protagonist is excluded. The woman tries to follow the man but she encounters a number

of impediments that make her feel physically restricted and emotionally confined. To combat

this sense of containment, the woman embarks on a quest of her own that is literary in nature.

On this separate journey, the woman has a lesbian encounter in which she grapples with the

conflicting impulses of fear and attraction. Fear gets the better of the woman and she resumes

her heterosexual relationship only to find that the emotional divide between herself and her male lover has widened even further. In *Frames* and *Zócalo*, the woman feels compelled to abandon the heterosexual relationship, but the stories end by suspending her decision. In *Ana Historic*, however, the heroine overcomes this state of inaction. Instead of remaining in a relationship in which she plays a subordinate role both as a "faculty wife" and research assistant, Annie decides to write her own book and consummate her desire for her lesbian friend and editor, Zoe.

Ana Historic begins with a bedroom scene that echoes the "hell" episode in *Zócalo*. It depicts Annie trapped in a marriage bed that feels to her like a prison:

> Who's There? she was whispering. knock knock. in the dark. only it wasn't dark
> had woken her to her solitude, conscious alone in the night of his snoring more
> like snuffling dreaming elsewhere, burrowed into it, under the covers against her
> in animal sleep. he was dreaming without her in some place she had no access to
> and she was awake. now she would have to move, shift, legs aware of themselves
> and wanting out. (9)

Annie whispers to herself in the dark, exploring the mouth of some nameless potential that the woman in *Zócalo* had submerged in silence. Like the Echo of Greek myth who repeats the last syllable of the words she hears, Marlatt's heroine in *Ana Historic* mimics the question and silent answer that concluded *Zócalo*. However, in posing this question aloud to herself, Annie stands a better chance of evoking a response than her predecessor did:

> it was the sound of her own voice had woken her, heard like an echo asking,
>   who's there?
>   echoes from further back, her fear-defiant child voice carried still
> in her chest, stealing at night into the basement with the carving knife toward
> those wardrobes at the bottom of the staircase. wardrobes. wordrobes. warding
> off what? (9)

Whereas the mythological Echo pined for Narcissus (who loved only himself), Annie responds to a loveless marriage (and a husband enamored of his own projects) by listening closely to the child's voice within the adult one. As in *Frames*, the narrator in *Ana Historic* searches for an explanation to her present condition in her childhood and the manner of speaking that she

learned in her formative years. The answers Annie seeks come from the sound of this voice, not from the man beside her.

The wardrobe/wordrobe that the narrator is afraid to open/articulate resembles the "malevolent and unmoving" parcel that the woman in *Zócalo* is afraid to unwrap. In *Ana Historic*, the young woman descends the staircase and opens the door repeatedly, but she recoils every time at the absence she finds:

> Who's There?
>> empty. it always was. though every time she believed it might not be. relief, adrenalin [sic] shaking her legs. she had chosen the darkest first and must go to each in turn, confronting her fear. (10)

Annie's quest in *Ana Historic* is to confront and transform this fear from a negative absence into a positive presence. In the process, she must revise the Freudian/Lacanian association of female genitalia with lack and develop a body-centred idiom that is capable of donning these word robes and bringing them out of the closet.

The first step in achieving this conversion is, for Marlatt, to reconsider the storytelling paradigms that shape desire in narrative. As in *Frames*, Marlatt returns to fairytales in *Ana Historic* to explore the formative influence of children's literature on adult sexuality. Robin Hood, Lancelot, Little Lulu, and the Lost Girls in Never-Never Land all make an appearance in the opening chapter, as does Bluebeard, whose reputation emphasizes the taboo act of the young girl opening the closet door. However, as Zwicker observes, the most important among these fairytale figures is Frankenstein, because Annie's castrating knife discovers, not a phallus, nor even Gerda's muff, but a crystallization of her fears:

> The empty closet—initially a puzzling trope—stages Marlatt's complicated vision. Whereas conventions of the coming-out narrative posit a stable closet out of which emerges a homosexual Self, Marlatt turns the closet inside out around homophobic fear. The figure of Frankenstein the monster is crucial here—but inverted. Instead of using Frankenstein in the most transparent sense as outlaw and inassimilable Other, in order to revalorize conventional representations of lesbianism as monstrosity, Marlatt shows the ways in which homophobia at once creates and exceeds the carceral dimensions of the closet as a trope.

> Instead of Frankenstein, what Annie confronts when she flings open the dark wardrobe door is the fear that she will "end up as girls were meant to be" (12). The monster is not, then, a presence in the closet, but a free-floating signifier for the terror that keeps women inside the bounds of propriety. ("Daphne" 170-1)

Initially, Annie stays within these bounds, even when she believes she is being transgressive. When Annie informs Ina that she is pregnant and planning to marry her history professor, she realizes that even her rebellion is scripted: "i ended up doing what i was meant to, i followed the plotline through, the story you had me enact" (17). In marrying a conservative historian known for his well-supported research, Annie weds herself to "history[,] the story [. . .] of dominance. mastery. the bold line of it" (25). Separating herself from Richard and the subordinate role he has fashioned for her demands that Annie reconsider the method and moral of this story.

Although Richard's perception of Annie as his assistant at first appears to be the cause of her sorrow, the problem is much larger, more systemic, and reaches back to her childhood. Annie argues that the male gaze in general converts all action by women into the passive (52), and her description of the pick-up scene at the Princess Pool (82) provides ample support for her claim. Annie summarizes the mood of her teenage years by stressing the passivity and absence associated with the vaginal "o": "o the luck, to be looked at. o the lack, if you weren't. o the look. looking as if it all depended on it" (50). Analyzing this "look," she argues that the male gaze is part of an incestuous practice in which mother and daughter compete for the father's approving gaze. When Ina accuses Annie of playing "the Perfect Little Mother" and trying to replace her (49)—as Richard's star student will try to replace Annie (59)—the daughter replies:

> the truth is (your truth, my truth, if you would admit it) incest is always present, it's there in the way we're trained to solicit the look, and first of all the father's, Our Father's. framed by a phrase that judges (virgin / tramp), sized-up in a glance, objectified. that's what history offers, that's its allure, its pretence. 'history says of her . . .' but when you're so framed, caught in the act, the (f) stop of act, fact— what recourse? step inside the picture and open it up. (56)

Thus, for Annie, unframing history also necessitates unframing the Freudian family drama.

Yet Annie also "experiment[s] with attracting [Ina's] attention" (11) and the incestuous quality of desire in *Ana Historic* extends to Ina's "soft breast under blue wool dressing gown, tea breath, warm touch" (10). Marlatt equates loving with birthing and nurturing in her later writings and incest is always present in the language she uses to describe lesbian relationships, from "Musing with mothertongue" through *Ana Historic* to *Two Women in a Birth* (1994), a collaboration with her lover (in the 1980s), Betsy Warland.

The scene in which Annie discusses *Frankenstein* demonstrates how Marlatt doubles Ina and Zoe as mother-figures to Annie within *Ana Historic*. During one of their editorial sessions, Zoe grows impatient with Annie's need to fictionalize her desire instead of acting on it, and she challenges Annie: "and you? do you really exist?" (141). Annie "recognize[s] Ina in that phrase" and her thoughts turn to her mother, whom she also characterizes as "[her] fear, [her] critic" (141). Just as the mother in the woman's dream in *Zócalo* doubled as the voice of heterosexual propriety and lesbian eroticism, Annie oscillates between two mother-figures in *Ana Historic* who represent opposite poles of behavior. Annie's erotically charged dialogue with Zoe in the cafe switches to an internal dialogue with her mother in which Ina admonishes Annie for not "telling a story" properly and Annie replies: "if i'm telling a story i'm untelling it. untelling the real. trying to get back the child who went too far, got lost in the woods, walked into the arms of Frankenstein" (141). The (un)framing that takes place here is two-fold. At the mention of Frankenstein, Ina thinks of "that Spanish movie about a child's fantasy" (141) in which Frankenstein is a monster, but Annie reminds her that in the book "Frankenstein was the man who created [the monster]" (142). The contrast between the original story by Mary Shelley and its film adaptations is crucial because Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818, shortly after her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley and while she was pregnant with her first child. Hers is a horror story (composed during a ghost-story competition between Percy Bysshe and his friends) about a creation that returns to destroy its creator, part of the fear of a male child that Zoe and

Annie discuss shortly before the conversation about Frankenstein (131). The film versions of

Frankenstein, on the other hand, represent "a man's name for man's fear of the wild, the

uncontrolled. that's where *she* lives" (142). This uninhibited "*she*," in *Ana Historic*, is Zoe, the

robbergirl-figure, so there remains a "transparent sense" in which Frankenstein is the outlaw.

However, Annie recognizes that the monstrosity is her fear of her own desire, not Zoe.

Therefore, Annie works to transform her own behavioral codes such that she and Zoe can "giv[e]

birth, to each other" (n.p.) at the conclusion of the novel without disastrous consequences. Annie

does not want to write the story of heterosexual conquest, as she asserts on one of the blank

pages that interrupt the narrative: "this is not a roman / ce, it doesn't deal with heroes" (67).

Instead of conquering a feared Other, Annie seeks to conquer the fear of alterity in herself and

offer a feminist vision of the heroine.

To untell the heterosexual quest narrative and tell a lesbian one, then, demands that

Annie reconsider the relation of women to *eros* and power. As Carson explains in *Eros the*

Bittersweet, the "Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' ' lack,' ' desire for that which is missing'": "The

lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants

if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay" (10). In *Ana*

Historic, this desire for something missing guides the narrative voice as well as the wordplay,

and thus Annie rejects the objective tone of the conventional historian, which Richard urges her

to adopt:

> i don't want history's voice. i want . . . something is wanting in me. and it all
> goes blank on a word. want. what does it mean, to be lacking? empty. wanton.
> vanish. vacant, vacuum, evacuate. all these empty words except for wanton
> (lacking discipline, lewd). a word for the wild. the gap i keep coming to. (48-9)

Through wordplay, Annie converts the etymology of "eros" from a passive lack to an aggressive

presence or wantonness.[91] Annie uses this wanton voice to rewrite history because the erotic

challenges the causal logic that undergirds conventional historiography. Marlatt argues that one

cannot "speak or write rationally of the erotic" because the erotic "is raw power, a current surging through my body surging beyond the limits of self-containment, beyond the limits of syntax and logic" (*Labyrinth* 46). The "erotic is anti-authority, always has been" (47), and in the erotic Annie finds the force to challenge the codes of rationality that she blames for Ina's madness: "it occurs to me you died of reason [. . .]. i mean explanation, justification, normal mental state—that old standard" (*Ana* 17).[92]

Of course, in Greek mythology Eros is a meddling boy who creates sensations of longing in men and women alike. Marlatt seeks a feminist variation on this power. Hence Annie's experiments in body-conscious "scribbling" (*Ana* 90) coincide with her learning to express her desire for women. The sentence, for Marlatt, is "what we sense our way into" ("Musing" 26) and with this etymology in mind she fashions an erotic narrative that reclaims the sensual in the "sensible." "Meaning-slippage, seductive by-play, wet labia, 'labyl mynde' and labial phonetics all find a place in a joyous slide of meaning in rhythmic lines across the page[s]" (*Labyrinth* 117) of *Ana Historic*, and the absence of longing reasserts itself as presence through Marlatt's poetic word associations:

> in poetry, which has evolved out of chant and song, in rhyming and tone-leading, whether they occur in prose or poetry, sound will initiate thought by a process of association. words call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance. we know from dreams and schizophrenic speech how deeply association works in our psyches, a form of thought that is not rational but erotic because it works by attraction. (*Labyrinth* 10)

By reconsidering the function of desire in the quest narrative and structuring her narrative around "concept constellations" (Marlatt, "Dorothy")—or what chaos theory calls "strange attractors"—Marlatt devises a serial alternative to the single "lodestone" (*Frames* 52) of linear prose.

The recursive symmetries of the serial poem transfer efficiently into prose. As Marlatt explains in "Eratic/Erotic Narrative: Syntax and Mortality in Robin Blaser's 'Image Nations,'" the logic of serial narrative can generate a different style of prose from one that follows time's arrow:

> When a poet engages prose, prose, that 'straightforward discourse,' is not single-track. It leaps like verse, returns circuitous, doubles over, duplicit and incantatory, resists the sentence that wants to come to a full stop. Endings: the problem of syntax like the problem of narrative in the serial poem: mortality. 'Its unrest and proses'—plural. ("Eratic" 98)

However, abandoning linear narrative creates a problem of emplotment, as Marlatt states in a 1985 journal entry:

> the trouble with plot in Ana H.—not wanting a plot-driven novel but not knowing what shape a looser sense of narrative might take—don't want a sense of moral order to dominate the characters. perhaps because I'd rather write something akin to a long poem—something with a more inclusive sense of knowing/narrating. (*Labyrinth* 50)

Marlatt's serial novel is thus a kind of anti-novel, as Annie declares on one of the nearly blank pages interspersed throughout *Ana Historic*: "a book of interruptions is not a novel" (37). Writing out of a medial position between poetry and prose, Marlatt strives to reconcile theoretical discourse with "that strong pull to narrative, even the loosest kind, & a lyrically charged language coincident with it" (*Labyrinth* 37). One means of creating continuity across the segmented narrative, with its juxtaposed genres, times, and places, is the echo.

As the repetition of "Who's There?" in the opening chapter of *Ana Historic* demonstrates, echoes give the prose in the novel a recursive structure akin to the anaphoristic repetitions of poetry. The "ana" in anaphora is not coincidental but rather part of the wordplay that Marlatt uses to structure her text. Marlatt's journal records catalogue "knock-knock jokes for Ana" that resemble bp Nichol's saints' names in *The Martyrology*: "Ana Colutha/ Ana M. Nesis/ Ana Chronistic" (*Labyrinth* 58). The latter two knock-knock (Who's there? Ana. Ana who?) jokes outline two of the major themes, time and reminiscence, while the former denotes "syntactical inconsistency or incoherence within a sentence; *esp*: the shift from one construction to another" ("Anacoluthon"). Thus, in addition to disrupting chronology, Marlatt aims to shift the syntactic framework from the linear pattern of subject-verb-object to what she considers a less masculine format, as she suggests in another knock-knock joke: "Ana Strophe: inversion of the normal

(syntactic) order" (*Labyrinth* 58). Given the baptismal theme of water, white robes, and rebirth in *Ana Historic*, the reader also perceives a playful reformulation of "Ana Baptism," which means "one who baptizes again" and refers to the practice of adult baptism: "The Anabaptists differed from Lutherans and Calvinists [. . .] in that they advocated, among other practices, nonviolence and opposition to state churches. They based their movement on voluntary congregations of converts (those who had undergone believer's baptism)" ("Anabaptists"). In place of a patriarchal cosmology ordered by the unitary Logos, Annie formulates a lesbian world view based on ana-logies between women's lives, variations on keywords, and an adult baptism into a new belief system.

Annie also thinks of writing as "knocking on paper, not wood, tapping like someone blind along the wall of her solitude" (45). However, Marlatt's writing is not as directionless and blind as she would have the reader believe. In place of an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end, the "knock knock" echoes in *Ana Historic* map the major transformative points of Annie's story. After the sequence of echoes in the opening paragraphs, the echo resurfaces when Annie resolves to abandon research on Richard's book and get serious about writing her own story, "tapping there, looking for a way out of the blank that faced her" (45). Exploring "the unspoken urge of a body insisting itself in the words," Annie hears the refrain: "who's there? (knock, knock). who else *is* there in this disappearing act when you keep leaving yourself behind the next bend. given that 'yourself' is everything you've been, the trail leading backwards and away from you" (46). As Annie ponders her past selves and the sexual politics fueling her rivalry with Ina for her father's attention, she hears the knocking once more: "trying. a trying child. trying it on for size. the role. all that she had been told would make her a woman. (knock, knock). would she ever be one?" (49). However, Ina's descent into madness warns Annie against accepting this conventional role, which she blames for her mother's eventual lobotomization: "when Harald brought you home, he brought home a new fear (who's there?) that no one was

there at all. Mum: mum. wandering around in some lost place, incapable of saying what it was they'd done to you. under the role or robe was no one" (148; see also 88). This painful memory of her silenced mother gives Annie the courage to declare herself to her would-be lover, Zoe. The final knock-knock sequence occurs when Annie breaks her long silence by responding to Zoe in word and deed:

> Annie—she said, as if it were fiction, as if there were quotation marks around it— Annie Richards. the sound of a door closing.
>
> i want to knock: can you here? i want to answer her who's there? not Ana or Ina, those transparent covers. Ana Richards Richard's Anna. fooling myself on the other side of history as if it were a line dividing the real from the unreal. Annie / Ana—arose by any other name, whole wardrobes of names guarding the limitations—we rise above them. Annie isn't Richard's or even Springer's.
>
> Annie Torrent, i said. (she looked up from the water she was floating something on in the dark, white robes or words, silver boats.) (152)

Whereas, in *Frames*, Gerda floats helplessly down a river in a boat to begin her journey, Annie and Zoe take control of the words and metaphors that are the "silver boats" conveying their story.

In *Frames,* Marlatt expresses a desire to "tap again, at the still centre of the story, power that is conjuring" but is perplexed by the question, "who of who?" (50). In *Ana Historic*, Annie answers this question by renaming herself and identifying her lover:

> so, Annie Torrent—she took my hand—what is it you want?
>
> she asks me to present myself to take the leap, as the blood rushes into my face and i can speak: you. i want you. *and* me. together. (152)

This passage replays an ambiguous stanza from *Frames*. Shortly after the robbergirl scene, an indented stanza disrupts the lineation of a larger lyric:

> your face, it's familiar
> what do you want?
> you to be there (52)

The "you" in this parenthetical passage could be a flash-forward to Gerda's meeting with Kay or a flashback to Marlatt's encounter with her female lover. However, in *Ana Historic*, Annie

clearly designates Zoe as her choice. Finally, one of Marlatt's heroines achieves "one clear act." The erotic force of the concluding scenes derive their energy from the breakdown of the social and narratological restrictions that had previously obscured a clear expression of lesbian desire in Annie and her predecessors.

However, Marlatt continues to employ pronominal uncertainty to a different end in *Ana Historic*. Whereas Marlatt employs the second-person pronoun in *Frames* to conceal the object of her desire, in *Ana Historic* Marlatt employs the second person to confound the identity of the desiring subject. Marlatt "gives voice to the relationships between women by creating a nonexclusive pronominal system" (432) as Keith Green and Jill LeBihan argue in "The Speaking Object: Daphne Marlatt's Pronouns and Lesbian Poetics." Green and LeBihan build their argument around the pronominal indeterminacy of a lyric that appears on one of the "interruption" pages in *Ana Historic*:

> worlds apart she says
> the world is
>
> a-historic
> she who is you
> or me
>   "i"
> address this to (*Ana* 129)

Reversing the "Great Man" approach to historiography in which the events of an age are interpreted through the life of a prominent man, Marlatt opens the a-historic subject position to a variety of women from diverse historical periods. Green and LeBihan explain that the lyric "i" is not exclusive in this case:

> Although other poems in the novel refer explicitly to "ana," this poem more readily participates in the discourse of lyric poetry because of its pronominal reference and lack of antecedent or cataphoric full forms. The poem is thus a deictic center whose references form a large and significant paradigm of participants. The pronouns could be attached to any of the women in the narrative (Annie, Zoe, Ina, Ana Richards) since these characters are directly addressed in dialogic exchange elsewhere in the novel. The "you" and "me" could plausibly be

directed towards women outside the text too (the reader, the writer). Locating a
speaking subject in the poem proves astonishingly difficult. (441)

In this manner, Marlatt complicates the apostrophic mode of the lyric and returns to a question

that she first articulated in *Vancouver Poems* (1972): "How far do 'I' go & where do 'you' begin"

("Recent" n.p.). Marlatt also embeds this question into the coda to *Ana Historic*.

The "you" in the concluding prose poem confuses second-person referents and thereby

draws the reader into the narrative:

we give place, giving words, giving birth, to
each other—she and me. you. hot skin writing
skin. fluid edge, wick, wick. she draws me
out, you she breathes, is where we meet.
breeze from the window reaching you now, trees
out there, streets you might walk down, will,
soon. it isn't dark but the luxury of being
has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading
us into the page ahead. (n.p.)

Whereas the second line of the coda distinguishes first, second, and third persons, the "you" in

the fourth line refers to either the narrator or the reader, depending on whether the passage is

dialogue or not. This indeterminacy displaces the centrality of Annie in the story and opens up a

space for readers to become the focus of the narrative. The accusative coaxes readers to take off

their "invisibility suit[s]" (Bowering, *Short* 174) even as it dispels the "dark" of Annie's

homophobic fear. Together, reader, author, and protagonist come out of their respective closets.

The bedroom scenes that frame *Ana Historic* thus shape the narrative as a space of

transformation for Annie as a desiring subject—a series of closets to enter and exit. Moving

from Richard's bed to Zoe's, and from the stairs to the basement wardrobe to the stairs to Zoe's

bedroom, Annie breaks the mold of Andersen's quest narrative, as well as disrupting "a feminism

anchored to a single axis of gender as heterosexual difference" (Whitlock 98). Annie's character

develops, but she narrates her development on her own terms. Thus Green and LeBihan argue

that in "reproducing a mother-daughter dialogue, in presenting a narrator with both lesbian and

heterosexual relationships, in using extracts from historical and scientific documentaries as part of a fiction and by creating psychological fantasy, *ana historic* both claims and rejects reassuring points of reference" (437). This collaging of reference points also informs the cover image on the Anansi edition of *Ana Historic* (1997), which presents a portrait of a young woman (held in the palm of what appears to be the photographer) and raised against a backdrop of maps and archival photographs. The image's overlapping frames of reference disallow a stable interpretive point and the presence of the mysterious hand raises questions of self-reflexivity and the role of the perceiver in (self-)portraiture.

The convolutions of Marlatt's "Eratic/Erotic" narrative in *Ana Historic* also confound the psychoanalytic templates that influenced her early prose works. After exploring the Freudian notion of absence and lack in women, Annie converts it to the plenitude and "luxury of being" of her new worldview. Thus *Ana Historic* "resists easy assimilation into a pattern provided by any one psychoanalytic metanarrative" (Green and LeBihan 436), but this fact does not mean that Marlatt rejects all metanarratives per se. In an interview with Brenda Carr, Marlatt explains that the feminist dimension of her writing derives from her choice of a political metanarrative:

> Working for change is what makes feminism different from the postmodernism I learned from the *Tish* days. Even though there's a continuity with some of those strategies, I'm using them for different ends now. [. . . Postmodernism], although it critiques the master narratives of our culture, the institutions and the codes, still ends up being complicit with them because it has no program for change. A program for change means valorizing a difference, and as soon as you valorize a difference you're moving out of postmodernist deconstruction into a position of [. . .] belief or trust in a certain meta-narrative. It's a difference at such a basic level that I think it's often been overlooked, but it's a difference that leads to a radical shift in world-view. ("Between" 106)

Is it possible to have a metanarrative that is not a master narrative? There are certainly traces of the old master narratives in Marlatt's new metanarrative. Knutson observes that although the "refusal of the patriarchal logos opens into the endless multiplicity of women's experiences," Marlatt's "often utopian projection of a postpatriarchal epistemology is a feminist vision of the

metanarrative of the liberation of the people" ("Metanarrative" 29). Thus, Marlatt has not

entirely done away with linearity in *Ana Historic* because A and Z come together in an

alphabetical and orgasmic completion that creates a progressive story arc from the heterosexual

bedroom to the lesbian one.

Of course, Annie maintains that the coda is not the end of the story. She "writ[es] the

period that arrives at no full stop" (90) and directs the reader to the page ahead. This gesture

inhibits closure but it encourages eschatology by pointing towards utopian future. On the other

hand, Annie informs the reader that the "story is 'only a story' insofar as it ends [. . .] in life we

go on" (150). In her own life Marlatt goes on to write a more openly autobiographical novel,

Taken (1996), in which the liberatory rhetoric of *Ana Historic* is notably absent. *Taken*

fictionalizes the end of Marlatt's relationship with Betsy Warland (for whom Marlatt left

Kiyooka) and thereby follows the elegiac pattern that seems to inspire her prose. The novel

dispels the utopian fervour of *Ana Historic* by illustrating how the breakdown of a lesbian

relationship mirrors a crisis in Marlatt's parents' marriage during the Second World War. As in

Frames, the narrator is abandoned by her lover and turns to writing "to fix an image so it won't

fade over time" (*Taken* 95). Returning to the labyrinth, she "hang[s] onto that slight thread in the

darkness of [her lover] gone" (129) and acknowledges that the legacy of the past is difficult to

escape: "Breaking the marriage script, we broke the familial ties we each were meant to

perpetuate. And yet, so many strands of the old scripts that compose us wove the narrative, then

unreadable, unread, that made me recognize you when you walked into that crowded café" (77-

8). By way of conclusion, the narrator asserts that everyone in society is "complicit, yes. Folded

into the wreckage of grief and power" (130) created by the past. However, she resolves to allow

her serial narratives to "go on spinning out of eyeshot, snapshot, beyond the reach of evidence.

The stories we invent and refuse to invent ourselves by, all unfinished . . ." (*Taken* 130).

The same kind of ambivalence can be found in *Ana Historic* if one ignores the tone of the

coda and examines the narrative on an abstract level. *Ana Historic* experiments at the level of

the sentence, but conforms to certain genre conventions at the level of the chapter. In comic plots

such as the one that shapes *The Snow Queen*, the narrative crisis produced by a period of misrule

is generally resolved by a marriage at the conclusion, and *Ana Historic* "parodically reproduces

the comic plot of marriage and childbirth by rendering both lesbian" (Zwicker 166). Thus, in the

same way that Marlatt reconfigures the linear values of standard syntax, she reconfigures the

comic model such that men no longer play the dominant role in the plot's libidinal economy. For

Annie, "the lure of absence" is initially "self-effacing," a desire to submerge her personality in

the role of the conventional housewife (24). Later, however, the lure of absence is precisely the

opposite: Annie's desire to develop a life outside the framework of heterosexual norms. None

the less, these two frameworks overlap and behavioral patterns identified with heterosexuality

and patriarchy also manifest themselves in lesbian relationships.

While *Frames of a Story*, Zócalo, and *Ana Historic* do not usher in a postpatriarchal era,

their accomplishment is to transform a mythic paradigm that the author once believed governed

her life. The new variations of the quest narrative that Marlatt generates in her prose do not

ossify into static paradigms; nor should they, as Teresa de Lauretis maintains in her introduction

to *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*:

> [A]n all-purpose feminist frame of reference does not exist, nor should it ever
> come prepackaged and ready-made. We need to keep building one, absolutely
> flexible and readjustable, from women's own experience of difference, of our
> difference from Woman and of the differences among women; differences which
> [. . .] are perceived as having as much (or more) to do with race, class, or ethnicity
> as with gender or sexuality per se. (14)

Whether unframing Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, Yo's photographic technique, or

Richard's history, Marlatt "put[s] together a narrative of brightly coloured bits turned, turning as

if to focus, and the falling patterns then. Beautiful forms. Illusions of continuity, of completion,

made by mirrors" (*Taken* 26). Marlatt employs the recursive symmetries of the serial poem in her prose to record the "endlessly repeating and not exactly repeated cycles [a woman's] body knows" (Marlatt, "Musing" 28) and fashion a narrative structure that accommodates this body consciousness. However, there are other revisionist strategies besides Marlatt's proprioceptive method, as Anne Carson demonstrates in *Autobiography of Red*, where she rewrites a (romantic) quest narrative from the perspective of a male monster.

CHAPTER 6

Anne Carson: (Un)framing Myth

> MDM: *Plainwater* is described or "packaged" as an anthology of essays and
> poetry yet I found it in the critical anthologies section of a large bookstore. Some
> works need sections entirely on their own. Is this a problem for you? For
> reviewers? For publishers? For bookstore clerks?
>
> AC: Not a problem but a question: What do "shelves" accomplish, in stores or in
> the mind. ("Matrix" 10).

As in this interview with Mary di Michele, Anne Carson repeatedly tells interviewers that she

defies genre conventions because her only means of developing a way of writing that inspires

her "is to break rules or change categories or go outside where they say the line is" ("Talk" 19-

20). Thus, the subtitle of Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* only hints at the

variety of genres that the Montreal poet employs.[93] In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson brings

together seven distinct sections—a "proemium" (6) or preface on the Greek poet Stesichoros,

translated fragments of Stesichoros's *Geryoneis*, three appendices on the blinding of Stesichoros

by Helen, a long romance in verse recasting Stesichoros's *Geryoneis* as a contemporary gay love

affair, and a mock-interview with the "choir-master"—each with its own style and story to tell.

As in *Obasan*, the principal narrative in *Autobiography of Red,* the romance, is surrounded by an

elaborate series of frameworks whose epigrams come to play a central role in the conclusion of

the story. However, unlike *Obasan*, Carson's principal narrative is in verse. Although men

appear to be the subject of both the romance and the academic apparatus that comes with it,

Carson sets the stories of Stesichoros, Geryon, and Herakles within a framework of epigrams and

citations from Gertrude Stein and Emily Dickinson that, far from being subordinate, assumes

equal importance with the male-centred narrative when Stein supplants Stesichoros in the

concluding interview.

At the same time, Carson's allusions to the myth of Isis emphasize her (un)framing of

mythic forms. Carson's retelling of the *Geryoneis* (itself a lyrical revision of an epic myth)

draws inspiration from Stesichoros's portrait of Helen of Troy in the *Palinode* (a recantation of the poet's earlier, Homeric portrait), as well as from the mythic scenes in which Isis reconstitutes the fragmented body of Osiris. Negotiating this complex arrangement of literary allusions, Carson uses shifts in gender and genre to foreground her extensive alterations to the myths that underlie and frame *Autobiography of Red.*

Because it employs fragmentation and "radical recontextualization" to "overturn the conventional distinction between a framing 'master-text' and a cited text that exists in supplementary relation to it" (M. Jones 14), *Autobiography of Red* could be situated in the Canadian tradition of "documentary-collage" that Manina Jones traces in works such as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Obasan,* and *Ana Historic.* Indeed, Marlatt has written a favourable review of *Autobiography of Red* ("Poignant" 41), and its cover bears a strong endorsement from Ondaatje: "Anne Carson is, for me, the most exciting poet writing in English today." The connection to Ondaatje is particularly intriguing because, in a 1984 interview with Sam Solecki, Ondaatje denounces the segregating mentality of criticism (which derives from a Greek word meaning "to separate") and then makes this prophetic statement: "We really need a Guy Davenport around us. Instead we get a lot of self-serving essays on all these forms. I think it's very dangerous for a writer to be living in a community obsessed with all these categories" (329).[94] Two years later, Carson published a condensed version of her doctoral dissertation from the University of Toronto entitled *Eros the Bittersweet.* A lyrical meditation on classical philosophy, this book presages Carson's later work in the lyric essay, as well as her sequence of prose poems, *Short Talks* (1992), which she describes as a series of "one-minute lectures" ("Readings"). *Short Talks* was published by Brick Books, which is affiliated with the literary magazine *Brick,* where Ondaatje is an associate editor. Although Ondaatje had no part in soliciting or editing the manuscript,[95] his comments illustrate that there was a niche in Canadian

literature waiting to be filled by someone who could combine classical and modern forms in eclectic ways.

In 1995, Carson published two collections of long poems and essays, *Plainwater* (Vintage) and *Glass, Irony and God* (New Directions), the latter of which featured an introduction by Guy Davenport. In this introduction, the innovative American classicist marvels that Carson "writes philosophy and critical essays that are as beautiful and charming as good poetry" (x), and he affiliates Carson with a lineage of poets (including Joyce, Pound, and Stein) who "dare new forms" (ix). However, the strong Hellenic influence on Carson's writing prompts him to situate Carson's poetry within a revived classicism:

> She is among those who are returning poetry to good strong narrative (as we might expect of a classicist). She shifts attention from repeating stanzaic form (which came about when all poems were songs) to well-contoured blocks of phrases: analogues of paragraphs in prose. Prose will not accommodate Carson's syncopations, her terseness, her deft changes of scene. (x)

The romance at the centre of *Autobiography of Red* certainly upholds Davenport's argument for "good strong narrative," but the scholarly framework surrounding Carson's romance is modeled on her non-narrative experiments in the long poem "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," collected in *Plainwater*.

"Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" is the stylistic prototype of the essay, interview, and translations in *Autobiography of Red*. The translations in "Mimnermos" combine fragments from the Greek lyric poet Mimnermos (also Mimnermus, c. 630 BCE) with contemporary details such that poet and translator seem to be engaged in a kind of cerebral copulation, or "brainsex." Like *A Short Sad Book*, "Mimnermos" is an "intellectual burlesque" (Hamilton 117) that takes perverse liberties with its subject material, but there is rigorous scholarship undergirding Carson's piece. To her unorthodox translation of the Greek fragments, Carson adds an essay and three mock interviews with Mimnermos, whose function she explains to Mary di Michele in "The *Matrix* Interview":

When I was working on ["Mimnermos"], I started from a translation of a body of fragments, then added to the translation an essay, in some degree historical, explaining the background of the poet and how the fragments have come down to us. And in dealing with that historical material, I found a whole lot of what they call, in Classics, "testimonia," which means anecdotal stories about the poet or about the poem, that are passed down and aren't really regarded as credible history. But they shape our notion of who the poet was as a person. [. . .] So the interviews are about this interstitial matter that comes down to us in semi-historical sources. (12-13)

Elaborating on the model of "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," *Autobiography of Red* will play on the double-meaning of "body of fragments" by inserting the "body" of Gertrude Stein into the fragments of Stesichoros, at first as an intertext and later as a character. In "Mimnermos," however, Stein is present only as an echo in the voice of the interviewer. Although one reviewer of *Plainwater* remarks that Carson is "surprisingly candid about presenting herself as an heir to Gertrude Stein" (Hamilton 114), the echo of Stein in this long poem is only strong if one considers its use of collage.

Each one of the "brainsex" paintings extrapolates from a fragmentary line of Mimnermos, adds an explanatory caption, and then creates a lyric that intermingles Carson's world with that of Mimnermos, in the manner of a collage. Asked by John D'Agata if the juxtapositions of ancient Greek and contemporary material in her long poems are meant to function as collage, Carson agrees and acknowledges that she has "always thought of [writing] as painting. Painting with thoughts and facts" ("Talk" 19). She then explains that her "painting notion comes out of dealing with classical texts which are, like Sappho, in bits of papyrus with that enchanting white space around them, in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we can't quite reach. I like that kind of surface" ("Talk" 19). Thus, in "*fr.* 2" of "The Brainsex Paintings," Carson begins with the Mimnermos fragment "All We As Leaves;" notes that the lyric poet follows Homer in "compar[ing] man's life with the leaves;" introduces Mimnermos's favourite image ("You see the sun?—I built that"); and then shifts the focus of the poem to a contemporary setting:

> But (let me think) wasn't it a hotel in Chicago
> where I had the first one of those—*my body walking out of the*
> *room*
> > *bent on some deadly errand*
> *and me up on the ceiling just sort of fading out—*
> > brainsex paintings I used to call them?
> In the days when I (so to speak) painted. (4)

The final line alludes to Carson's early ambition to be a painter, which was temporarily abandoned when the poems in *Short Talks* garnered more interest than the paintings they were supposed to complement. However, the introduction of the term "brainsex" in this passage suggests that writing and painting continue to interpenetrate in Carson's work. Like Ondaatje, in particular, Carson takes a mixed-media approach to writing in which the defining genre (in this case painting) is absent except as a trace in the writing.

The opening paragraphs of the essay that constitute the second section of "Mimnermos" identify painting as the model for the form of the translations. Pondering the collected fragments of Mimnermos, Carson notes their serial qualities: "it is true we see the windows glow in turn with boys and flesh and dawn and women and the blue lips of the ocean. It is true he likes to get the sun into every poem" (12). More important than the recurring motif of the sun, however, is Mimnermos's interest in the mechanics of time: "the poet's task, Kafka says, is to lead the isolated human being into the infinite life, the contingent into the lawful. What streams out of Mimnermos's suns are the laws that attach us to all luminous things. Of which the first is time" (12). As in Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Carson presents a series of framed images here that combine to map the passage of time. However, Mimnermos's interest in time is not readily apparent in the fragments. "What is time made of?" is Geryon's favourite question in *Autobiography of Red* (93), and Carson frames the poems in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000) with meditations on the nature of "Ordinary Time," but in "Mimnermos" the preoccupation with time seems to be the projection of Carson's own preferred theme. She concedes that the Greek poet "scarcely uses the word," but then asserts that "everything in his verse bristles with it" (12). She

maintains that time manifests itself in the form of the poetry, not the diction: "Time goes whorling through landscapes and human lives bent on its agenda, endlessly making an end of things. You have seen this vibration of time in van Gogh, moving inside color energy" (12). However, van Gogh differs from Muybridge—who used "Helios" as a pseudonym and as the name for his photography studio (Hendricks 34)—in that the painter's technique is more expressive and less influenced by time's arrow. His colour patterns and brushstrokes move "in circles (not lines) that expand with a kind of biological inevitability, like Mimnermos's recurrent metaphor of the youth of humans as a flowering plant or fruit" (12). In Carson, these fractal forms eventually branch out beyond the boundaries of "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" and into *Autobiography of Red*.

The final section of "Mimnermos" consists of three interviews between Mimnermos and an interviewing "I" that reappears in *Autobiography of Red*. The pair discuss a range of subjects concerning Mimnermos's writing and the *testimonia* about his life. Of particular interest is the long poem *Nanno*, allegedly named after Mimnermos's "*aulos*-playing lover, [although] there is not a trace of her in the fragments. In fact there is not much trace of love at all in the fragments" (A. Allen 21). The interviewer notes that "Kallimachos talks about Nanno or 'the big woman' as if it were an epic poem on the founding of Kolophon," but then despairs that "no one understands this reference" ("Mimnermos" 24). Mimnermos does not respond to the interviewer's request for clarification and thereby compounds the absence at the heart of interviewer's desire to know Mimnermos as a person (26) and to know the history of the text. Carson's transformation of the fragments into a story of unrequited desire between poet and scholar thus foreshadows her transformation of the *Geryoneis* and its epic theme into a gay romance that bears the mysterious designation "autobiography." Indeed, the following exchange between the interviewer and Mimnermos might allude to *Autobiography of Red*:[96]

I: I understand the text as we have it is merely the proemium to a much longer work
M: Well I don't know what you're reading over there nowadays those American distributors get some crazy ideas (19)

Mimnermos compounds this open-endedness in the third interview when he asks: "who are those storytellers who can put an end to stories [?]" (26). Here, Carson is perhaps playing on the etymological connection between Mimnermos's city and the colophon, a printer's insignia that is typically inserted at the end of a book in order to authenticate its contents. No authentication is possible in the cases of the *Nanno* and "Mimnermos," because the entire story is set in the white space bordering the fragments. This is the space onto which Carson projects her desire and imagination in "Mimnermos," and the desire for this space caused Carson to transform her first draft *of Autobiography of Red* into a novel in verse.

In the interview with John D'Agata, which appeared in *Brick*, Carson is asked if she sometimes begins an essay and then reworks it as a poem. Likely thinking of the essay that begins *Autobiography of Red*, Carson responds by explaining the evolution of the form of her novel in verse:

> Well, there's a novel I've written that was all prose at first and very thick. Then I thought, "What if I break these lines up a bit? Maybe they'd move along more smartly." So now the novel's in verse but when I'm writing, usually I mush around first with the form and if I don't get it in a few days then I don't write the thing because I can't begin without a form. ("Talk" 22)

Carson borrows the form of "Mimnermos" to shape the academic apparatus in *Autobiography of Red*, but as concerns the romance one must ask how breaking up a line can make it move along more smartly. The answer, for Carson, is that narrative can emerge from a rapid succession of images and insights that resonate thematically but do not connect in a continuous manner. She thus contrasts serial narrative with "straight narrative" and explains her preference for the former:

> [In] a straight narrative you'd have too many other words, too many other words that aren't just the facts. You're too busy trying to get from one fact to another by

standard methods: *and; but; oh, no; then I was in this room; because; that's Patti;*
These aren't facts; they're hard to paint. ("Talk" 19)

Note that Carson has no interest in connective words and phrases, but in the poem "By God" she

wakes up at night "thinking of prepositions" (*Glass* 41), words that situate something in relation

to something else without conflating the two things. Although Carson claims not to know why

prepositions intrigue her in this poem, Jennings argues that she displays a fascination with

"liminal syntactic position[s]" because prepositions facilitate the triangulation of desire that

Carson outlines in *Eros the Bittersweet*—that is, a preposition mediates between two things in

the way that Eros mediates between lover and beloved (Jennings 929).

A more recent example of this preoccupation with the syntax of juxtaposition would be

the "Note on Method" in *Economy of the Unlost*, where Carson contemplates the sentence "And

The Word was with God" from the Gospel of Saint John and asks: "What kind of withness is it?"

(viii). There is not a single answer to this question because the Greek preposition has at least 14

meanings. Indeed, for Carson, the answer seems to be to perform as many variations on this

"withness" as possible. Like Bolden on the train to Slaughter, Carson writes her "Note on

Method" on the train to Milan, where the passengers "flash past towers and factories, stations,

yards, then a field where a herd of black horses is just turning to race uphill" (viii). Capturing the

movement of the horses at the very moment when "everything change[s]" ("PWINTERVIEW"

57), Carson records the serial transformations of the landscape but avoids continuous description

of it. She suggests that there is a relation between windows and "aesthetic structure" (vii) and

therefore rejects expansive descriptions in favour of a lyric sense of narrative in which "one may

encounter a fragment of unexhausted time" (viii).

In addition to the fields of blue chickory in *Slaughter*, the field onto which Carson looks

out from the train recalls "the snowy fields and the blue-green shoots and the plant called

'audacity,' which poets mistake for violets" (29) in Carson's introduction to *Short Talks*.

Standing in one of these fields, the poet listens to the conversation of three wise women and copies down everything that they say. The snippets of their conversation suggest to her a unique style of narrative:

> The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough. (29)

To avoid the unsatisfactory movement of the narrative in her manuscript for *Autobiography of Red*, then, Carson fragmented its prose, toyed with its syntax, and juxtaposed the literary legacies of Stein and Dickinson with the myths of Isis and Helen of Troy to create a novel that is partly an essay and partly a romance composed of a succession of lyrical moments.

The reception of *Autobiography of Red* highlights the diversity of readings made possible by what Melanie Rehak calls Carson's "dazzling hybrids" (39) in a feature-length article on the poet in the *New York Times Magazine*. However, one should note the media dazzle that accompanies the discussion of Carson's hybrids when Rehak's article includes a full-page fashion shot of Carson in red (37). The success of *Autobiography of Red* has rocketed Carson from cult status in small literary magazines to international prominence, creating a mystique summed up by the opening question of an article in the *Boston Review*: "What if a Canadian professor of classics turned out to be a greater poet than any living American?" (Halliday). Assessing *Men in the Off Hours*, the *New York Times Book Review* calls Carson the "most instantly penetrating of contemporary poets" (Bendient 44), *Time Magazine* declares that Carson "fulfills poetry's highest calling" (Bruck 98), and the *Globe and Mail* (scrambling to respond to the feature in the *New York Times Magazine*) proclaims that "Carson is where the action is in contemporary poetry" (Wilson D19).[97] While Carson can mix and match with the best postmodernists, however, she distinguishes herself by writing essays, lyrics, narrative, and non-narrative poetry with equal facility. Many critics have praised her versatility, but this ability also creates

contradictory appraisals of her talent. For example, in a review of *Autobiography of Red* for the *London Times Literary Supplement* (3 Dec. 1999), poet Oliver Reynolds praises Carson's attempt to blend intellect with emotion, but laments that the romance at the heart of novel in verse could not "sustain the expectations created by its extraordinary first half" (24). In the same issue of the *TLS*, critic Karl Miller chooses *Autobiography of Red* as his book of the year on the strength of its "single magnificent and perplexing poem [the romance]" while suggesting that it "might have shed the gnomic appendices which both precede and round off the romance proper" (6). The reception of *Autobiography of Red* has been overwhelmingly positive (among reviewers such as Marlatt, Rasula, Miller, Moses, Siken, Macklin, and Beam), but some critics of the novel in verse find it either "top-heavy with its absurd apparatus" (Logan) or "so devoted to the emotional fluctuations of [the] protagonist" of the romance that the novel "ends up feeling like a lyric poem fantastically extended" (Halliday). However, a closer look at the treatment of myth in *Autobiography of Red* reveals that the mock-academic apparatus surrounding the romance is neither absurd nor subordinate to the lyric sequence.

The first section of *Autobiography of Red*, a proem entitled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" introduces the reader to the ancient Greek lyricist. Stesichoros (also Stesichorus) was born in Himera, on the coast of Sicily, between 650 (*Red* 3) and 628 (J. Davidson 197) BCE. Of the "dozen or so titles and several collections of fragments" (*Red* 3) remaining from Stesichoros's works, Carson is particularly interested in a "long lyric poem in dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure" (5) called the *Geryoneis*. The eighty-four surviving papyrus fragments and half-dozen citations of the *Geryoneis* expand on the story of Geryon from the 10th labour of Herakles (also Heracles or Hercules). The fragments "tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an adjective simply meaning 'The Red Place') quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle" (5).[98] Instead of adopting the "conventional [. . .]

point of view of Herakles and fram[ing] a thrilling account of the victory of culture over

monstrosity," Stesichoros offers a "tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful,

from Geryon's own experience" (6). Stesichoros gives Geryon an "unexpectedly noble"

character (Davies, "Stesichorus" 277) and marks the transition from epic deed to lyric encounter

as a shift from heroic conquest to subjective engagement. In the lyric sequence "Autobiography

of Red: A Romance," Carson furthers this evolution by transforming the *Geryoneis* into a

contemporary gay love affair between a leather-jacketed Herakles and his little red admirer.

However, as the organization of *Autobiography of Red* implies, it is necessary to understand

Stesichoros's deviations from the epic form before engaging with Carson's romance. "[R]anked

with Homer by some of the ancients" (Barnstone 109), Stesichoros achieved considerable fame

by re-framing the epic narratives of Homer and Hesiod, as well as by reconsidering the targets of

their abuse, such as Geryon and Helen of Troy.

Although Quintilian remarks that Stesichoros "sustained on the lyre the weight of epic

song" (10.1.62; trans. A. Miller 77) and Carson has Longinus—in a slight manipulation of

Longinus 13—call Stesichoros the "[m]ost Homeric of the lyric poets" (*Red* 4), Stesichoros's

primary contribution to literary history lies in his alteration of epic for lyric purposes.

Stesichoros was probably the first to combine elements of lyric monody (solo song), epic

narrative, and dance in order to recast the ancient myths as choral performance:

> Although he may well have been preceded by Terpander (and others unknown) in
> the invention of musical settings for the traditional epics, his poems on epic
> themes appear to have been distinctive in their completely "lyrical" form,
> composed as they were in a triadic structure and adapted to *nomoi* for the lyre.
> (Maingon 1)

Malcolm Davies cautions that Stesichoros's compositions were not strictly choral ("Monody"

601), but his verse differs from the monody of Sappho, Alcaeus and Anacreon in its preference

for "an artificial language with a strong Doric flavour" and its triadic structure—in which "a

strophe is followed by an antistrophe in the same metrical pattern, the antistrophe by an epode in

a related but different rhythm" (Campbell 2: 262). Thus, instead of relying solely on the

conventions of either lyric or epic, Stesichoros—like Carson—creates his own hybrid form.

In "Stesichorus and the Epic Tradition," Maingon examines Stesichoros's treatment of

Homeric form and diction and offers these conclusions:

> Retaining the heroic theme, he amalgamated traditional and original material in
> narrative poems of about 1500 lines in length to be performed to the
> accompaniment of the lyre, either by solo voice or by chorus, or even both. Held
> within the bounds of this structure the poems were far more narrowly defined as
> far as content was concerned and less digressive than epic. The musical
> accompaniment in itself, the *nomos* which was traditionally divided into seven
> parts, imposed a finite structure on the theme. (Maingon 355)

Toying with these numerological conventions, Carson divides *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in*

Verse into seven sections (in the manner of lyric performance) and the lyric sequence

"Autobiography of Red: A Romance" into 47 numbered sections (one short of the Homeric

corpus). This kind of generic play becomes increasingly important towards the conclusion of

Autobiography of Red, where the lyric/epic evolves into a "photographic essay" (*Red* 60) that

gives way to an interview which appears to be part of a drama. In Western literature, this

manipulation of genres begins, according to Carson's proem, with Stesichoros.

Carson explains Stesichoros's achievement in terms of adjectives, which she calls "the

latches of being" (*Red* 4). "Homer's epithets," Carson writes in her proem, "are a fixed diction

with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in

place for epic consumption" (4). For example, in Homer "blood is *black*," "God's laughter is

unquenchable" (4), and the name Helen of Troy is attached to "an adjectival tradition of

whoredom already old by the time Homer used it" (5). As a young man, Stesichoros followed

Homer in "mak[ing] the most of Helen's matrimonial misadventures" in his lost *Helen* (J.

Davidson 200). However, for "no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the

latches" in mid-career (*Red* 5). Suddenly there was "nothing to interfere with horses being

hollow hooved" or a "river being *root silver*" (*Red* 5) and this change affected the fixed

characterization of Helen as a whore. Whereas Homer has Helen qualify her speech in the *Iliad* with disclaimers such as "slut that I am" (Lattimore 3.180), Stesichoros reconsiders the denigrating effects of these insults.[99] By rejecting the presentation of Helen as a (self-described) "nasty bitch evil-intriguing" (Lattimore 6.344),[100] Stesichoros implicated the men who made her both the prize and scapegoat of the Trojan War.

Legend has it that Stesichoros changed his attitude towards Helen after she blinded him. Newly deified, Helen revenged herself on the epic tradition by blinding Stesichoros when he engaged in the standard Homeric slander of her name. To regain his sight, Stesichoros spontaneously composed a *palinode* or counter-song, and performed a kind of public retraction. In its use of inversion, the *Palinode* parallels other innovations by Stesichoros in style (strophe/antistrophe/epode) and diction. To cite one example of relevance to *Autobiography of Red*, Stesichoros assigns Helen her husband's distinctive hair colour, ξανϑòς or reddish-brown (*Oxyrhynchus* 43), in fragment 2619 14.5 (probably from the *Iliou Persis*). By Maingon's count, the epithet "ξανϑòς belongs primarily to Menelaus (16 times in the *Iliad* and 15 in the *Odyssey*) while it is used in the feminine of Demeter (twice), of Agamede (once) and Ariadne (once, in the *Theogony*)" (86). In contrast, Homer leaves Helen's exalted beauty unspecified, enabling her to stand in more easily as a synecdoche for all women of treacherous beauty. Undoing this particular latch, "Stesichorus probably intended the relationship between Menelaus and Helen to be accentuated (perhaps ironically) by th[e] transference of the epithet regularly expected with Menelaus to his misguided wife" (Maingon 87). This simple verbal transgression not only speeds Helen's conversion from archetype to individual, it also sets a precedent for Carson's manipulation of epithets and proper nouns in her final interview, where Gertrude Stein answers questions in place of the "choir-master," Stesichoros.

Stein maintains a strong presence in the academic frame of Carson's novel in verse. Carson begins her proem with an epigram from Stein, "I like the feeling of words doing/ as they

want to do and as they have to do" (3) and then immediately situates Stesichoros "after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet" (3). Between the epigram and interview, Carson develops the connection between Stein and Stesichoros as a shared talent for fragmentation. Just as Stesichoros's adjectives broke with the standard diction of Homeric epic, Stein's experiments in sentence structure changed the face of twentieth century narrative by "repudiat[ing] the conventions of syntactical causality" (Kostelanetz xiv). In Stein's "cubist" (xxiii) treatment of the verbal surface, "nouns [. . .] are used in ways that obscure their traditional functions within the structure of a sentence," adverbs that "customarily come before a verb now follow it, and what might normally be the object of a sentence either becomes its subject or precedes it [. . .]. Instead of saying 'someone is alive,' Stein writes, 'Anyone can be a living one'" (xiv). For Stein as for Stesichoros, fragmentation serves as a means to destabilize fixed modes of representation and perception. Thus, when Carson returns rhetorically to the proem's titular question—"What difference did Stesichoros make?"(4)—she offers a comparison that directly links early Greek lyric to high modernist portraiture: "When Gertrude Stein had to sum up Picasso she said, 'This one was working.' So say of Stesichoros, 'This one was making adjectives'" (4). The theme of working—as in working with, belabouring, modifying— fragments serves as a bridge to the proem's conclusion, where Carson invites her readers to create their own work:

> [T]he fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a
> substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box
> with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment
> numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course
> keep shaking the box. "Believe me for meat and for myself," as Gertrude Stein
> says. Here. Shake. (6-7)

The interjection of Stein's voice here completes her framing of the proem. Stein's quotation also makes her words essential to the semantics of *Autobiography of Red* because they provide a clue to the meaning of "Red Meat" in the first two chapter titles.

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Stein's disturbing conflation of meat and self in a paragraph about the fragments of

Stesichoros jars momentarily, but the interjected quotation points back to "The Gender of

Sound," the final essay in Carson's *Glass, Irony, and God* (1992), where Carson contemplates

sexual *double-entendres* in antiquity and asserts that "putting a door on the female mouth

(mouth/vagina) has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present

day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and

death" (121). In the midst of discussing epithets attached to the voices/mouths of Helen,

Aphrodite, and Echo, Carson asks her reader to consider this description of the sound of

Gertrude Stein by the biographer M.D. Luhan:

> Gertrude was hearty. She used to roar with laughter, out loud. She
> had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved beef.
> These sentences, with their artful confusion of factual and metaphorical levels
> [. . .] projec[t] Gertrude Stein across the boundary of woman and human and
> animal kind into monstrosity. The simile "she had a laugh like a beefsteak" which
> identifies Gertrude Stein with cattle is followed at once by the statement "she
> loved beef" indicating that Gertrude Stein ate cattle. (*Glass* 121)

When compounded with details of Stein's "large physical size and lesbianism," Carson argues,

Luhan's allusion to cannibalism completes the "marginalization of [Stein's] personality" as a

"way to deflect her writings from literary centrality. If she is fat, funny-looking and sexually

deviant she must be a marginal talent, is the assumption" (121). *Autobiography of Red* redresses

this slight by giving Stein's voice increasing prominence in the story of a monster who tends a

herd of mythical red cattle and whose name means "roarer" or "speaker." Stein's epigrammatic

voice in the upper margin of the first page resurfaces as reported speech in the body of the

proem, as a stylistic echo in "Appendix C," and eventually as an active voice in the final

interview.

In the second section, "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros," Carson offers her own

experimental translation of the *Geryoneis*. Carson does not simply render the Greek into English.

Instead, she blends details from the *Geryoneis* and her upcoming adaptation of it to create a

hybrid translation. Her translations exaggerate the "strangeness [. . .] of language" (*Economy* 28) by incorporating foreign elements into fixed narratives and refusing the smooth transition of Greek into English. To alert the reader that scenes where, say, Geryon's mother takes him to his first day of school are not features of Stesichoros's text, Carson inserts anachronistic details such as "the ticking red taxi of the incubus" ("III") into the gaps of Stesichoros's narrative. Painting fragments in the manner of the cubists, Carson combines glimpses of ancient and modern narratives in a style that foreshadows the perspectival shifts of the concluding interview. Translation, in this way, becomes an act of composing elements from different epochs and speech genres, rather than an exercise in maintaining a uniform identity for the text across languages and periods.

Even Carson's direct translations are highly unconventional. For example, Carson translates only the latter half of fragment 15 (which she numbers 14), focusing on the moment of penetration in the conquest of Geryon by Herakles. The clipped diction in Carson's translation contrasts sharply with the heroic tone in Andrew Miller's version:

(Fr. S15)	XIV. Herakles' Arrow

[T]he arrow held its course straight through
  to the top of his head
and stained with crimson blood
  his breastplate and his gory limbs.
 	
Then Geryon's neck drooped
  to one side like a poppy
which, disfiguring its tender beauty,
  suddenly sheds its petals (A. Miller 77)
	Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's skull like a comb Made
	The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a
	Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze (*Red* 13)

Traditionally, the three-bodied grandson of Poseidon posed a formidable threat to Herakles. The Greek folk hero, as Carson notes ironically, "[g]ot the idea that Geryon was Death" (37). Although Herakles and Geryon are descended from immortals, both suspect they are mortal. Malcolm Davies therefore speculates that "the labours involving Cerberus and the Hesperides are recent in origin" and reads the tenth labour of Herakles as a "heroic journey to the land of the dead" ("Stesichoros" 278) in which the hero must attain "immortality and triumph over death"

(279). Carson's translation, on the other hand, makes Geryon a "boy" and sexualizes his encounter with Herakles by limiting the imagery to penetration, nudity and shame. Carson's version of the *Geryoneis* remains a "matter" of life and death, but the contemporary poet explicitly eroticizes the border between mortality and immortality. As translator and author of the romance, Carson foregrounds a homoerotic subtext that would have been obvious to the Greek audience of Stesichoros, but under the generic title of autobiography, Carson's work as a whole suggests a heterosexual subtext.

Carson pioneered this kind of experimental translation in "Mimnermos," but on a formal level the fragments of "Red Meat" begin to cohere only when Carson works the myth of Isis (conventionally represented with cattle horns) into the story of Geryon. While Carson's use of the Isis myth is not conventional, the Montrealer insists that "[c]onventions exist to be re-negotiated" ("Matrix" 12). Instead of modifying the story of Geryon to match the Egyptian myth, Carson appropriates formal elements of the myth and uses them to shape her narrative framework.

Numerous elements of the Isis myth resonate with the *Geryoneis*—the characters, the fetishization of red, the goddess' journey and triumph over death—but one story does not transpose onto the other. With her husband/brother Osiris, Isis ruled Egypt in its earliest epoch, introducing magical incantation, justice, and weaving in the company of the "watchdog of the gods," Anubis, with his "dog's head and spotted dog's coat" (Goodrich 30). Osiris taught writing, astronomy, poetry and "traveled throughout the world with his kinsman Heracles, spreading the science of agriculture" (Goodrich 30). Periodically, the siblings' peaceful kingdom suffered droughts brought on by their evil brother Seth, father of "Orthos the hound of Geryones" (Hesiod 101). Seth "haunted the delta region, his red hair flaming" (Goodrich 33), and consequently Egyptians "abhorred the color red, considering it a manifestation of all the forces of treachery, murder, and jealousy" (Goodrich 33). According to Plutarch, the inhabitants of Coptos hurled

asses off cliffs because of their red coats and Egyptians generally "sacrifice[d] red cattle" (165). Turning Egypt into a "Red Place," Seth trapped Osiris in a coffin and sent him floating down the Nile. Isis recovered her husband's coffin in Syria and revived him through a kind of necrophilic magic, only to have Seth chop him into 14 fragments and cast them into the Nile. Isis retrieved the fragments of Osiris, but "did not find [. . .] his male member [. . .]. In its place Isis fashioned a likeness of it and consecrated the phallus, in honour of which the Egyptians even today hold festival" (Plutarch 145). Revived, Osiris ascended to the sky and left his wife to rule in his absence, her power confirmed by the symbolic phallus entrusted to her priestesses.

This theme of a reconstituted "body of fragments" provides the most important link to the structure of *Autobiography of Red*. The ordeal of Isis pertains to "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros" because Carson's chapter title makes an explicit connection between authorial corpse and literary corpus. These terms are similarly interchangeable in Plutarch's *De Osiride et Iside* where the historian writes that Typhon (Seth) "scatters and destroys the sacred Word which the goddess [Isis] collects and puts together and delivers to those undergoing initiation [. . .] of which the end is the knowledge of the First and the Lord" (121). In this context, Carson's "brainsex" is a kind of necrophilia. "Words after all are dead," Carson tells di Michele, "[t]hey impersonate life vividly but remain dead" (14-15). Lacking the presence of Stesichoros's original text, Carson must work—Isis-like—with likeness (that is, citations, testimonia) and absence (textual gaps). "No passage longer than thirty lines is quoted from [Stesichoros]," Carson explains, "and papyrus scraps (still being found: the most recent fragments were recovered from cartonnage in Egypt in 1977) withhold as much as they tell" (6). The fragments of the *Geryoneis*—like the fragments of the story of the house of Oedipus by Stesichoros, recovered from a mummy case in 1974—are pieces of the Stesichorean/Osirian body that Carson must summon all her poetic and academic craft to revive. However, Carson does not, like Isis, use the power of inscription entrusted to her to uphold patriarchal codes. Rather, like Marlatt,

she pieces together a textual Frankenstein that will subvert these codes by redefining the gender of the authorial body.

Carson's translations are not simply a re-membering of the Greek poets in English. In choosing to work with fragments of Mimnermos and Stesichoros, Carson deliberately chooses texts that have been dis-membered—as the missing book in Carson's "epic" underscores. While Carson's scholarly work resuscitates these nearly forgotten poems, the fictional elements of her writing actively resist any attempt to restore the authority of "the First and the Lord." Thus, ironically, Stesichoros's "master-text" undergoes the same overhaul to which the lyricist subjected his epic predecessors, and the Mimnermos interviews are complicated by the Greek's insistently phallic language. In the first interview, Mimnermos corrects the interviewer's use of the word "mystical": "M: Mystical I don't think we had a word mystical we had gods we had words for gods 'hidden in the scrutum [sic] of Zeus' we used to say for instance, proverbially" (*Plainwater* 20). Similarly, the second interview terminates when Mimnermos (named for his grandfather) objects to the interviewer's question on disguises:

> M: Well eventually someone has to call a boat a boat you can't dismember
> everything
> I: Dismember
> M: Sorry I meant remember
> I: Freud was named for his grandfather too (22-23)

In *Autobiography of Red*, Stesichoros and Helen engage in a similar linguistic power struggle, but one which suggests a paradigm for Carson's translations. The red-headed Helen of the *Palinode* offers Carson a second role-model for reconstituting the male corpse/corpus with a difference.

Carson's "Appendix A: Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen" uses citations such as Isokrates's *Helen* 64 to demonstrate how Helen goes from being the object of language to an active agent (in)forming it:

> Looking to demonstrate her own power Helen made an object lesson of the poet Stesichoros. For the fact is he began his poem "Helen" with a bit of blasphemy. Then when he stood up he found he'd been robbed of his eyes. Straightaway realizing why, he composed the so-called "Palinode" and Helen restored him to his own nature. (*Red* 15)

Carson offers no commentary here, but it is clear that in her appendices and "Red Meat" fragments Carson is also making "an object lesson of the poet Stesichoros." Carson restores the "vision" of Stesichoros by reconstituting his literary corpus and presenting it to the eye of the modern reader. But just as Helen's magic altered Stesichoros's impression of her, Carson's translation of the *Geryoneis* creates a new portrait of the ancient Greek lyricist.

"Appendix B" consists solely of a translated fragment from Stesichoros's famous retraction. The thrice-repeated "No" in the palinode is unique to Carson's translation. It echoes the use of "(no)" as a caesura in the first brainsex painting, "What is life without Aphrodite" (3), and "measures out the area of the given and the possible" (*Economy* 118) along a margin of negatives:

> No it is not the true story.
> No you never went on the benched ships.
> No you never came to the towers of Troy. (*Red* 17)

Such fragments withhold as much as they tell, as Carson observed earlier. Although Carson does not state it explicitly, Stesichoros's revised story of Helen amounts to "a revolutionary version of the legend of Helen. [. . .] Such an innovation called into question the entire mythical basis for the legend of the Trojan War" (Maingon 300). Contradicting Homer, Stesichoros argues in his *Palinode* that the *eidolon* (image, phantom) of Helen goes to Troy with Paris, while the real Helen waits out the war in Egypt, where Euripides finds her in his *Helen*.[101] Carson, too, follows Stesichoros's version of the Helen story in her uncollected poem about the daughter of Tyndareus. Carson's "Helen" begins with the statement, "Nights of a marriage are like an Egypt in a woods," and proceeds to imagine Troy vanishing, "murmuring, stain/ is a puzzle you do not want/ the answer to" (*Boston Review*). Although there is some debate in the matter, A.M. Dale

argues—in a view corroborated by Maingon (307)—that there can be "no serious doubt that, as all antiquity believed, the *eidolon*-story was the bold invention of Stesichorus, a volte-face in mid-career, possibly the outcome of a visit to Sparta" (Dale xxiii) where Helen was worshipped as a goddess. Stesichoros's Helen story never supplanted Homer's version, but it created a rival interpretation well-known throughout antiquity. Thus, in *The Republic,* Plato can remark without embellishment that "as Stesichoros says the wraith of Helen was fought for at Troy through ignorance of the truth" (9.586c). Using absence to define presence, the *eidolon* story stresses the fact that the Trojan war was fought, not over a woman, but over the way a woman was imagined.

In *Helen: Myth, Legend and the Culture of Misogyny,* Robert Meagher explains the crucial and codified role Helen played in the mythological foundations of Greece:

> Helen—goddess, wife, consort, whore—[figured as] the epitome of woman to the Greek eye. In ancient Greek poetry and art, Helen was indeed always more than *a* woman who brought on *a* war. The Trojan War, whatever its actual insignificance may have been, stood as the paradigm for all war and Helen, its reputed cause, was the avatar of the feminine, the provocatrice of all mischief and pain, the original *femme fatale*. This synecdoche by which Helen was seen as all women and by which all women were seen as "Helens" was a simple liberty taken by the ancient tradition and operative, in one guise or another, ever since. (Meagher 10)

Stesichoros's challenge to the received "truth" about Helen—the paragon of that "deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble" (Hesiod 123)—called her vilification into question. However, Carson is not content with a simple reversal of value judgements. Having apprenticed in "No," Carson attempts to go beyond the rigid opposition of truth and falsehood in "Appendix C: Clearing Up The Question of Stesichoros' Blinding by Helen."

In fact, the twenty-one syllogisms in "Appendix C" clear up nothing at all. On the contrary, the mock-syllogisms "induce a narcosis of logic" (Rasula 188) by manipulating the binary movement of statement and counter-statement. Pressuring the gaps created by language,

Carson begins with the simple syllogism, "1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not" (18) and proceeds to more vertiginous and Steinian statements: "10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back" (19). Circling and supplementing, Carson draws out the phantom of doubt in deduction's linear movement towards truth. Welcoming this spirit of doubleness, Carson then launches her reader into "Autobiography of Red: A Romance," the principal narrative in *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*.

The romance within the *roman* suggests a duplicity befitting the novel's second version of the Geryon myth. Likewise, the multiple potential meanings of "autobiography"—of red, of Geryon, of a concealed "I"—make a fitting introduction to the story of a monster whose "triplicity makes him a natural symbol of deceit" and whose spirit "presides over the second of the three lowest regions of Dante's Hell, the circles of those who sinned by fraud" (M. Robertson 210). Carson's "duplication" of Geryon makes little attempt to be true to the classical version. Gone are two of Geryon's three conjoined torsos, his blue hair and his yellow skin, familiar to classicists from his sculpture (c. 560 BCE) at the Athenian Acropolis (Boardman 77; "Geryon"). The red cattle and the "little red dog" of the fragments also disappear. Instead, Carson makes red a symbol of sexual drought in the romance and colours her anti-hero in the ochre of desire. By reducing details and narrowing the narrative focus to a lyric subjectivity that frequently approximates the first person, Carson makes Geryon the representative of passion *in extremis* in "Autobiography of Red" and concentrates the reader's empathy on her little red misfit.

Although Carson sometimes claims not to "fee[l] easy talking about blood or desire" (*Plainwater* 189), Eros is in fact the subject of her first collection of essays and the principal theme of her poetry. "The vocation of anger is not mine," Carson writes in "The Glass Essay":

I know my source.

> It is stunning, it is a moment like no other,
> when one's lover comes in and says I do not love you anymore. (*Glass* 30-31)

By translating the power struggle between Herakles and Geryon in the *Geryoneis* into a story of sexual conquest and unrequited love, Carson once again addresses "that custom, the human custom/ of wrong love" (*Red* 75). Geryon's love is not wrong because he is gay. On the contrary, Carson offers sensitive renderings of same-sex desire in several of her long poems, most strikingly in "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve" (about a professor of ancient Greek who falls in love with one of her female students). Geryon's sexuality serves instead to complete his alienation. His desire pushes him away from his (otherwise) supportive mother and makes him dependent on Herakles at the very moment that Herakles terminates their love affair. It is from this perspective of powerful desire and disempowering attachment that Carson prefers to explore "How people get power over one another,/ this mystery" (*Red* 79). Dominant-subordinate relations—particularly their inversion—fascinate Carson, whether the relations be between men, between women, between men and women, or between a master-text and its adaptation.

Carson's genre-mixing is appropriate in this context because, as she explains in *Eros the Bittersweet*, the "terms 'novel' and 'romance' do not reflect an ancient name for the genre. Chariton refers to his work as *erōtika pathēmata*, or 'erotic sufferings': these are love stories in which it is generically required that love be painful" (78). Most of Geryon's "erotic suffering" takes place in Erytheia, a combination of Stesichoros's mythic "Red Place" and contemporary Montreal. "Somehow Geryon make[s] it to adolescence" (39) in this setting, surviving his brother's sexual abuse and the humiliation that a public school would hold for a winged red child. Then, in "one of those moments that is the opposite of blindness" (39), "Herakles step[s] off/ the bus from New Mexico" (39) and Geryon falls in love. The term "wrong love" acquires a double-meaning in this scene because of the echo in Carson's metaphor of blind Stesichoros

"restored to his nature." In Geryon's visionary moment of sexual awakening, he sees that gay love is right for him, yet he is blind to his choice of lover. It takes Geryon the entire course of the narrative to admit that his unrequited desire, his "wrong love" for Herakles, is "[d]egrading" (144).

There is a hint of national allegory here as Herakles makes a quick conquest of Geryon and, tiring of him, moves on to more exotic challenges in South America. Carson's Erytheia is a North American island where older brothers play hockey (34), where baby-sitters read from "the loon book" (32), where an American dollar bill is a novelty (29), and where schoolchildren examine "beluga whales newly captured/ from the upper rapids of the Churchill River" (90). Arriving in Erytheia, Herakles instantly makes Geryon his love slave. As in Stesichoros's *Geryoneis*, Herakles represents the unitary subject who subdues hybird monsters at the edges of empire. He is the epitome of the masculine ideal described by de Lauretis in her discussion of the quest narrative ("Desire" 109) and Carson's portrait of him matches his traditional profile as "the heroic individual, performing incredible feats, single-handed, in remote corners of the earth" (Maingon 292). With a club and arrows dipped in the gall of the many-headed hydra (slain in the second labour), Herakles kills the two-headed guard dog Orthos and then destroys (the fragments suggest) each of Geryon's three heads individually. Similarly, in "Autobiography of Red," Herakles "slays" the man-dragon of the north and then assumes control over his Quechua-Peruvian lover Ancash—"a man as beautiful as a live feather" (112) whose name suggests both economic and cultural currency (Ancash's name occurs in a Quechua folk song that Herakles sings against Ancash's wishes). As if to confirm Herakles's covetousness, the "master of monsters" (129) enlists Geryon and Ancash to help him steal a statue of Tezca the tiger god when Geryon runs into the couple in Buenos Aires years later. However, Carson also confirms the association of Geryon with fraud, because she invented the name of Ancash, as well as the

Quechua folk song, so that she "couldn't settle on a meaning" ("Woman" 31). Since the narrative adopts Geryon's point of view, one should not trust its information to be reliable.

Moreover, although Carson states in an interview that Geryon's accent is Canadian ("Woman" 30), one should not push the national allegory too far. In addition to McGill, Carson has taught at Princeton, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan, and her books, with the exception of her first chapbook, have been published in the United States. A recipient of the Lannan Award (1996), Pushcart Prize (1997), Guggenheim Fellowship (1998), and MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (2000) in United States, Carson has so far been honoured with only one national award in her native country, the inaugural Griffin Poetry Prize (2001). Her border-crossing is such that one American poetry editor calls Carson, without qualification, "our new Emerson" (Beam). While this is a high compliment in some circles, little in Carson's work suggests an interest in nation building, either Canadian or American. As the contemporary North American setting for her Geryon story indicates, Carson uses myth to span the borders of time and space, not to entrench national boundaries.

Furthermore, Carson's topography remains resolutely mythic. "Herakles' hometown of Hades" lies "at the other end of the island [Erytheia] about four hours by car, a town/ of moderate size and little importance/ except for one thing" (46), it has a volcano. On an early visit to this volcano, Herakles breaks up with Geryon and the molten, volatile volcano immediately becomes a metaphor for Geryon's emotional life. Years later, when Geryon runs into Herakles and Ancash in South America, they are recording the sound of volcanoes for a documentary on Emily Dickinson. The couple take Geryon with them to record the volcano Icchantikas in Peru, where Geryon finally frees himself from Herakles. Along the way, however, Ancash discovers Geryon's wings and tells him the Quechua myth of the Yazcol Yazcamac, eyewitnesses who descend into the volcano and "return as red people with wings,/ all their weaknesses burned away—/ and their mortality" (129). This mythic frame transforms

Geryon's status as an outsider to that of a liminal figure—"One Who Went and Saw and Came Back" (128)— whose role is to transgress boundaries that others cannot cross.

The association of Geryon with volcanoes, "Lava Man" (59) and the Yazcol Yazcamac is not coincidental. In *Hercules' Labours* Jan Schoo argues that Geryon personifies the volcano El Tiede on the Canary Island of Tenerife. Schoo cites as evidence the meaning of Geryon's name ("roarer"), the winged images of the volcano Talos on Crete, and the fact that Geryon's dog Orthos is the "brother of Kerberos, the hellhound, one of the most outstanding representatives of the underworld" (Schoo 86). Maingon furthers the equation of Geryon with volcanoes by pointing out that in fragment 4 of the *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros uses the epithet κορυφη in its "less common sense of 'head.' [. . . Retaining] the epithet most frequently associated with the word in its sense 'mountain'[,] he has deliberately suggested both potential meanings, magnifying the dimensions of the monster" (Maingon 60). This monster occupies a critical position between nature and culture, disorder and order, inhuman and human.

However, if one tries to determine the gender of this volcano/monster, an important fissure emerges in the narrative. The first reference to a volcano in the romance occurs in the opening stanza of its epigram, a heavily allegorical poem about speech and immortality by Emily Dickinson, #1748. The first stanza of #1748 offers a surprising variation on Dickinson's "often reiterated analogy of the self as a dormant volcano" (Dobson 107):

> The reticent volcano keeps
> His never slumbering plan—
> Confided are his projects pink
> To no precarious man. (*Red* 22)

While the masculine adjectives in this stanza may refer to the "Jehovah" of the second stanza, I choose to apply them to the volcano because Dickinson usually (see, for example, #1651, #1686)—though not always (see #1601)—capitalizes adjectives and pronouns referring to God. In either case, as an epigram, "his projects pink" alludes to Geryon's "autobiography" which

begins as "a sculpture" (*Red* 35) when the reticent monster is five years old. Ultimately, Geryon's autobiography "take[s] the form/ of a photographic essay" (60) and helps Geryon to get over the fickle Herakles. However, the fact that Geryon's "photographic essay" is a thinly veiled metaphor for Carson's lyric sequence (which culminates in a series of eight "photographs") undermines Geryon's masculinity. The final two stanzas in Dickinson's poem compound this ambiguity. Like the antistrophe and epode in Stesichoros's verse, Dickinson's second stanza introduces a female counterpart to the male volcano, while the third stanza changes the mood with an abstract aphorism that reconciles male and female figures as "people" with a shared secret:

> If nature will not tell the tale
> Jehovah told to her
> Can human nature not survive
> Without a listener?
>
> Admonished by her buckled lips
> Let every babbler be
> The only secret people keep
> Is Immortality. (*Red* 22)

The prize of immortality for which Geryon and Herakles struggle is, in Dickinson's hymn, a secret divulged by neither the reticent volcano nor the woman with "buckled lips." While this secret is not directly verbalized, Dickinson none the less conveys it as a property of "lyric time" (Cameron 4)—that sudden eruption of past and future into the poem's present tense that Carson calls "*Volcano Time*" (*Red* 144). Both Dickinson and Carson prefer these lyric flashes of eternity to the plodding flow of continuous narrative: "Much truer/ is the time that strays into photographs and stops" (*Red* 93). One of these moments occurs in photograph "#1748," the synchronic and synaesthetic climax of Geryon's erotic suffering, where Geryon takes Ancash's tape recorder to the summit of Icchantikas to record an instant that blurs the borders between acoustic and visual, female and male, nature and culture.

Photograph "#1748" stands out because, in addition to sharing the numbered title of Dickinson's epigram, it "is a photograph he [Geryon] never took, no one here took it" (*Red* 145). The poem depicts an event that is the inverse of Bowering's experience as an aerial photographer, because in this case the photographer becomes the target. Following an ambiguous preamble, in which Carson once again casts doubt on the identity of the autobiographical subject, the "eyewitness" descends into eye/I of the volcano:

> He peers down
> at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he smiles for
> the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep" (*Red* 145)

The picture taken of the eyewitness by "her ancient eye" in this scene is a kind of mirror image—a self-portrait that borrows its title from the final lines of Dickinson's poem. Dickinson's interjected fragment, like the Stein quotation earlier, enters the narrative abruptly, yet comes close enough to the end of the romance to frame it. The once-reticent male volcano thus concludes the romance using a feminine adjective and speaking in Dickinson's voice. Carson completes this transition from phallic to labial imagery in the concluding lyric where the three men stare at "the hole of fire" in the side of the volcano and Carson explicitly distinguishes between the men and the fire to which they are "neighbors" (146).

Such "lateral fissures"—"called fire lips by vulcanologists" (105)—permeate Carson's romance. The most striking example occurs in the poem "She," where Geryon finds himself in the bedroom of Herakles's mother and asks, "Who am I?" (57). Surveying the mother's pearls and slips, Geryon is shocked to see himself "in the mirror cruel as a slash of lipstick [. . .]./ He had been here before, dangling/ inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt" (57). While this simile seems to disparage femininity as passive and ornamental, the pronoun "she" carries extra weight coming from a poet who tells di Michele: "I cannot stand reading reviews of my work (I skim) or in general sentences in which I appear as 'she'" (17). Di Michele pursues the question

of why Carson presents herself as "a person of no particular gender" (*Plainwater* 123) in her writing:

> MDM: In "The Anthropology of Water" you write: "I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely use the word woman myself . . . The truth is, I lived out my adolescence mainly in default of my father's favour. But I perceived I could trouble him less if I had no gender . . . I made my body hard and flat as the armor of Athena. No secrets under my skin, no telltale drops on the threshold." What is the relationship of your writing to this word "woman"? To being a woman?
> AC: A relationship of dis-ease as I suggested in the passage you quote.
> MDM: Are "feminisms" of interest to you?
> AC: Not currently. Particular females are of interest to me. (14)

Although Carson names Stein and Dickinson among the writers of interest to her, she clearly does not (like Marlatt) present herself as a proponent of an *écriture feminine*. It is important to note, however, that Carson's relationship to patriarchy in "The Anthropology of Water" is also one of "dis-ease." This long poem begins with Carson struggling to understand the "word salad" (*Plainwater* 120) of her ailing father, who suffers from dementia, and concludes with Carson writing from the perspective of her estranged brother. As in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson treats gender here as a phenomenon to be explored through fictional guises. If Carson presents herself as a person "of no particular gender" in her writing, it is because she refuses to restrict herself to the perspective of a woman. Similarly, if Carson's novel in verse is of no particular genre, it is because Carson wants to explore what Manina Jones calls *That Art of Difference*: collage.

The fundamental question in *Autobiography of Red* is thus not whether Geryon is a "he" or a "she," but rather how this "monster" can negotiate the conflicts entailed by loving and existing in a world more complex than its social, linguistic, and literary conventions would suggest. "Gay, red and winged," Geryon "wants to know how to survive in a world where difference equals pain" (Marlatt, "Poignant" 42). Herakles's photographer grandmother suggests one solution to this dilemma by redefining Geryon's question during a conversation on women

and art: "Question is/ how they use it—given/ the limits of form" (67). Nowhere is Carson's

questioning of gender as a question of genre more explicit.

The final section of *Autobiography of Red* tests the limits of gender and genre. Titled

simply "Interview"—with "(Stesichoros)" set below the title and divided from it by a double

line—it unfolds as a dialogue about literature:

> I: One critic speaks of a sort of "concealment drama" going on in your work some
> special interest in finding out what or how people act when they know that
> important information is being withheld this might have to do with an aesthetic of
> blindness or even a will to blindness if that is not a tautology
> S: I will tell about blindness
> I: Yes do
> S: First I must tell about seeing (*Red* 147)

Carson sets up the reader to expect that Stesichoros will describe his blinding by Helen.

However, the conversation makes a sudden chronological leap:

> S: Up to 1907 I was seriously interested in seeing I studied and practiced it I
> enjoyed it
> I: 1907
> S: I will tell about 1907
> [. . .]
> S: Paintings completely covered the walls right up to the ceiling at the time the
> atelier was lit by gas fixtures and it glowed like a dogma but this is not what I saw
> (*Red* 147)

This shift in time-frame alerts the reader that returning to Carson's "scholarly apparatus" entails

entering "a wickedly parodistic parallel universe to the novel inside it" (Macklin). The proem

and interview surrounding Carson's romance prove not to be merely a passive frame, but rather

active agents in determining the course of the larger story. As Jacques Derrida argues in

"Parergon," those elements marked as extrinsic to the *ergon*, or principal artwork, in fact perform

an intrinsic function in mediating the borders of that artwork (71). Carson employs this

mediating power to shift the focus of the story and resituate Stein, Helen, and Dickinson—

women marked as extrinsic to the history of Stesichoros, Geryon and Herakles—in more

intrinsic positions. This manipulation of frames is a question of self-definition for "ex-centric"

(Hutcheon, *Canadian* 4) writers because, as Derrida notes, "*Parergon* also means the exceptional, the strange, the extraordinary" (58), revealing how easy it is for ex-ceptional writers such as Stein and Dickinson to be dismissed as merely strange.

With the temporal frame destabilized, the reader's eye turns towards the left margin of the interview transcript for several reasons. First of all, the references to a gas-lit atelier, paintings and 1907 make it clear that the "S" in the column stands for Stein, not Stesichoros. Secondly, *Autobiography of Red* has been, thus far, an autobiography without an "I." Suddenly the reader is confronted with an interviewing "I" speaking in the first person. Remembering that Stesichoros often "spok[e] in his own *persona* in the introduction and conclusion of his poems" without "intru[ding] within the framework of the narrative itself" (Maingon 358), one is to presume that the interviewing "I" is Carson's academic persona returning from the proem. Thus the women's voices framing the male narrative have moved from the extrinsic positions of epigram and proem to occupy more intrinsic positions in a story they actively create as direct speakers.

Carson achieves this subversive manoeuver within the limits of literary form. According to myth, each of Herakles's 12 *althoi* or *erga*, labours or works, included minor deeds called *parerga* or *side-works* (Schoo 7). Thus, the *ergon* of stealing the red cattle included the *parerga* of killing Geryon and Orthos. Stesichoros transforms the myth of Herakles into the *Geryoneis* by moving the parergonal figure of Geryon from the myth's periphery to its centre. Carson duplicates this parergonal movement by having Stein supplant Stesichoros in the mock-interview. Just as Carson's opening section on Stesichoros begins with an epigram from Stein, the final section on Stein begins with the proper noun "(Stesichoros)" suspended in parentheses. The choir master unmastered figures as the starting point in a word play between Stein and Carson where the contemporary poet accentuates the epithetic origins of the Greek proper noun. Once famous for his unconventional adjectives, Stesichoros looks on from the wings as the

women's concealment drama takes centre stage. The reputed inventor of the choral hymn (a form of performance involving several singers and dance, and a precursor of drama) finds himself listening silently to a duet of female voices, neither of which appears to command control. This *hymn* become *her* casts an ironic pall over the title of the romance's final lyric, "XLVII. The Flashes in Which a Man Possesses Himself." Clearly, women's voices have taken possession of the narrative at this point.

Carson, like Stein, parodies autobiography's pretense to objective self-expression by using the genre as a means of fictional disembodiment. In Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, for example, Stein tells the story of her life through the fictional voice of her lover, Alice Toklas. Only on the final page of Toklas's autobiography does Stein concede her authorial ruse. Stein's originality—as Shirley Neuman argues in *Gertrude Stein: Autobiography and the Problem of Narration*—lies in her "repudiation for literary purposes of the continuity of the self": "Once [Stein] reconceptualizes narrative as that written as though by someone else, as analogous to translation, she begins to free herself to write about the 'self' without concern for its duration and consequent identity" (17). Carson, likewise, dons several literary disguises— Athena, Stesichoros, Geryon, Stein—in search of "another human essence than self" (*Glass* 137). Each of the distinct voices in her identity collage offer a kind of testimony that, while it cannot be "regarded as credible history," none the less shapes "our notion of who the poet [i]s as a person."

And Carson's concealment drama has a final act. Reading the interview's marginal inscription vertically, one finds that the Steinian "ISISISISISISISISISIS" transforms—through the difference generated by repetition—from an assertion of being "*Is* is" to an ontological question "Is *is*?" (A similar question is raised if one reads the margin inscription of the Mimnermos interviews as "IMIMIMIMIMIMIMIM"). And whom could the subject be hiding behind these verbs but Isis, "she of the thousand titles" (Goodrich 27)? As a clue to this

encryption, the Montrealer disguises her voice in vintage Montmartre and shifts "Isis" from the

left margin to the main narrative: [102]

> I: Description can we talk about description
> S: What is the difference between a volcano and a guinea pig is not a description
> why is it like it *is is* a description (my emphasis 148)

Isis is not directly named here, she is de-scribed, her name fragmentarily en-crypted in a passage

that stresses the difference between surface appearance and a dynamic understanding of form.

Such concealment pays homage to the goddess, as Plutarch explains: "At Saïs the seated statue

of Athena, whom they consider to be Isis also, bore the following inscription: 'I am all that has

been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle'" (131). The secret Isis keeps,

having struggled hard to win it for Osiris and herself, is immortality.

While the secret of immortality remains intact, Carson creates a sense of temporal

continuity across her works, as well as expanding the context of *Autobiography of Red*, by

serializing key phrases and performing variations on certain forms from book to book. For

example, *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001) is a meditation on the Keatsean adage that beauty is

truth. While Carson endorses this belief to a certain extent (141), she also creates a palinode

from Keats fragments which implies the opposite:

> {Not for the glance itse}
> {Not for the fiery glance itelf perhaps}
> {Nor at the glance itsef} (137)

The husband in this poem, whose fiery glance is as cruel as it is beautiful, creates another echo to

Autobiography of Red by reiterating one of the questions that perplexes Geryon: "How do people

get power over one another [?]" (15). The woman, who resembles Geryon more than the man,

takes up this question later (38), but Carson confounds any easy transposition of one narrative

onto the other by also assigning the autobiographical "I" to the husband in poems such as

"XXVII. HUSBAND: I AM" (129-30). Indeed, it is the husband who "write[s] paintings" (115)

in this book. Yet the woman also writes, and Carson builds a legend around her own early

poetry by having the woman write "a short talk ('On Defloration')" which the husband steals and

has "published/ in a small quarterly magazine" (11). Carson's original short talk is set in Venice

and describes the loss of virginity, yet the woman in the later book insists that "Neither of us had

ever seen Venice" (11). Thus, while *The Beauty of the Husband* might seem to be Carson's

autobiographical take on her failed eight-year marriage—which would establish a

masternarrative for the subtext of her previous books—the concealment drama none the less

continues. Indeed, the woman's comments on her husband, who is a serial adulterer, also reflect

on Carson's own compositional process. Discussing the husband's mistress with Ray, the

couple's mutual friend (who is perhaps an echo of the Ray Charles soundtrack that accompanies

another couple on their ill-fated journey in "The Anthropology of Water"), the gay friend

advises:

> [D]on't waste your tears on this one.
> This one. It's a series?
>
> It's a gap in a series the series is you. (74)

Playing with self-reflexive repetitions and gaps even within this short passage, Carson

mythologizes her own work through a carefully orchestrated use of echoes. Yet she also

unframes each installment of the myth in her series on marital heartbreak.

There is also an intriguing resonance between *Autobiography of Red* and another

Montreal novel about a love triangle, Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (1966). The manner in

which Carson re-veils Isis's secret in her concluding interview recalls a key scene in *Beautiful

Losers* where the historian-protagonist demands that his Mohawk lover reveal her true identity.

The woman replies by stating the motto of Isis—the meaning of which Cohen conceals by

transcribing it in Greek (195). I am not suggesting that Carson modeled her book on *Beautiful

Losers*, but there are formal echoes between the two works that establish some interesting

continuities in the poet's novel in Canada. Like the *Geryoneis*, *Beautiful Losers* is triadic in

structure. The first section, "The History of Them All," is a personal narrative by the historian

that doubles as an essay on the Mohawk Saint, Catherine Tekakwitha. The second section, "A

Long Letter from F," is an incantatory narrative, parts of which have been anthologized as lyric

poetry (Geddes 338), composed by a sexual and political revolutionary not unlike Carson's

Herakles. Cohen's final section, "Beautiful Losers," features a visit to the System Theatre, after

which the historian takes to the sky and reconstitutes himself as Ray Charles in a cinematic

apotheosis (258). This final section is subtitled "An Epilogue in the Third Person" and the

sudden shift in narrative perspective performs a similar, if inverted, transformation to the one

that the interviewing "I" performs in *Autobiography of Red.*

Thus, Carson does not use the *Geryoneis*, the myth of Isis, or even her own

autobiographical material as a fixed template, but rather sets in motion a series of literary

allusions that intertwines ancient and modern, masculine and feminine, Greek and Quechua,

Egyptian and Canadian. These surprising juxtapositions are the hallmark of Carson's style,

whether in long poems such as "The Glass Essay," where she "weaves and conflates one theme

with another [. . .] tell[ing] two strong stories with Tolstoyan skill" (Davenport ix), or in

academic works such as *Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*,

where Carson explains her technique in a "Note on Method":

> To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling. Partly for this reason I
> have chosen to talk about two men at once. They keep each other from settling.
> Moving and not settling, they are side by side in a conversation and yet no
> conversation takes place [. . .]. With and against, aligned and adverse, each is like
> a surface on which the other may come into focus. (*Economy* viii)

In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson manipulates and conflates her source material, "exploding

genres and making literature from shrapnel" (Greenman). Drawing female and male literary

figures into closer focus through a series of alternating frames, Carson combines the Osirian art

of writing with the Isian art of weaving to create "good strong narrative" through constant

fragmentation and displacement of material. These shifting frames of reference are far from

settled, as the reappearance of the "little red dog" (149) in the final lines of the interview underscores. *Autobiography of Red* thus demonstrates that the frameworks of myth, genre, and gender are volatile and constantly subject to revision.

However, while Carson has put volatility to use, she has also been its victim. The praise that was initially heaped on Carson for producing such dazzling hybrids has since prompted a backlash. When Carson was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for *The Beauty of the Husband* in January, 2002, the Canadian national newspapers responded with articles entitled "Poet or 'Prize-Reaping Machine'?" (Heer B5) and "Who's Afraid of Anne Carson?" (Martin R3). Carson's most virulent critic, David Solway, who is cited in both articles, condemns *The Beauty of the Husband* for blurring the lines between poetry and prose: "Decently compressed and tucked into the featureless prose that is its natural medium, *Husband* would make a tidy little article on marital infidelity in *Chatelaine*" ("Trouble" 26). His sentiments are echoed by the poetry editor for *The Guardian* (UK), who reacted to the awarding of the Eliot Prize by complaining that Carson's poetics exhibit "Neither Rhyme nor Reason": "[*Husband*] fails as poetry, simply because it shows either crashing inability or an unbecoming contempt for the medium. Its materials—the narrative, its details and a dry wit are engaging enough—would have made for a compelling short story" (Potts 2). These are isolated voices, of course, and they do not reflect the general reception of Carson's work. Nor can the critics agree on the particulars of their judgments. For example, the simile "He could fill structures of/ threat with a light like the earliest olive oil" in *The Beauty of the Husband* has been cited by critics as an example of Carson's brilliance (Sutherland, "Tango" D3) and shortcomings as a poet (Merkin 3; Solway 26). However, what is certain is that Carson has challenged her critics to reconsider their notion of what structure is in poetry and the novel. Thus, in a largely enthusiastic review of *Husband* in *The New York Times*, Daphne Merkin hails Carson as "one of the great pasticheurs" (2) and recommends that what Carson's "fellow poets would do well to ask themselves is not whether

what Carson is writing can or cannot be called poetry, but how has she succeeded in making it—whatever label you give it—so thrillingly new?" (3). Carson's hybrids are certainly thrilling, but, at least in a Canadian context, it is rather overstated to say that they are brand new. Given the intermingling of lyric and narrative in the other writers I have discussed, it is simply not the case that "Carson's writing is without precedent in Canada" (Wilson D18). I will return to Carson's reputedly incongruous relation to Canadian literature in my discussion of Lynn Crosbie in my Conclusion.

CONCLUSION

(Un)framing the Book

> One unanswered question of Canadian literature is why so many celebrated fiction writers begin and continue as poets: Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, of course, but also, more recently, Anne Michaels and Jane Urquhart. (Sutherland, "Jane" D13)

I began this study by suggesting one response to this type of question by *Globe and Mail* poetry reviewer Fraser Sutherland. I have illustrated that for Ondaatje, Bowering, Kogawa, Marlatt, and Carson, the long poem facilitated the transition from the lyric to the novel by allowing them to develop a serial form of narrative that can convey a sense of duration without sacrificing the intensity and concision of the lyric. However, even Sutherland's brief statement illustrates the difficulty of addressing a topic as broad as the poet's novel in Canada. Many more poet-novelists have been left out of this study than have been included.

One could redress this oversight by returning to the bifurcated "place to begin" an "archaeology" of the contemporary Canadian long poem proposed by Kroetsch ("Play" 119) and start with Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* instead of Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.* Although Atwood makes a point of distinguishing the lyric voice of her poetry from the narrative voice of her prose ("Why" 48), there are strong formal and thematic echoes between *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and *Surfacing.* For example, the "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" in *Journals* (30-1) prefigures the death of the father by drowning in *Surfacing,* such that Atwood speaks in what she calls "The Double Voice" (*Journals* 40) in her treatment of the theme. This doubling of genres mirrors Atwood's established penchant for doubling the "You" and "I" in her poetry, such that one perspective is the flipside of the other yet necessarily joined.[103] In this context, her long poem and novel are inextricably linked, although stylistically distinct.[104]

Alternatively, one could begin with Kroetsch himself and thus invert my thesis. I have shown that an author can approach the novel through the lyric, but Kroetsch achieved the rare feat of proceeding in the opposite direction. Thus, Bowering hails Kroetsch as Canada's "most admired and imitated poet" while noting that many "poets write a good novel or two, and most novelists try to write poetry, but it is very rare that a novelist becomes a very good poet" (*Magpie* 202). While Bowering's use of the superlative is probably excessive, Kroetsch has certainly had a profound effect on the Canadian long poem and on the writers collected in the early long poem anthologies. For example, Bowering has written an essay on Kroetsch's poetic technique entitled "Stone Hammer Narrative" (*Imaginary* 171-83), and Ondaatje has written an unproduced screenplay for Kroetsch's 1975 novel *Badlands*. Like Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, this novel features an intermediary figure named Web, but the novel is of particular interest here because its use of framing devices suggests a connection to Kroetsch's narrative long poem, *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001).

Badlands is principally the story of the relationship between the archeologist William Dawe and his daughter Anna. Anna collects her father's field notes (*Completed Field Notes* [1989] is the title of Kroetsch's collected long poems) and places his story within a frame narrative relating her version of the patriarch's story. The use of spatial tropes in this novel (which features a painting of a window frame on the front and back cover of the New Press edition), as well as the adversarial relation of the fictional writer and editor, recurs in *The Hornbooks of Rita K* (2001). According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, a hornbook is "a leaf of paper containing the alphabet, the Lord's Prayer, etc., mounted on a wooden tablet with a handle, and protected by a thin plate of horn." Rita Kleinhart, whose name echoes Kroetsch's own, is a poet with an obsession for framing her poems in hornbooks and writing about back doors. The narrative technique and the trope of the frame here—which extends to the square brackets around the numbered fragments of Rita's poetry—recalls the design of *Badlands*

because Rita is dead, and her written traces are manipulated by her editor and ex-lover Raymond. Thus, Raymond frames the story of a poet with an obsession for frames and the trope that informs the work of so many of Kroetsch's peers is placed *en abyme*.

However, the use of the painting "Venus Simultaneous" from Michael Snow's "Walking Woman" series for the cover and frontispiece image in *The Hornbooks of Rita K*, as well as the iterated image of the back door within the text, underscores the influence of the visual series on the narrative forms developed by Canadian poets. One could further investigate this pairing of literature and the visual arts by studying the writings of Jane Urquhart, who is married to the visual artist Tony Urquhart (see Ondaatje and Bowering chapters). Indeed, the quotation that I have used as an epigram to this chapter comes from the review, "Jane Urquhart's Painterly Poetry," in which Sutherland assesses Urquhart's collection *Some Other Garden* (2000) and concludes that "prose poems show Urquhart at her best":

> When she relies on short lines, her technique is mundane, and the line breaks are sometimes awkward. What she does do superbly well is convey the mood of languorous despair we find in the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico. Indeed, this very painterly book suggests not the narrative thrust and character development we expect of a novelist, but the expansive possibilities of poetic prose. ("Jane" D13)

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, the mode of expansion in the prose of many Canadian poets bears more resemblance to the recursive patterning of the visual series than to the narrative thrust of a plot-driven work, and this observation is also true of Urquhart's first novel, *The Whirlpool* (1986). Although *The Whirlpool* employs elements of Victorian realism, Urquhart is well acquainted with the techniques of serialism, as well as its practitioners. *The Whirlpool* is dedicated to Stuart Mackinnon (see Ondaatje chapter), and she acknowledges Ondaatje as one of her manuscript readers.

Accordingly, *The Whirlpool* makes extensive use of framing devices to segment its narrative and disrupt the impression of linearity that it initially establishes. The novel is framed

by a prologue and epilogue that chronicle the last days of Robert Browning as he wanders along the canals of Venice and ponders the poetry and death by drowning of Percy Bysshe Shelley. However, the bulk of the narrative takes place on the banks of the whirlpool at Niagara Falls and builds out of an epigrammatic fragment from Margaret Avison's poem "The Swimmer's Moment" (1960). Set in 1889, the principal narrative dramatizes Avison's theme of a life-altering choice by depicting a love triangle between Fleda McDougal, her husband David, and a mysterious poet who, in Byronic fashion, dreams of swimming across the whirlpool. While workmen frame Fleda's new house and David outlines his history of the War of 1812, Fleda fantasizes about the mysterious poet in her diary and intersperses her entries with long quotations from Browning.[105] The sexual tensions, literary allusions, and biographical echoes coalesce in a narrative framework that at first appears to have the classical structure of Browning's Venetian villa, but comes to resemble the whirlpool: "the whirlpool was like memory; like obsession connected to memory, like history that stayed in one spot, moving nowhere and endlessly repeating itself" (49). Thus, the whorling patterns that Carson observes in the paintings of van Gogh (*Plainwater* 12) also shape the form of *The Whirlpool*, although Urquhart's prose is not as turbulent as Carson's poetry in "Mimnermos."

The recursive patterning of memory is also a feature of Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). *Fugitive Pieces* relates the life of poet Jakob Beer, a Jew who fled the Nazi occupation of Poland and moved to the Greek islands, then Toronto and Athens. His memories and poetry live on in the mind of a young Canadian professor, Ben, whose name is "the Hebrew word for son" (253), and who acquires Beer's fragmentary memoirs. Ben has a particular interest in Beer's survivor story because of the devastating impact of the Second World War on his own father. The theme of generational recurrence takes on an added significance in this Jewish context because, as Michaels explains, it is "Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as 'we,' not 'they.' 'When we were delivered from Egypt . . . .' This encourages empathy and a responsibility

to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt" (159). As in Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, "always" is the word that must be used to describe Michaels's manner of recording perceptions in *Fugitive Pieces*. Collapsed time and "Vertical Time" (55, 257) shape her sense of Jewish history and she treats language as a "core sample" (100) and history as archeological strata. She speaks of "lyric geology" (209), lyric meteorology (211), and applies the synchronic properties of the lyric to a variety of other discourses.

However, the suitability of the lyric mode for a holocaust novel is a vigorously debated subject. Both D.M.R. Bentley and Méira Cook begin essays on *Fugitive Pieces* by weighing the relative merits of two famous quotations and opposing viewpoints. The first is Theodor Adorno's assertion in a 1955 essay that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno, "Cultural" 34). Cook argues that *Fugitive Pieces* "is, in many ways, a response to Adorno's implicit challenge: if it is no longer possible to write after Auschwitz is the only alternative to remain silent?" (12-3). Just as Kogawa rejected silence after examining its various uses, Michaels attempts to reclaim the lyric voice as a means of promoting empathy and responsibility. Unlike Adorno, who, in 1955, was outraged that poets could publish shortly after escaping the prison camps, both Kogawa and Michaels confront the fading presence of the events of the Second World War and by using the lyric they sharpen that dulled awareness. Thus, Kimberly Verwaayen argues that Michaels's collection of lyric sequences, *Miner's Pond* (1991), constitutes a "deeply committed post-holocaust testament to memory" (69) in the face of collective denial. The same can be said of *Fugitive Pieces,* her subsequent publication.[106] However, Cook notes that to a certain extent Michaels fails to combine lyricism and narrative successfully in *Fugitive Pieces* because, "[w]hen brutality, love-making, and the pragmatism of daily living are all described in Michaels' habitual mode of high lyricism, a prevailing flatness results" (16). This fact alone is not enough to discredit the lyric voice, however. Albright argues that the lyric operates according to an "orthogonal principal" (259) in which language attains its

lyrical character by shifting radically out of one register into another. Usually this shift in tone moves from low to high, but when an elevated tone becomes the norm, it also moves effectively from high to low. Thus, the occasional monotony of Michaels's writing is not the failure of the lyric, but rather the failure to mobilize all the possibilities of the lyric voice.

The second pivotal and oft-cited quotation comes from a 1958 speech delivered by Paul Celan in which the Jewish poet explains to a German audience how language might overcome calamity. Bentley speculates that Beer might be modelled on Celan (8) and the discussion of silence in Celan's speech also suggests a plausible model for the proem in *Obasan*:

> Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure through all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all. (Celan 34)

The opening sentence of this passage also supplies the title of Carson's *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, although Carson translates Celan's word "*unverloren*" differently: "Reachable, near and unlost amid the losses, this one thing remained: language. This thing, language, remained unlost, yes, in spite of everything" (*Economy* 29). For Carson, like Michaels and Celan, language reaffirms human interconnection even in the face of murder and travesty. However, Carson has been criticized for appropriating elements of Celan's style and the same charge could be laid against Michaels—namely, that she "has no comparable and validating experience" (Solway 24) of personal tragedy to justify her treatment of the holocaust theme. Michaels's implicit response in the novel is to insist on the specificity of particular human tragedies while refusing to treat the holocaust as an event that defines the before and after of human relations. The chilling scene where Ben's father goes to collect his pension in Canada and is refused by a bureaucrat (who appears to be a former Nazi soldier) underscores that the past is not past.

However, given that Michaels did not, like Celan, endure the desacralization of her mother tongue, one must still ask what, specifically, is unlost in *Fugitive Pieces*? The name of the poet in the novel suggests a number of possible answers. Jakob, in the Old Testament, is identified with the nation of Israel, and thus the trials and tribulations of Jacob in *Fugitive Pieces* reflect the diasporic experience of European Jewry. However, Bentley notes that Jakob Beer is also "named for the nineteenth-century German composer who renamed himself Giacomo Meyerbeer after receiving a legacy from a relative called Meyer and achieving critical success with a series of operas in Italy" ("Anne" 7-8), and this naming has important implications for two other important themes in the book: love and music. The composer was born Jakob Liebmann Beer (1791-1864) in Berlin and he moved from Germany to Italy and thence to France. The loss of his middle name ("Love-man") during this migration foreshadows the much more sinister loss of love for one's fellow humans that swept over these countries a century later with the rise of fascism.

The ability to love others and to communicate this love in language is a power that Michaels's Jakob and Ben seek to reclaim after their troubled upbringings, and their struggle reflects Adorno's revised statements in *Negative Dialectics* (1966). In this work, Adorno concedes that he "may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems," because "[p]erennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream" (362). He reaffirms his faith in the sublime to mitigate this suffering, yet he stresses that the more pressing question is "whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living" (363). Adorno sees in this question a crisis of "bourgeois subjectivity" because the concentration camp survivors must return to the quotidian state of affairs that masked the atrocities of the camps, yet must cope with "the drastic guilt" of having been "spared" (363).

This characterization succinctly describes the predicament of Ben's father, whose sorrow and emotional difficulties Ben inherits.

Ben finally realizes how he might regain the power to love others at the conclusion of *Fugitive Pieces*. On the airplane back to Canada, having cheated on his wife in Greece, he considers the memory of his father, who had trouble eating after his wartime experience:

> But now, from thousands of feet in the air, I see something else. My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.
> I see that I must give what I most need. (294)

Thus, as in the Torah, the conclusion is a beginning. There is no definitive before and after, but rather a process of overcoming. And as in the New Testament, the concept of love that facilitates this overcoming is paradoxical: one must incur loss for gain.

Within this network of literary allusions, facts, and fictions, contradictions abound. For example, the emphasis on romance and high drama in Giacomo Meyerbeer's operas greatly influenced the work of Richard Wagner, whom Meyerbeer aided personally while Wagner was struggling to earn a reputation in Paris. Despite this personal and artistic debt, Wagner remained an anti-semite, and his heady combination of romance and nationalism was embraced by the Nazis. On the other hand, Wagner's treatment of harmony broke down the conventional hierarchy of tones and lead to the development of serialism ("Wagner"). Thus, the fact that several of the chapter titles in *Fugitive Pieces* appear twice (and not quite in the same order) might suggest a musical sense of the serial in which each "piece" forms an independent part of a larger sequence that evolves through repetitions with subtle variations. Indeed, both Bentley (13-4) and Cook (30-1) find the patterns of recurrence in the novel significant but perplexing, and serialism might suggest one explanation of the doubled characters and echoed phrases. Yet the uniformity of tone in the novel would suggest exactly the opposite interpretation.

Considering the zeal for blurring fact and fiction in the novels that I have discussed, one could also explore the use of serial formats in works of creative non-fiction, such as Elizabeth Hay's *The Only Snow in Havana* (1992). Indeed, Marlatt praises the manuscript of *The Only Snow in Havana* in a letter to Sarah Sheard: "This one is an elegant weave of history, autobiography, poetic imagery—almost a serial poem in prose" (*Labyrinth* 105). Alternatively, one could follow Carson in the direction of the novel in verse and investigate George Eliott Clarke's *Whylah Falls* (1990), which is listed as a "poem novel" in the liner notes to Clarke's 2001 poetry collection, *Blue. Whylah Falls* is predominantly a collection of lyrics, but it also includes a number of short prose pieces, archival photographs, newspaper clippings, letters, and songs, the whole organized by a preface, a "Dramatis Personae" (n.p.), and prose chapter introductions labelled "The Argument" in the fashion of *Paradise Lost*. Moving from Montreal to Nova Scotia in this way, one could also track the career of the Nova Scotia poet Sue Goyette, whose first novel, *Lures* (2002), is based on her experiences in growing up in the Montreal suburb of St. Bruno. *Lures* began as a series of "troll-under-the-bridge poems" in which "the town was the main character," but it evolved into a novel when Goyette dispensed with line breaks and allowed her characters to dictate the movement of the narrative (Goyette D8). Indeed, Canadian literature is full of examples of works that combine elements of the poem and novel. Instead of listing further examples, then, I will briefly consider some objections to this style.

(Un)framing the Thesis

While novels by Canadian poets have garnered numerous literary prizes and established a broad readership both nationally and internationally, the subjective focus and fragmented quality of the poet's novel is also the subject of vehement criticism. For example, Andrew Pyper, author of the successful literary thriller *Lost Girls*, speaks for many Canadian realists when he describes his preference for plot-driven fiction in a 2001 interview with *Books in Canada*:

> I think that a lot of the work that I tend not to seek out for myself is that highly rarefied "literary" writing where bugger-all happens. The literature of non-event and pure insularity. I really don't need any more insight into wandering about. I like plot. I like stuff happening. As obvious as that would seem, it's not especially fashionable. Plotlessness seems to be ubiquitous, at least in Canada. A lot of my contemporaries seem very interested in highly fractured post-structuralist forms; they're aggressively anti-plot. (Pyper, "Interview" 11)

Ironically, the influence that poet-novelists have had on the Canadian literary landscape has been so profound that Pyper finds himself in a position inverse to the one Bowering occupied when he wrote "The Painted Window" in the mid-1970s. Whereas Bowering felt constrained by the prevailing taste for continuous narrative, Pyper feels marginalized by the current popularity of discontinuous narrative. However, this fascination with fragmented structures is not exclusive to the poet's novel or Canadian literature, but is rather symptomatic of much larger developments in both intellectual and creative discourse over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Consider, for example, the discussion of framing in contemporary science. John Polanyi, the University of Toronto Nobel prize winner in chemistry, explains scientific hypotheses in terms of the classical narrative model of Aristotle's *Poetics*: "Scientia is knowledge. Only in the popular mind is it equated with facts. That is flattering, since facts are incontrovertible. But it is also demeaning, since facts are meaningless. Science, by contrast, is story-telling; it searches for a beginning, middle and end" (Polanyi 15). This tripartite model of classical storytelling is a powerful explanatory tool, but a rigidly linear mapping of cause and effect fails to address the specific concerns of contemporary science, which grapples with dynamic systems where the elements under analysis are constantly interacting and in flux. The strange attractors and fractal geometry of chaos theory, for example, are frameworks for modeling phenomena that do not behave in a linear fashion or achieve a stable state. However, the transformation of the Aristotelean model does not diminish the importance of framing, as Stephen Kellert explains in *In the Wake of Chaos*: "When scientists confine attention to a particular collection of objects or

processes, they draw a figurative frame around the subject matter of their inquiry and label the contents of that frame a 'system'" (2). Instead of making frameworks obsolete, nonlinear systems engage multiple frameworks in a state of interaction. Thus N. Katherine Hayles and the contributors to *Chaos and Order* see analogies between literature and science because these disciplines develop models "not as a totalized condition but as the replication of symmetries that also allows for asymmetries and unpredictabilities. In this [the science of chaos] is akin to poststructuralism, where the structuralist penchant for replicating symmetries is modified by the postmodern turn toward fragmentation, rupture, and discontinuity" (Hayles 10-1). Critics of chaos theory maintain that fractal geometry, unlike the cybernetic model of complexity theory, does not address systems that are radically open—that is, systems that constantly interact with and adapt to their environment. Yet the more open and indeterminate the system, the more vital framing becomes. The element of relativity in open systems makes the framing role of the perceiver a vital element in any equation, as Paul Cillers explains in *Complexity and Postmodernism*:

> Complex systems are usually open systems, i.e. they interact with their environment. As a matter of fact, it is often difficult to define the border of a complex system. Instead of being a characteristic of the system itself, the scope of the system is usually determined by the purpose of the *description* of the system, and is thus often influenced by the position of the observer. This process is called *framing*. (Cilliers 4)

Thus, the frameworks of contemporary science—like the frameworks of the serial novel—are not absolute, determinist structures.[107]

In another sense, however, the popularity of serial forms in the Canadian novel jeopardizes this claim to indeterminacy. For example, Toronto novelist Ray Robertson[108] denounces what he sees as an established formula in Canadian literature:

> [W]hat a successful commercial novel does well is put language, theme and even, to a degree, characterization on the back burner while allowing plot to boil away happily on the front [. . .]. Contrary to the prevailing McCanlit wisdom that has made a virtue out of boring, static fiction about humourless, self-obsessed

> protagonists, even novels of the most literary sort need a compelling story line to allow the reader the opportunity to participate actively in significant character study and real thematic exploration. (R. Robertson D19)

Assuming for the moment that a storyline can minimize theme and characterization while simultaneously engaging "in significant character study and real thematic exploration," Robertson's argument makes an interesting counterpoint. It echoes Pyper's objection to fragmented literary forms, and, to a certain extent, finds an unlikely ally in some of Daphne Marlatt's statements.

As early as 1968, Marlatt complained that she was "tired of [her] complicated prose style" (*What* 25) and during a question-and-answer session in 2000 she stated that *Taken* achieved "a greater emotional depth" than *Ana Historic* because of its more conventional story arc and prose style ("Dorothy"). Of course, even with its more linear format, *Taken* is still not the sort of page-turner that Robertson prefers. However, the question of linearity is relevant here because, in editing Kiyooka's *Mothertalk* (1997) following the artist's sudden death, Marlatt rearranged the sections of Kiyooka's biography of his mother in a chronological configuration, as opposed to a serial one (Egan and Helms). Marlatt explains her motives in the introduction:

> I also found that Roy's final version had abandoned the chronologically specific nature of the original interviews [with Mary Kiyooka] for a free-floating succession of stories that jumped around in time and place. Factual biographical material had been dropped out and stories were linked thematically or verbally rather than chronologically, sometimes not linked at all, and sometimes repeated elsewhere in the manuscript. All of this left a reader with a sense of immediate experience but no sense of the overall arc of Mary's life. True, we rarely experience our lives as having an obvious line of development in the flux of our actually living them out from day to day. But it's difficult to stay intrigued with the details of someone else's life without having some sense of the emotional weight of those details. And to tell an event in a life so that a reader can feel its weight requires a sense of what has preceded that moment. (5)

Of course, even in its revised state, *Mothertalk* is associative, fragmented, and indicative of Kiyooka's serial approach to art. However, Marlatt's introduction implies that Kiyooka violated the integrity of his mother's story by disrupting its chronology, which raises a series of pertinent

questions. Does one do violence to history and biography by mapping duration in any framework other than a chronological one?[109] If not, why have all of the novelists profiled in the previous chapters adopted a more conventional syntax and linear storytelling method over the course of their careers? Moreover, on the subject of violence, how does one explain the recurring connection between serial forms and serial killers in such works as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Dennis Cooley's *Bloody Jack* (1984), which features an epigram from *Billy*? Is this connection simply a matter of language generating a form suitable to its subject matter?

These questions can be addressed by examining what the poet Lynn Crosbie describes as "the shit-storm about *Paul's Case*" ("Shapeshifter" 2), her first novel. *Paul's Case: The Kingston Letters* (1997) consists of 52 letters from an unnamed woman to sex-slayer Paul Bernardo, who is incarcerated in the Kingston penitentiary and does not respond to her questions. Although the format of the novel is epistolary, the letters are in fact poems, word puzzles, comic strips, and lyric essays. Crosbie's preface introduces the novel as a "critical enterprise [. . .] designed to explore and invent a series of conjectures, to tell the truth, in Emily Dickinson's words, *slant*" (n.p.). Addressing Bernardo, the unnamed woman calls her writing an "essay" (24) that "is experimental, analogous to your case. Your sex trial, where female sexuality was never mentioned. An experiment involving burial and decomposition, the essence that attracts rats who mistake it for perfume" (24). Whereas Bowering links decomposition to regeneration in the body of his daughter, Crosbie connects the literary phenomenon to the relation between Thanatos and Eros. Seeking to understand her own attraction to the serial rapist, the woman writes her letters while staring at a photograph of Bernardo that is hung above her desk—presumably the photograph that is reproduced on the cover of the Anansi edition. Crosbie is fascinated by the "*homme fatale*, the man and the myth feminists love to hate" (Mandel 78) and her writing explores the darker side of the romantic obsession that one also finds in Carson's works. However, Crosbie's real purpose in the novel is to examine the way in which women construct

this myth, as well as to deconstruct the plea bargain of Karla Homolka, Bernardo's accomplice in

the murders of Tammy Homolka, Kristen French, and Leslie Mahaffy between 1990 and 1992.

The police, in their haste to guarantee the conviction of Bernardo and quell public

outrage at his sex crimes, struck a plea bargain with Homolka and charged her with

manslaughter instead of murder. The "original psychiatric reports painted Homolka as the

hapless victim of her sexually sadistic ex-husband" (Wood 60), and the press packaged the story

as a textbook example of domestic victimization. However, Crosbie doubted the official

storyline and sought a more complex explanation for Homolka's actions. In an interview with

Eva Tihanyi, Crosbie explains that in *Paul's Case* she wanted to "raise some provocative critical

points about, for example, female sexuality in the case of Karla Homolka, flaws in the whole

treatment of the case by the law" ("Shapeshifter" 2). Her description of the work's development

evinces the (by now) familiar symptoms of a poet becoming a novelist:

> When I started [*Paul's Case*] I had just finished with *Pearl*, and *Pearl* pretty well
> did it for me with poetry. It was very elegiac. It was a very emotional, personal
> book, and my mind was travelling more around the idea of writing essays. Also,
> I'd got this idea in my head that a lot of my poems were mini-essays—especially
> in *VillainElle*—tiny essays on female sexuality. I wanted to find a genre of
> writing that wasn't one thing or another, that wasn't poetry, that wasn't an essay
> exactly. A genre that was a melting pot for everything I'd learned as a journalist,
> as a poet, etc. I had been thinking about the Bernardo trial a lot and had followed
> it quite intently. I was originally going to write a short piece about it, and then I
> thought maybe this is my subject because all the ideas became too unwieldy for
> an essay. So I ended up writing *Paul's Case*. ("Shapeshifter" 2)

In fact there is a direct connection between *Pearl* and *Paul's Case*, because the lady-killer theme

in the novel grew out of the poem "Paul Teale, Mon Amour" in the earlier collection. Discussing

the context in which she wrote this poem about Bernardo (who considered changing his name to

Teale), Crosbie identifies the origin of the letter-writing character in *Paul's Case*:

> I wrote that [poem] during the press ban. A friend of mine told me that there was
> this crazy woman who had dyed her hair blonde to look like Homolka and was
> madly in love with Bernardo. I'm intrigued by why women fall in love with these
> kinds of men. I don't understand it. And instead of listening to all the usual
> arguments—like the ones on talk TV— that somehow these women are just

> delusional and have nurturing complexes, I thought: no, there's something even more sinister at play than that. And I'm explicit about it in "Paul Teale, Mon Amour"—that maybe if you think this guy loves you, if you're safe from him, then somehow you have a level of superiority to his victims. I think there's a lot of ego involved with that, a lot of ego identification with the monster. ("Shapeshifter" 3)

As in *VillainElle* and *Pearl*, then, Crosbie argues for women's agency in *Paul's Case* even if that agency has sadistic consequences. Rejecting the work of an earlier generation of feminists, Crosbie lists a range of texts by Andrea Dworkin and others that (at least in *Paul's Case*) Homolka reads in preparation for her trial and uses to construct her plea bargain (75). While Crosbie does not doubt the capacity of men for evil, she demonstrates that the dichotomy of female victim / male victimizer is oversimplified because, in this case, a woman masterminded the incarceration of other women, and used feminist theory to escape a lifetime of incarceration herself.[110]

However, even given Crosbie's desire to shock, she is far too lenient on Bernardo. *Paul's Case* depicts a woman writing her way through her unhealthy obsession with a violent man, but the woman's final condemnation of Bernardo does not even approach the magnitude of his crimes. In making the case against Homolka, Crosbie often makes Bernardo look hapless, although, as the "Scarborough Rapist," he had already established his place in infamy before he met Homolka. Moreover, there are some disturbing similarities between Homolka's fixation with rats in *Paul's Case* and Crosbie's epithet for herself in her selected poems, *Queen Rat.* Although Crosbie claims not to understand women who are attracted to violent men, such men and women are a constant feature of her poetry and prose. Her second novel, *Dorothy L'Amour* (1999), is also about a glamorous, blonde Canadian (Playboy centrefold Dorothy Stratten) who dies at the hands of her husband, Paul.

Crosbie's work is particularly relevant to this study of the poet's novel because it also offers a woman's perspective on the dangerous men that appear in Ondaatje's early fiction. Indeed, Crosbie makes her admiration for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* clear in the serial

poem "Alphabet City" (in *Queen Rat*), where she parodies the catalogue that begins *Billy*—

"These Are the Killed/ (By them)" [. . .] "These Are the Killed/ (By me)" (*Billy* 6; *Queen* 35-

36)—in order to list the friends and lovers that Crosbie has lost. Crosbie acknowledges this

literary debt at the end of the segment of the poem entitled "Cameron House" by reproducing

Ondaatje's signature from a reading of *Billy* in 1993 (*Queen* 36). In *Paul's Case*, Crosbie puts a

sadistic spin on the title of Ondaatje's selected poems (1963-78) and portrays "Blossom Dearie

singing, *There's a trick with a knife I'm learning to do*" (104).[111]   However, the thematic

connection to *Billy* is even stronger. Crosbie removes the serial killer from the legendary

American West and inserts him into the Southern Ontario setting that is the sub-text of

Ondaatje's book. Instead of an unfairly charged gunslinger (Billy), Crosbie depicts Bernardo as

a wrongly convicted murderer. Whereas Ondaatje staged a mock-interview with the *Texas Star*

(*Billy* 81-4), Crosbie deconstructs the storylines employed by journalists who covered the

Bernardo scandal. In particular, she focuses on the undertones of sexual desire in the coverage

of *Toronto Star* columnist Christie Blatchford, who sued Crosbie over the chapter in *Paul's Case*

dealing with her articles. The suit was eventually dropped, but in the meantime Crosbie became

a regular figure in the television and print media, and she briefly achieved the sort of notoriety

that she writes about.

Crosbie's use of historical personages involved in sex crimes underscores the sensitivity

to questions of voice and appropriation that should be exercised in cases where an author

proposes to "present [a historical personage] in fragments. And make a figment of [them]" (*Paul*

26). These concerns also apply to Marlatt when she invents a lesbian history for Mrs. Richards or

to Ondaatje when he shows his contempt for historical accuracy:

> I have no desire, for instance, to go back and re-write *Billy* or re-investigate
> Bolden. Just recently there's another book on Bolden that's come out in the States.
> I have absolutely no desire to read the thing. Even if it gives me all kinds of new
> material about Bolden, I'm not at all interested in it. For me, Bolden is a character
> who is important to me only as I knew him. ("Moving" 134)

I do not mean to suggest that authors should not tackle historical subject matter. Indeed, it is somehow symbolic that the families of Bernardo's victims won the right to destroy his torture videotapes in 2001, the same year that the DNA Theatre in Toronto produced *Paula and Karl*, a drama based on the Bernardo scandal and set in a real living room (*Paula*). Rather, I note the public reaction to the portrait of Bernardo in *Paul's Case* as a cautionary tale for the ways in which a cavalier treatment of source material can unduly distort the historical facts of a case.

Crosbie's portrait of Homolka, on the other hand, seems increasingly prescient. Now that Homolka is eligible for parole, journalists in the popular media who once condemned Crosbie are beginning to sound like her. For example, in "The Case against Karla," a feature article in *Elm Street* (April 2001), investigative journalist Trish Wood details the overwhelming evidence to suggest that Homolka planned, committed, and felt no remorse for the murder of her sister Tammy—evidence (including home videos) which surfaced following the plea bargain, and of which Crosbie had some knowledge from the Bernardo trial coverage. The key pieces of evidence and sexual motives cited by the experts in Wood's article are almost identical to the ones depicted in Crosbie's novel. While literature is not a court of law, these findings demonstrate at the very least that Crosbie's willingness to explore fragmentary evidence and operate outside the parameters of an accepted storyline facilitated a deeper psychological character study than the narrative templates deployed by the courts and press. Crosbie's series cannot replace the day-by-day reconstructions of the Bernardo case, but it can travel in otherwise overlooked directions, as the novel's narrator informs Bernardo: "I have read them all [i.e., the books about the case] and I'm tired of the story. It never changes, and I want to mix things up with you" (25). Telling the story slant in a mixture of lyric, documentary, and academic voices, Crosbie's serial novel is outrageous, disturbing, and self-indulgent, but it is also intelligently crafted and psychologically insightful.

The rival positions of Robertson and Crosbie on the subject of narrative demonstrate the validity of Malcolm Bradbury's thesis in *The Novel Today* (1977). He states that the novel, from its very emergence as a genre, has fluctuated between its "propensity towards realism, social documentation and interrelation with historical events and movements, and [. . .] its propensity towards form, fictionality and reflexive self-examination" (Bradbury 8; see also Deer 353). However, Pyper's dismissal of the latter style as "rarefied" has peculiar implications for Crosbie's work, because she levelled the same charge against Anne Carson shortly after Carson won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2001. In an outspoken article entitled "Something New, Please, O Universe" (June 16), published in the *Globe and Mail,* Crosbie lashed out at the Griffin judges and mission statement, which states that the aim of the prize is "to raise public awareness of the crucial role poetry must play in society's cultural life" ("Griffin"). "With all due respect to the genuinely gifted Anne Carson," Crosbie writes, the "cultural life" evoked in the poetry of the Griffin nominees "is overly rarefied." Crosbie assesses Carson's style and subject matter in *Men in the Off Hours* and finds it too weighted down with tradition—in stark contrast to the reviewer of *Plainwater* in *The New York Review of Books,* who declares that Carson has "created an individual form and style for narrative verse . . . . Seldom has Pound's injunction 'Make It New' been so spectacularly obeyed" (cover). Of course, it is not Carson's fault that she was awarded a prize whose mission statement may or may not reflect her writing style.[112] Moreover, the scope of Crosbie's literary world, which is populated with villains and divas lifted from the pages of tabloids, is limited in its own way. Given the similar serial techniques employed by Crosbie, Carson, and Ondaatje, however, what interests me about "Something New, Please, O Universe" is that Crosbie criticizes the very same writers with whom she has aligned herself—in the case of Ondaatje, who is a Griffin trustee—and with whom other critics have positioned her.

For example, in the conclusion to his essay "Confession and Critique: The Work of Lynn Crosbie," Philip Marchand expresses his reservations about lyrical fiction in general and Crosbie's novels in particular:

> With [Crosbie's] novels, we confront a much larger issue—that of fiction written by Canadian poets, notably Michael Ondaatje and Anne Michaels. Works such as *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces* are, in a sense, disastrous literary successes embraced by readers in spite of the novels' failure to reconcile the lyrical impulse with the traditional demands of realistic fiction for credible characterization and narrative. *Dorothy L'Amour* by no means solves this question—the narrator remains a consciousness unrooted in a recognizable character. As in the work of Ondaatje and Michaels, there are moments of brilliant imagery and striking perception, but the moments do not cohere. It may well be that Crosbie's forte is to continue as a dramatic monologuist in verse, refining and expanding her gifts as a poetic chronicler of our nightmare world. (Marchand 149)

Marchand's conclusion encapsulates the standard argument against serial forms of lyrical fiction. Although he praises Crosbie's poetry, his idea of a credible narrator in the novel is one who meets "the traditional demands of realistic fiction." He favours a "recognizable character" over "striking" insights into that character's mode of perception. He prefers descriptive continuity to "moments of brilliant imagery." Most tellingly, he feels that if these moments do not cohere in a continuous sense, then they are incoherent in a readerly sense. Yet, as Marchand concedes, readers have embraced many works of lyrical fiction. Rather than consider these novels by Canadian poets as "disastrous literary successes" because of their failure to adhere to meet "the traditional demands of realist fiction," it is time to acknowledge that their success derives, in part, from their ability to establish their own terms of reference and create new kinds of coherence.

The Upset Frame of Reference

Certainly, a continuous storyline creates a functional kind of order in the novel, but I have been at pains to demonstrate that novels informed by the lyric and long poem possess another, more flexible kind of order. I would like to summarize the ordering principles that shape this kind of

narrative by returning to the passage which began this study, from Erin Mouré's serial poem "The Splendour":

> Is it rigour or is it patchwork
> Riding, alone, the engine of economy
>
> A splendour
> (or is it)
>
> Trying to be as curious
> Trying to forge an upset frame of reference
> Pulling the window thru the door   (34)

In this passage, the propositions being contemplated in the first stanza—"Is it rigour or is it patchwork"—are immediately undermined by doubt—"A splendour/ (or is it)." As the meditation continues, nouns yield to gerunds because the author no longer seeks a thing, but rather a poetic technique: "Trying to be as curious/ Trying to forge an upset frame of reference[.]" Mouré uses the syntactic expectations created by the truncated comparison "as curious" (with its missing "as") to introduce and amplify the reader's sense of "the upset frame of reference." In a final transition, Mouré deviates from her anaphoristic repetition of "Trying"—as she earlier abandoned the repetition of "Is it"—and substitutes "Pulling the window thru the door[.]" In this way, the lyric (un)frames its form by multiplying and diversifying its frames of reference such that no one frame dominates. Mouré creates a patchwork of possible interpretations by juxtaposing semantic structures which, like the window and door, have related symmetries but resist synthesis. In this way, the engine of economy rides alone in several directions.

How does Mouré's poetic agility relate to the novels by Ondaatje, Bowering, Kogawa, Marlatt, and Carson? Carson writes in *The Beauty of the Husband* that "[t]o stay human is to break a limitation" (16). The power to dismantle generic codes and diversify one's own rhetorical patterns is a vital part of literary creation, as Bowering states on the cover of *Ana Historic*:

> For years we have been asking Daphne Marlatt to write a novel, to get that novel finished, please. We have even insisted that the books she was writing were novels, that no matter what she thought she was doing, novels were coming out. But really we wanted her to set up and write a novel. Now she has done it. It took a long time, but she has done it. And as one might have expected, she first had to tear down The Novel. What she has put up in its place is too beautiful to keep to oneself. (Anansi 1998)

For Marlatt, tearing down "The Novel" means dismantling the rhetorical framework of realist convention. In their discussion of her first novel, Bowering notes that in "*The Sea Haven*, way back then, the function words were all there, all the prepositions & so forth" and Marlatt concurs: "Once you say 'she says,' you get the frame in there. I dont want the frame" ("Given" 78). In place of the realist frame, Marlatt offers the lyric voice, through which, she believes, phenomena are "just transmitted straight [. . .] without being diverted by a personality" (78-9). However, one cannot communicate without some form of contextual framework and it is impossible to transmit impressions directly to the reader.[113]

Framing is an inescapable part of the communicative act, as linguist Deborah Tannen explains in *Framing in Discourse*. Tannen demonstrates that framing and pattern recognition are in evidence at all levels of narrative and reading:

> [N]otions of script, frame, and schema can be understood as structures of expectation based on past experience, and [. . .] these structures can be seen in the surface linguistic form of the sentences of a narrative. Furthermore, the structures of expectation which help us process and comprehend stories serve to filter and shape perception. (53)

In this light, Marlatt's manipulation of conventional syntax and the romance plot is significant because it reveals how these forms contain expectations about gender position and sexual orientation. She thus uses the power of the erotic lyric to break down scripted definitions of femininity. Similarly, Bowering undermines the structures of expectation in colonial historiography by employing parody and what Albright calls "lyric irony" (79), the refusal of the bardic voice. Perhaps more than any other voice, the ironic voice demands an expert facility for framing metamessages, as Hutcheon argues in *Irony's Edge*: "signs become markers of irony

through their successful functioning—meta-ironic or structural—within a frame or context"

(159). The qualification "successful" is crucial because irony is frequently interpreted as

inappropriate or hostile if one does not frame the *meta*-message properly. Even when

successfully framed, Hutcheon points out, irony retains an edge—that is, it participates in hostile

and humorous frameworks simultaneously.

To be human, then, is also to acknowledge the omnipresence of limitations. Lyrical

writing may defy a convention or change a reader's way of thinking, but it is not transcendent, as

Michaels asserts in her essay "Unseen Formations":

> A real power of words is that they make our ignorance more precise. Writing is a
> negative aspiration: to work strenuously towards the moment when failure is
> confirmed [. . .]. What's on the page is only an entry point for what's still buried
> in ourselves. A shred, a shadow. Truth is guarded by the impeccable security
> system of the uncertainty principle[.] ("Unseen" 97)

One of the things the lyric tradition offers the aspiring novelist, on the other hand, is a model for

incorporating uncertainty and absence into narrative. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis observes, poetry

is composed of "sequences; it is the creation of meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gap

(line break, stanza break, page space). Although [. . .] other practices may have periodicities or

gaps, these seem more systematic in poetry" (287). What the serial novels in this study sacrifice

in terms of continuous narrative, then, they recuperate through recursive symmetries that bind

together fragmented material across gaps and silences.

A lyric framework thus establishes the conditions of enunciation according to which the

(auto)biographical narratives in this study are enunciated. These novels employ elements of

historical portraiture—biography, autobiography, life-story—in combination with meta-

commentary on the act of writing that is in some way allied with the lyric. The synchronic

epigrams, embedded song cycles, and codas in these works prefigure, interrupt, and reconfigure

the diachronic narratives in which they are placed. Furthermore, the segmentation and

associative leaps within the lyrics become a model for the serial arrangement of the prose pieces.

At the same time, the enduring conventions of the novel overcome the limitations of the lyric frame. For example, the lyric "I" is one voice of many in the novel. This movement towards a more multi-vocal, multi-perspectival genre complements tendencies that are already manifest in the anti-lyric dimensions of the serial poem and documentary collage. Once unseated, the lyric "I" is compelled to record, not only objects in an environment, but also the way in which the speaker/narrator's presence in that environment affects their description of it. Thus, whereas Ondaatje imagines his mind pouring chaos in nets onto the page, Bowering maintains in his preface to *The Catch* that the "passive mind, too, is a net [. . .]. As one grows older one learns to get caught in the mesh oneself" (n.p.). "Passive mind," like the term "dictation" used by Spicer and Blaser, does not stand up to intense critical scrutiny, and Bowering admits as much: "I mean I know that I'm writing it, but I feel that it's being written" ("1976 Interview" 94). However, these terms do convey the condition of receptivity to one's environment that Bowering brings to his lyrics, serial poems, and novels.

Such self-consciousness also affects the treatment of language in the poet's novel. As poets, the novelists insist that readers take note of the actions of language within the text, in addition to the actions described. The authors' attitude towards language, then, resembles that of Fred Wah in his portrait from Bowering's serial poem, *Curious*:

> But in my mind he is sitting
> beside a tape recorder dreaming. Is this language
> any good? He is thinking of the language of
> poetry, I've always had trouble getting to
> him but sometimes, is he moving & I cant
> catch him or is he still immobile is he
> still, mobile in my picture so I have to
> keep moving & that's why I miss him. (n.p.)

This colloquially phrased passage flows easily upon first reading. It accelerates through a run-on sentence but then trips over the question of the relation between the perceiver and perceived. Bowering unmoors the perspective of the classic portrait (in which the artist records his

motionless subject) and the poem comes to terms with the relativity of time ("still immobile")

and space ("still, mobile"). The stable point of Bowering's gaze disappears and wordplay

unframes the reader's bearings. Listening to the language of his own poetry, Bowering assumes

the position of Wah and perceiver and perceived exchange roles. This passage thus demonstrates

minutely the larger processes that Marlatt observes in serial narrative: "Connections flare in a

radiant matrix and wink out. Narrative momentum builds only to collapse and then resurface,

refracted differently or altered, poems along" ("Eratic" 95). Thus, the poem concludes in a space

of contradiction as the portrait-maker's photographic eye misses his subject, which is also

himself.

In this context, the impression of closure provided by the frame of the literary portrait is

illusory. By questioning the media and perceptual conventions of portraiture, an artist may undo

his or her own rhetorical devices, as John Welchman asserts: "The frame is a virus in the

machine of formalism, a sort of double agent functioning as a necessary part of the system but

also as the gateway to its dissolution" (213). There are many ways of activating this virus, the

most effective being to challenge the fundamental conventions of a genre, such as the "I-You"

dynamic in the lyric, or the expectation of a continuous storyline in the novel. By invoking and

subverting convention, authors create competing interpretative frameworks that effectively

"dissolv[e] the frame of a book" (182), as Kamboureli observes in her discussion of parody in

Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*.

Yet these unstable frameworks facilitate, rather than inhibit, interaction between different

meanings and media. Carson argues in *Economy of the Unlost* that it is the particular genius of

poetic language to highlight the porous quality of rhetorical frameworks and hint at what might

lie beyond them. Comparing the paintings of Zeuxis—who "is said to have rendered a bunch of

grapes so realistically that birds flew down to peck the canvas" (50)—and the poetry of

Simonides of Keos, Carson writes:

> For there is one thing a poem can do that a painting cannot, and in an age of sophistry and illusionism it is a thing of transforming importance, namely, render the invisible: Simonides' iconology captures not only bird and grapes but also the stingy fact of the picture frame that separates them. His commitment is to a reality beyond "what is visible to each person." His medium is words positioned so as to lead you to the edge where words stop, pointing beyond themselves toward something no eye can see and no painter can paint. (51)

Poetry, then, represents even as it (un)frames its representation. When the engine of this lyrical economy powers the novel, it does not create the kind of prose narrative that Bowering, following Hulme, associates with the railroad. Its poetic impulse lures readers off track and, like the woman in *the man with seven toes*, they follow their curiosity into the unknown. Or, like Bolden on the train through Slaughter, they dream to delay an undesirable end. Or like Carson, they develop an aesthetics around the stingy fact of the window frame and record the scenes flashing by the eye. In all these cases, the intrusion of the lyric voice radically alters the figurative means of transportation and the resulting narrative builds on hybrid forms that the authors develop in their long poems.

Although Kroetsch argues that Canadians write long poems which challenge "the authenticity of history by saying that there can be no joined story, only abrupt guesswork, juxtaposition, flashes of insight" ("For" 119), I have also demonstrated that there is a logic to the patchwork in long poems by Ondaatje, Bowering, Kogawa, Marlatt, and Carson. The underlying coherence of their serial narratives is particularly in evidence in their novels, as Ondaatje states: "The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.' Meander if you want to get to town" (*Skin* 146). At the same time, the serial form is extremely flexible and open to change. Increasingly, a younger generation of writers is expressing its discontent with the beautiful but sentimental treatment of history in Urquhart and Michaels (Payne), as well as the distant relation of Carson's poetry to Canadian popular culture. Poet-novelists such as Lynn Crosbie and Michael Turner[114] are answering this demand and their manner of response (un)frames the literary models of their Canadian

predecessors. Therefore, one cannot adequately evaluate the broader currents of Canadian novel writing from (at least) the 1960s onwards without thorough reference to contemporaneous developments in the Canadian long poem.

ENDNOTES

[1] For example, in his influential essay "For Play and Entrance" (1989), Robert Kroetsch identifies Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* as "a place to begin" an "archaeology" ("Play" 119) of the contemporary Canadian long poem. Both poems were published in 1970 and make extensive use of framing devices. On the cover of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Atwood tips an oval portrait of Moodie sideways to create the visual impression of an eye looking back at the viewer. Atwood connects this portrait of Moodie to her own lyrics in the collection's epigram:

> I take this picture of myself
> and with my sewing scissors
> cut out the face.
>
> Now it is more accurate:
>
> where my eyes were,
> every-
> thing appears (n.p.)

In its ambiguity, Atwood's "picture of myself" matches the "picture of Billy" (5)—an empty picture frame—that begins *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Like Ondaatje, Atwood blurs the boundary between her identity and that of her subject, thereby playfully highlighting the unstable identity of the speaker in the poem. Moodie's effaced portrait creates a mask for the author and a space of projection for the face of the reader. Atwood's collages and watercolors enhance this effacement, rendering Moodie's eyes as white blanks or dark blurs and transforming her, through stylization of detail, into an archetypal figure.

The concluding lyric in Atwood's collection reinforces the archetypal status of Moodie. Atwood resurrects Moodie as "the old woman/ sitting across from you on the bus" who instructs the eye/I perceiving her to "[t]urn, look down":

> there is no city;
> this is the centre of a forest
>
> your place is empty (61)

At the conclusion of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, similarly, Ondaatje places a photograph of himself at age seven into the empty portrait frame that began the book. This portrait of Ondaatje the Kid does not fill the entire picture frame, so it remains unclear whether Ondaatje is juxtaposing his picture with Billy's portrait, or whether the snapshot is in fact the "picture of Billy" that has taken the length of the narrative to "fix" in developing solution. In any case, both Atwood and Ondaatje frame their long poems such that the boundaries of their texts are highly unstable.

[2] For example, in the fall of 2000 a series of poetry readings took place at the University of British. The readings were hosted by writer-in-residence Roo Borson and readers included Borson, Sharon Thesen, Kim Maltman, Jan Zwicky, and Don McKay. In jest, at the end of each reading, Borson assumed the voice of a publisher and posed the same question to the poets: "When can we expect a novel?" For the record, none of the poets had a novel in the works. In most other countries, it would be insulting to ask a poet such as Don McKay (who had just won the Governor General's Award for Poetry) when he would produce a novel. However, Borson's joke, and the ensuing discussions, reinforced the importance of the poet's novel to Canadian literary history.

[3] The serial poem is a type of segmented long poem that shuns the lyric ego and builds continuity through recursive symmetries instead of a continuous storyline. Finkelstein explains the concept of seriality in his discussion of Robin Blaser's poetry:

> Seriality, then, implies the simultaneous dissolution and recovery of the self as singer in the continuum of the song. Traditional lyric subjectivity may have come to an impasse, but the serial poem, conceived through a process of dictation, has proven an appropriate corrective. Rather than expose the "big lie" of the personal, the serial poem provides us with something of much greater

value: a structure and an aesthetic through which the self and its concomitant lyric utterance can be redefined and resituated in a new and variously decentered discursive landscape. (Finkelstein 271)

(

[4] The *haibun* is a Japanese form of prose poem. Its seems to influence the style of the proem in *Obasan*, and one critic has suggested that the "series of prose pieces" in Carson's "Kinds of Water" is "like Japanese haibun" (Burt 56). See also Fred Wah's "This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun" in *The New Long Poem Anthology* (1991).

[5] Schlegel and other Romantics conceived of the novel as "Universalpoesie"—that is, the highest-ranking, because all-embracing, type of poetry. In his literary aphorism #116, Schlegel explains his vision of "universal poetry":

> Its mission is not merely to reunite all separate genres of poetry and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetorics. It will, and should, now mingle and now amalgamate poetry and prose, genius and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature, render poetry living and social, and life and society poetic, poeticize wit, fill and saturate the forms of art with solid cultural material of every kind, and inspire them with vibrations of humor. (140)

[6] Although at least one prominent critic has argued for "the existence of an age of balladry before the date of the epics" (H. Rose 31).

[7] For a broader discussion of this "poem," see Albright 218-19.

[8] Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* is a homage to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Ondaatje's sequence, on other hand, draws more on the legendary circumstances surrounding the composition of Rilke's sequence. The last poem in Ondaatje's sequence is addressed to Rilke, but there are clues scattered throughout *Tin Roof* as Ondaatje drinks "Rainier beer" (27) and the birds whistle "*duino/* duino" (31). Ondaatje probably also refers to Bowering in his final lyric where he writes:

> I want the long lines my friend spoke of
> that bamboo which sways muttering
> like wooden teeth in the slim volume I have
> with its childlike drawing of Duino Castle. (42)

Bowering made a conscious effort to extend his line length in *Kerrisdale Elegies* after a number of years of writing shortline poems.

[9] These artists, along with many others, also contributed to "A Celebration of Roy Kiyooka" published in *Brick* (Spring 1994).

[10] The author cites Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* as examples of the kinds of novels he was writing against when he wrote *Coming Through Slaughter*.

[11] See pages 38-9.

[12] Some critics might object to the linearity of my method because it implies a progression from work to work. Although I do not wish to establish a hierarchy between works, I do intend to demonstrate that author develops an expanding repertoire of skills over time, as Ondaatje testifies: "With each of the longer works I was simply doing what I was able to do at the time. I could not have written *Running in the Family* before *Billy* or *Slaughter* although it would seem to come first logically" ("1984 Interview" 324). At the same time it is important to note that authors and artists deconstruct their own past achievements, as Ondaatje asserts: "I think one tries to start each new book with a new vocabulary, a new set of clothes. Consciously or subconsciously we burn the previous devices which have got us here but which now are only rhetoric" (325). Nolan concurs: "I like to change the medium every now and again so that I can work against it, so that I am not proficient in it—because, in some way, I've always been worried by proficiency. It has so many dangers, especially as there is a certain kind of satisfaction in automatic response. But this could keep out more serious messages" (qtd. in Barber 98).

[13] The poet-spider is an allusion to the West African trickster figure, Anansi, after whom the Toronto publishing house is named. Ondaatje published *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* with Anansi.

[14] Ondaatje's disregard for historical accuracy also affects his portrait of Bolden, as the author remarks: "I have no desire, for instance, to go back and re-write *Billy* or re-investigate Bolden. Just recently there's another book on Bolden that's come out in the States. I have absolutely no desire to read the thing. Even if it gives me all kinds of new material about Bolden, I'm not at all interested in it. For me, Bolden is a character who is important to me only as I knew him" ("Moving" 134).

[15] For Nolan, the repetition of bird imagery creates continuity between works, but erratic effects within the works:

> It is common enough now for commentators on modern abstraction to write of movement that expands beyond the picture-frame, and of action taking place, as it were, on a plane in front of the painting. Nolan's birds [. . .] are not only emphatic points of focal interest, they also seem to be flying not across the sky in the painting but across the painting itself. (Lynn 34)

[16] Freud is referring to K.A. Scherner's book *Das Leben des Traumes* (1861).

[17] Lynn's description of a "return" to aboriginal myths misrepresents the Jindyworobaks somewhat. These artists wished to develop a mystical relation to the Australian landscape in the manner of the Aborigines, not simply to appropriate their myths. Although cultural appropriation was also part of their program, the task that they set for themselves was to invent and create, not merely to imitate.

[18] In addition to the series by Nolan and Ondaatje, the Mrs. Fraser story inspired a plan for an opera with music by Peter Sculthorpe, sets by Nolan, and a libretto by Patrick White intended to be performed at the opening of the Sidney Opera House. Although the project was never completed, White used the story as the basis for his acclaimed novel, *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). A range of works also explore the Mrs. Fraser story from historical and critical perspectives, including John Curtis's *Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle* (1838) and Michael Alexander's *Mrs. Fraser on the Fatal Shore* (1971).

[19] Note that Ondaatje refers to *Coming Through Slaughter* as "soup" ("1984 Interview" 324) and gives the title "What is in the Pot" to his introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology*.

[20] Although he has expressed a commitment to "finding [his] own mythology in [his] own landscape" ("1975 Interview" 15), Ondaatje spent years apprenticing in other people's mythologies before he explored his own landscapes in *Running In The Family* (1982) and *In The Skin of a Lion* (1987).

[21] Thus, Hutcheon begins an essay on the "breakdown of the conventional boundaries between the arts" and the "slippage between image and referent" in Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* by referring to "La Condition Humaine," a series by Magritte that presents "paintings within paintings, unframed pictures (which stand within window frames) whose pictured landscapes overlap perfectly with those of the world outside the windows" (*Canadian* 78).

[22] Curnoe also influenced Bowering, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter. His work has enjoyed a revival in the new millennium, including a major retrospective exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the spring of 2001, entitled "Greg Curnoe: Life & Stuff." One of his colourful paintings of a bicycle wheel graces the cover of the second edition of *The New Long Poem Anthology*.

[23] Barbour uses this quotation as an epigram to his book on Ondaatje because the poet's interest in dogs, in particular the mongrel, is one of his defining idiosyncracies.

[24] In a footnote, Ondaatje states that "Cohen turned down an offer to write a film script for *The Favourite Game*, claiming that he had progressed too much as a writer to rewrite an earlier work" (*Cohen* 62).

[25] The detective's name suggests both a connective tissue and the visual patterning so important to Ondaatje's poetry. The name also acknowledges a debt in the development of Ondaatje's serial technique, as he explains:

> In *the man with seven toes*, I guess that book was influenced in a lot of ways, though not in theme, by Phyllis Webb's *Naked Poems*, somewhere where she talks about a narrative form as a kind of necklace in which each bead-poem while being related to the others on the string was,

nevertheless, self-sufficient, independent, lyrical. That got me really interested in the form for *the man with seven toes.* ("1975 Interview" 24)

Ondaatje also emulates the style and theme of *Naked Poems* in his long poem *Tin Roof,* which is dedicated to Phyllis Webb. In addition, he refers to *Naked Poems* repeatedly in his introduction to *The Long Poem Anthology* (1979), arguing that the sequence "is still one of the most beautiful and influential books of the last decade [the 1970s]" (12) even though it was published in 1965. Robert Kroetsch concurs, noting that Webb's "short long poem" is the trace "behind many of the long poems of the 1970s in Canada" because its gestural, haiku-inspired "nakedness" suggests "a way out of the ending of the lyric [. . .] with its ferocious principles of closure" ("Play" 118). Appropriately, Kroetsch gives the name "Web" to a pivotal character in his novel *Badlands,* for which Ondaatje has written an unproduced screenplay.

Phyllis Webb's open-ended style may also have influenced Ondaatje's portrait of Bolden, since her response to the problem of closure is to create "open completions, which do not stop the poem, but which cast their strange felicity back over all the other lines, so that the whole poem is gathered into a unity without proposing a closure. We are not let down by Webb's endings, but, as if caught in a complicated jazz progression, neither are we permitted the satisfaction of conclusiveness, of argument upheld" (Thesen, *Vision* 10).

[26] This reference to Coleman suggests that Ondaatje is once again "deviously [thinking] out plots / across the character of his friends" ("Burning Hills"). As the author stated earlier, *Slaughter* is "a kind of funneling of various people's ideas and emotions." The book is a homage to writers "who represent [Ondaatje's] age and [his] group" (Ondaatje, "Moving" 141), such as Coleman, Nichol, Marlatt, Bowering, Kiyooka and others who, in the 1970s, combined poetry, prose, and the visual arts into new hybrid forms.

[27] The window imagery in this song was brought to my attention by Douglas Barbour in a private e-mail, 27 March 2001.

[28] Spicer's only novel, *The Tower of Babel,* was published posthumously in 1994. *The Tower of Babel* is a generic detective story, but his serial poem "A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud," published in *The Heads of the Town up to the Aether* (1962), likely influenced Bowering's *Autobiology.* Spicer's "fake novel" is a series of 30 short prose poems bearing chapter titles in the same way that *Autobiology* does.

[29] For more on the poetics of excrement, see Olson's theorization of "shit," as well as Davey's commentary on Olson, in the introduction to *Tish 1-19* (Davey, *Tish* 8).

[30] *Poetry and the Colonized Mind* is a monument to the cultural monomania and isolationism it professes to deplore in American society, and is so entirely unconcerned with poetry that it manages to discuss the Tish movement without citing a single poem from founding editor Fred Wah or later editors such as Daphne Buckle (Marlatt). Richardson directs his tirade primarily at Bowering and Davey, but he accuses the entire group of espousing a "U.S. individualistic anarchism" that threatens "Canadian traditions" (29). Richardson seems as unaware of the irony involved in calling anarchism a national trait as he is of the fact that, in George Woodcock, the University of British Columbia already had a prominent anarchist in its employ. Woodcock became the first editor of *Canadian Literature,* but the journal certainly cannot be classified as anarchist.

[31] According to Ekbert Faas's biography of Creeley, the elder poet detested Bowering because he reminded Creeley of his younger self. On impulse, Creeley even attacked Bowering at a party while the latter was dancing with Angela. Creeley apologized shortly afterwards (287).

[32] There was Canadian literature on the UBC syllabus, but mainly the poetry of an older generation: Carman, Lampman, D.C. Scott. See also (Marlatt, "Connexion" 28).

[33] In his 2001 autobiography, *A Magpie Life,* Bowering credits the Contact Press poets for being a major influence on him and he connects their project to that of Olson:

> The first book to be published by Contact Press was called *Cerberus* because it displayed the work of Contact's three editors, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, and Irving Layton. It came out in 1950, and would become for young strangers such as myself the signal of the new, the end to the illusion cherished by some elders that our proper influences were Auden and Spender and other Brits who were tilting at windmills we had never seen. In *Cerberus,* the three poets introduced

themselves with a few paragraphs of prose. Souster took the opportunity to recommend the poetry of the unknown Charles Olson and to predict that we would be hearing from him.

It made some Canadians in the literature community edgy to hear that the move from fustian to modernity in Canadian poetry was among other things a move from British orientation to American. I was vilified by the nationalistic conservatives and remnant anglophiles back east for aiding the incursion of U.S. poet-thought into our sovereign nation. The attack has been simplistic but unamusing. (*Magpie* 200)

In "George Bowering's Plain Song," the long introduction to Bowering's *Selected Poems* (1980), Blaser focuses on the influence of the Contact Press poets "in order to say his poetry is not foreign here [in Canada]" (21). The question of whether Montreal is more foreign to Vancouver than San Francisco is fraught in the context of Bowering's zeal for the West Coast, but Blaser offers a balanced perspective. As an American who became a Canadian citizen in 1972, as a friend and colleague of Bowering's at Simon Fraser University, and as a poet who would not see his life-long poem *The Holy Forest* published until Coach House Press issued it (while Ondaatje was editor for the press) in 1993, Blaser proposes an interesting middleground:

> The 'TISH poets' have been in Canada identified with an Americanism, an injudicious freedom, the 'Black Mountain influence'—all based on Robert Duncan's having set off the idea for a magazine and on the famous Vancouver Poetry Conference of 1963— visitors were Duncan, Olson, Ginsberg, Creeley, Levertov, Whalen and [Toronto's Margaret] Avison. It is time to reread this with some subtlety. Unfortunately, the proceedings of the Conference are largely unpublished. Therein can be found the clearest evidence for what I have said of this gathering purpose, originally Canadian, of the intimacy of form with circumstance. Those "wonder merchants" (Warren Tallman's name for them) had similar concerns and a similar struggle to undergo. ("George" 20-21)

As evidence of this Canadian "purpose," Blaser cites the Bayard/David interview in which Bowering positions himself "where Souster was in 1948 in comparison to A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott" (99) and argues that, from "1959 on, Bowering seems to have worked with and through that division in Canadian poetic concern. The work of Dudek, Layton and Souster first offered a Canadian model in which an intimacy of form is strict and demanding" (Blaser, "George" 20-21). Blaser does not mention that Bowering concludes this interview by stating that "Souster and Layton happen to be not anywhere near as good or as important as some of the poets in the States were": "They may have been important in Canada, but they were nowhere near as good as Williams, Pound, and H.D." ("1976 Interview" 99). Bowering does not explain what he means by "good," but it is clear that his criteria change over the years.

Blaser bolsters the Canadian-influence argument by noting that when Bowering "comes to measure his place in Canadian poetry, he does so with two careful studies, a book on Al Purdy (1970), and a fine essay on Margaret Avison, 1971" (Blaser, "George" 20-21). In the first book, Bowering praises Purdy's colloquial voice and frank sexuality, but takes him "to task for violating the laws of projective verse" (Kröller, *Bright* 24), whose jurisdiction Purdy steadfastly denies. The pair essentially agree to disagree, but their correspondence "may well be one of the most important extended discussions of, and feuds in, Canadian poetics" (24). On the matter of Avison, however, Bowering has said over and over, in first and third persons, that "Margaret Avison is the best poet we have had. Whether he was asked or not, he said it everywhere" ("Margaret" 97). In his 1986 essay, "Margaret, a Vision," Bowering argues that "when it comes to making a canon, and wanting a figure to look to as the founder of excellence and the first name in the canon, the writers with regard for precise language and delight tend to agree. In fiction they tend to agree on Sheila Watson, and in poetry they tend to agree on Margaret Avison" ("Margaret" 97). As the two essays on Avison and the book on Purdy make Bowering's estimation of these writers abundantly clear, I will not elaborate further.

[34] Following Duncan, Bowering avoids poetic formulae because form, "to the mind obsessed by convention, is significant in so far as it shows control. What has nor rime nor reason is a bogie that must be dismissed from the horizons of the mind. It is a matter of rules and conformities, taste, rationalization and sense" that excludes "whatever is feared" (Duncan, "Ideas" 197).

[35] In Piccolo Mondo, Angela Bowering describes her husband's term in the Air Force as a "self-imposed penance [. . .] for failing first-year university and losing his girlfriend and his job within the space of a few months" (146).

[36] Bowering: "[I] started at about the time that the original *Tish* guys broke up and everybody had a magazine–Fred Wah had *Sum*, Frank [Davey] had *Open Letter*, and I had *Imago*. In a sense, we were all doing open letters. It was an extension of what was going on in *Tish*, with a little bit more savvy" ("1976 Interview" 85).

[37] However, the military concerns of *Man with Yellow Boots* stand in sharp contrast to the subject matter of Bowering's next publication, *The Silver Wire* (1967). Dedicated to his wife Angela, this collection offers lyrical sketches of married life, often placing two poems on one page. The short lyrics of conjugal love in the first half of the book, such as "leg" (14), and the slightly longer ones, such as "when you run naked" (20-1), display a frank eroticism strongly reminiscent of Layton, whom Bowering considers to be one of the Canadian poets that depend on a formula. (It is typical of Bowering to emulate even as he criticizes, in order to demonstrate that he is capable of writing in a particular style but chooses not to, for the most part). However, the elliptical tone of the longer lyrics in the second half of *The Silver Wire*, such as "vancouver etude" (66-7), suggests that Bowering is growing impatient with the constraints of the short lyric and making studies for a grander design.

[38] See "Telephone Metaphysic" and its illustration (*Sticks* 22-23).

[39] This citation derives from Kröller (*Bright* 36). For all further citations from Bowering's unpublished letters, I am endebted to Miki's *A Record of Writing*.

[40] The title comes from Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies*: "They turn/ bright circles of colour,/ like the painted bicycle/ wheels of Greg Curnoe,/ king child" ("Elegy Six"). This wheel also appears on the cover of the second edition of *The New Long Poem Anthology*.

[41] They would also be colleagues at Sir George Williams University (Concordia) in Montreal in the late 1960s.

[42] Note that in "Baseball and the Canadian Imagination" Bowering, following William Humber, points out that "in Southern Ontario they were playing baseball a year before the legendary Abner Doubleday was supposed to have invented it down farther south" ("Baseball" 44).

[43] The back cover of *Smoking Mirror* shows Bowering admiring one of bissett's performance poetry recordings.

[44] For Bowering's first-person account, see "Support Your Local Police" (*Seventy-One* 32-36). For a satirical version, see *Piccolo Mondo* (138-9).

[45] Note that Bowering considers Ondaatje's "Rock Bottom" a biotext, although I have trouble understanding the connection.

[46] Bowering and Ondaatje co-edited the bp Nichol reader, *An H in the Heart* (1994).

[47] Blaser was probably thinking of *Autobiology* when, shortly after writing the introduction to Bowering's *Selected Poems*, he wrote in "Diary, April 11, 1981":

> it is true you can get art
> out of anything as it comes to be
> the backside of itself   you see
> the actor acting   in an anti-novel
> you see the novel novelling   in the
> anti-poem, an aesthetic raspberry is
> thrilling or worn-out (*Holy* 183)

[48] These views on art are likely an application of Olson's opinions. Olson argues that in the 19th century an "idea shook loose, and energy and motion became as important a structure of things as that they are plural, and, by matter, mass":

> It was even shown that in the infinitely small the older concepts of space cease to be valid at all. Quantity—the measurable and numerable—was suddenly as shafted in, to any thing, as it was also, as had been obvious, the striking character of the external world, that all things do extend out. Nothing was now inert fact, all things were there for feeling, to promote it, and be felt; and man, in

the midst of it, knowing well how he was folded in, as well as how suddenly and strikingly he could extend himself, spring or, without even moving, go, to far, the farthest. ("Equal" 177)

Consider also Stein: "I wonder now if it is necessary to stand still to live if it is not necessary to stand still to live, and if it is if that is not perhaps to be a new way to write a novel. I wonder if you know what I mean. I do not quite know whether I do myself. I will not know until I have written that novel" ("Portraits" 102).

[49] Kröller observes that Bowering's *Kerrisdale Elegies* "insist on parataxis to underline the independence and opacity of each thing, a method which Rilke had first observed and admired in the brushstrokes of Cézanne, who boldly juxtaposed primary colours until then considered incompatible" (*Bright* 82).

[50] Carson is also interested in photography and engages with these questions in *Autobiography of Red*. However, in "The Glove of Time by Edward Hopper," from *Men in the Off Hours*, Carson minimizes the distinction between the temporal and eternal by asking: "For in what does time differ from eternity except we measure it?" (60)

[51] The 1974 edition of Spicer's *After Lorca* employs a similar design.

[52] Decomposition is a tactic that Bowering also uses in the short poem "Against Description":

I went to the blackberries
on the vine.

They were blackberries
on the vine.

They were
blackberries.

Black
berries. (*West* 135)

[53] Kröller points out, for example, that "'Letter Shapes' (also in 1962) bore the motto that 'writing is the painted image of the voice; the more it resembles it, the better it is,' echoing a main principle of Olson's "Projective Verse" which was to permeate the Vancouver Poetry Festival the subsequent year" (*Bright* 18).

[54] Bowering criticizes novels such as MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* (148) because he believes that realist narrative normalizes the way Canadians understand history and the expectations they form for literature:

In Canada our most popular prose writers write popular history. Our readers prefer it to fiction. When they read fiction they like to read fiction that obeys the rules of historical narrative, the sense that character and setting and event combine to lead to a conclusion, that there is a force something like necessity, that language is the normal link between pre-linguistic history and drama. They have been encouraged to like anecdote in their history and realism in their fiction. Thus, while pre-realist fable, fantasy, myth, and the unnatural narrator have reemerged in the literatures of the older world, Canadians intent on discovering themselves and exploring their time have been slow to welcome the unreliable and the capricious in their writing, to respect the author who invents rather than obeying. ("Northward" 2)

[55] The critic is perhaps D.G. Jones in *Butterfly on Rock* (1970).

[56] The index attempts to dissociate "Al" from Al Purdy by making the poet "Al Purdy" a walk-on character who appears only on page 44.

[57] Pondering Vancouver's status in Canadian history, Bowering writes in *A Short Sad Book*:

Captain George Vancouver has a city & an island in Canada but he has a city in the United States & a rock in Australia & an arm in New Zealand & a mountain in Alaska.

No, Captain Vancouver was not the first Canadian. (78)

[58] See, for example, *Bowering's B.C.: A Swashbuckling History* (1996) and *Egotists and Autocrats: The Prime Ministers of Canada* (1999).

[59] An encrypted reference to the writer Paul Claudel (1868-1955) who was known for his renderings of conflicting human passions. He was also the brother of the sculptor Camille Claudel.

[60] Note that Stein herself does not believe in repetition: "there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe that there is no such thing as repetition" (Stein, "Portraits" 99).

[61] Olson also appears in *A Short Sad Book* to debate his "special view of history" with that of historian and Confederation Poet Charles G. D. Roberts (96).

[62] "My unlucky number has been fifty-two ever since I was a child. [. . .] I wondered whether I would end in my fifty-second year or when I was fifty-two" (Bowering, *Magpie* 13-4).

[63] Bowering wears his fictional masks quite lightly. In the short story "Carter Fell," for example, the thinly veiled third-person narrator switches to the first person in an important scene, and then briefly reverts back to the third person to explain the shift: "He couldnt keep his narrator in the third person any more, not thru all this emotion" (12). Bowering satirizes his authorial position in this passage, as he does in *Harry's Fragments*, where the narrator remarks: "He was not a writer of books or even of a book, certainly not a book about someone he referred to as 'he,' who was trying to find out how to live in pre-Socratic metonymy. He knew no such words" (*Harry* 56).

[64] Fox's surname is also sometimes spelled "Foxe."

[65] *Harry's Fragments* (1990) would make an interesting subject for further analysis. It bears the dedication, "for Mike Ondaatje in flux" (n.p.), and extrapolates from the fragments of Heraclitus in much the same way that Carson does the fragments of Stesichoros. The novel is fundamentally a detective story, where the typically male figure is "a core of rationality or logic stepping into a world of chaos or the unknown anyway, stepping into the wild logos and sorting it out, bringing order" (87). However, it stresses the maze of lyrical detours and puzzles. In a self-reflexive moment, Harry remarks: "After a while he thought perhaps yes I should say I am working on a book that will remain as fragments for restless readers many centuries from now. I will fill it with contradictions and they will observe how poetically they are expressed, and call them paradoxes" (70).

[66] Bowering even cites the fact that he and Kogawa are the same age to underscore their differences as writers (*Magpie* 22).

[67] As literary artificer, Kogawa rewrites history by blending fact and fiction, as she explains in "Minerals From Stone":

> For many years
> androgynous with truth
> I molded fact and fantasy
> and where they met
> made the crossroads home (*Woman* 64)

There is, for example, no master narrative of the abortion experience. In *The Rain Ascends,* Millicent summarizes her experience in a prose account (149-51) that corresponds to "Dear Euclid" in its basic details (Thursday, July, New York, East Side Clinic, the humid weather). However, unlike the speaker in "Dear Euclid," Millicent is alone in New York; her operation takes place late on Thursday (or possibly on Friday), not on Thursday morning; and she maintains that she "did not know" she "had a choice" (150). These minor differences illustrate the opacity, not the transparency, of the author's accounts. Both the long poem and novel are organized to achieve particular rhetorical effects.

[68] In an interview, Kogawa states that during the writing of *Obasan* she was also "thinking about the [Jewish] Holocaust, and [she] was thinking how could one make sense out of an event like that after 2000 years of

Christianity?" ("Journey" 10). She came to the conclusion that if the Austrain psychotherapist "Victor Frankl could find meaning in the middle of the Holocaust, if people can, in the midst of the worst devastation we can imagine, if they can experience love, and nothing can destroy it, then love is present. If we are able to find nourishment within stones, then we are never hungry" ("Journey" 10). This proverb echoes in the symbolism of the white stone and stone bread in *Obasan*.

[69] This Goddess is a version of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Kannon.

[70] To a certain extent, moon imagery also frames *The Rain Ascends*. The "new moon" (2) appears with the Goddess near the outset of the novel. It reappears in a different guise towards the conclusion when Millicent and her father confront "the bishop and the lawyers [. . .] under the harsh and merciless light of the newspaper moon" (216).

[71] See Psalms 18 and 28.

[72] Rough Lock Bill transmits the Native (traditionally Kutenai) history of Slocan to Naomi and Kenji in oral fashion. However, the question of whether Bill is Native or a Native stand-in is a matter of debate. Davidson, for one, sees him as Caucasian (59), despite the fact that Bill's skin is "darker" than Naomi's (144) or Kenji's (145). I view Rough Lock Bill as Native for a number of reasons. His views on race would be surprisingly liberal for a rural Caucasian of the war period: "'Red skin, yellow skin, white skin, any skin.' He puts his leathery arm beside Kenji's pale one. 'Don't make sense, do it, all this fuss about skin?" (145). Bill speaks a colloquial English different from that of any other character in the book, and his peculiar storytelling technique either identifies him as Native or identifies him inextricably with Natives. His story of the exodus begins, "this here is an Indian brave" (145), although it immediately becomes apparent that he is talking about the stick he is using to illustrate the story. Bill's identification grows stronger as his exodus narrative switches from third to first person: "So off we go, these few here" (146). The narrative's ambiguity is strongest when Bill recalls: "When my Grandad came, there was a whole tribe here" (146). Bill's phrasing makes it unclear whether his grandfather arrived with Native or European migrations. If Bill is not Native, he is doing his best to "indigenize" himself. His "King bird" (144) stories are thinly veiled versions of Native tales. Furthermore, at the end of his exodus tale, he admonishes himself for talking too much, stating that "smart people don't talk to much. Redskins know that" (147).

[73] The notion of a "sea change" recalls Frye's theory of identity loss (descent into the underworld) and reclamation (ascent back into the world) that informs Atwood's *Surfacing*.

[74] However, the verb is generally used to refer to water, not people.

[75] Russell Rose identifies the distrust of language and history in *Obasan* as a generic feature of metafiction:
> [A]s self-conscious "historiographic metafiction" *Obasan* draws attention to the instability, the elusiveness, of "history" itself; as minority metafiction it draws attention specifically to the difficulties implicit in any attempt to give voice to the silenced, underground histories of victimized and marginalized people. ("Hawthorne" 286-7)

Certainly Kogawa is "obsessed with history/ and always scratching for clues," as she states in "For Ben and Malcolm" (*Woman* 58), but the designation of *Obasan* as a historiographic metafiction by Russell Rose, Goellnicht ("Minority" 287), Davidson (19) and others has been contested.

According to Chinmoy Banerjee, Goellnicht's argument that *Obasan* is "an autoreferential postmodernist metafiction as theorized by Linda Hutcheon is seriously flawed" (102). In addition to "internal contradictions in Goellnicht's argument," Banerjee notes a "more basic problem with the claim that the novel is postmodern" (102):
> [T]he formulaic equation of "historiographic metafiction" with the postmodern ignores all specificity of production and reception and is theoretically meaningless. Challenges to realism or the authority of dominant historiography are not specifically postmodern, and apparently "postmodern" strategies often have very different origins and trajectories from the postmodern as a condition of Western knowledge as theorized by Lyotard or a condition of late capitalist culture as theorized by Jameson. (Banerjee 102)

While another essay might look at the intermingling of Buddhist and Christian motifs in *Obasan* (Gottlieb 50-53; Willis 243; Davidson 27-8) as an example of what Jameson calls "transcoding"—by which he means comparatively "measuring what is sayable and 'thinkable' in each of these codes or idiolects" (394)—I will focus here on Banerjee's other objection. I maintain that the techniques of (un)framing in *Obasan* provide a fine example of the postmodern as a condition of Western knowledge as outlined by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. In fact, Linda Hutcheon

directly links *Obasan* to Lyotard's philosophical project while sketching "models of postmodernist historiographic metafiction" (15) in her introduction to *The Canadian Postmodern*:

> If the view of history as ordered and neatly closed-off narrative is now under attack, then (logically) so too should be the realist presentation of historical events and characters in fiction, for nineteenth-century historical narrative was a major model for the writing of realist novels. Jean-François Lyotard has defined the "postmodern condition" as one characterized by a distrust of "meta-" or "master" narratives, that is, of the received wisdom or the grand narrative systems that once made sense of things for us. Canadian novels have contributed to this distrust of everything from the state (Kogawa's *Obasan*) to religion (Scott's *Antichthon*). (15)

[76] Miki's critical framing of the novel is slightly different from Gottlieb's model. He argues that the "biblical text finds its symmetrical counterpart in the document that closes *Obasan*, the excerpt from a brief submitted by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians" (*Broken* 139) and he links the opening found poem to the concluding found document to create a closed circle that encompasses the entire text. He maintains that *Obasan* "ends within a gap" between Naomi's epiphany and the memorandum in which "private and public are dichotomized as a stasis" (117), but there is a problem in the symmetry of this argument. The previous essay in *Broken Entries* argues that the counterpart of the memorandum is the proem—not the epigram—to which the memorandum stands in asymmetrical relation: "Naomi's story, beginning and end, does have the symmetrical balance of aesthetic closure, a novelistic convention that *Obasan* fulfills, and which many readers see as a sign of Naomi's resolution of the injustices, but the end document has an asymmetric relationship to its counterpart, the opening proem" (116). This discrepancy of counterparts is not so much a contradiction as a demonstration that narrative frames "are not static structures like the borders of a picture 'but are constantly [. . .] negotiated footings. The framing that is going on at any moment is part of what establishes the frame for what goes on next, and is partly created by the framing that went before'" (MacLachlan and Reid 65). Accordingly, Russell Rose argues that Naomi's history manifests a "complex synchronicity" that breaks down the division between narrative frames:

> [T]he structure is non-linear and achronological, shaped by the consciousness of the narrator as she acts in the present, remembers much from the past, reads (in the present) Emily's documents from the past, and records dreams from both past and present, zig-zagging back and forth through time. ("Hawthorne" 292)

Praising this dynamic, Ondaatje argues that in "Kogawa's horrifying fictive memoir [. . .] the barrier between fiction and document has been erased, creating an even more powerful form" (*Ink* xvi), one that Manina Jones calls "documentary-collage" (120) and Kamboureli sees as "montage" (176). Whatever one calls these juxtapositions, doublings, and ambivalences, they manifest the "productive tension" and reflexivity advocated by Miki because they "repe[l] the static of binarism and yiel[d] a dispersal of frames" (*Broken* 213). Although the narrative structure of *Obasan* might appear to be rigid and circular, it is elliptical in all senses of the term.

[77] As a leading figure in the National Coalition for Japanese Canadian Redress, Miki is a possible model for the radical figure Morty in *Itsuka*.

[78] Bowering and Ondaatje (as well as Robert Kroetsch and bp Nichol) were members of the National Coalition for Japanese Canadian Redress (Kadota 12-13), a multiethnic coalition supporting the National Association of Japanese Canadians' redress objectives. Marlatt's oral history, *Steveston Recollected: A Japanese Canadian History*, comes after *Obasan* on the NAJC's list of recommended reading (Kadota 15).

[79] See also the egg dreams in *Itsuka* (49, 169).

[80] Davey also considered romantic the use of metaphor (of which Marlatt is fond) and favoured metonymic connections between nouns in the manner of the Whitman, Pound, and Olson. Ironically, Davey's idea drew criticism from some of the very same American writers the *Tish* group were trying to impress. For example, in an editorial in *Tish 10*, Davey announces that the "tyranny of a poem or painting as the product of an artist's 'craft' independent of his human personality is over" (Davey, *Tish* 201). Denise Levertov, to whom the editors mailed their free newsletter, responded by letter to say that testimony "can't be made **without** that craft that makes of it an independent entity" and she proposes these two dictums: "I say: **No possibility of viable form without genuine experience**. But: **No possibility of communicating experience** (i.e. testimony) **without crafted form**" (Davey, *Tish* 223).

[81] The evolution of the fairytale *Beauty and the Beast* suggests an interesting subject of comparison because, from its very first recorded version, many of its interpreters have been women. See Betsy Hearne's *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (1989).

[82] Marlatt discusses the idea of female heroism in her essay "Subverting the Heroic in Feminist Writing of the West Coast" (1988). Commenting on the West Coast women writers who went before her, Marlatt argues:

> Perhaps like the arbutus, also known as Crazy-Woman Tree, we thrive in opposition to the norm, drop our leaves when we're not supposed to, shed our bark and still flower. Frontier heroism, with its cult of the macho individual who beats all odds to survive, has paradoxically provided ground for an alternative feminist vision which is not only rewriting the old heroic script but changing our cultural values as it challenges the language in which the old values are embedded. [. . . Such] writing challenges notions of the conventional lyric or conventional forms of the novel just as it rewrites the old heroic script with its inscribed gender roles. (*Labyrinth* 87)

[83] Marlatt also defines an "event" in serial terms: "an event is simply an acted-out series of relationships" ("Given" 56).

[84] Marlatt also states that the "single frame is the trap, because experience is constantly moving forward. You cant stop it. It's being constantly transformed, or it's constantly transforming itself at every point. That's why the photograph itself is an illusion, because it makes it seem as if you've managed to preserve that point in time, & you havent" ("Given" 50).

[85] Discussing the form of *Our Lives* in an afterword, Marlatt writes: "it was prose, immediate to the moment as writing a poem, no form but the form it made for itself, language making connections as i felt our lives were" (*Our* 39).

[86] When Kiyooka died suddenly in 1994, Marlatt also took on the editing of his biography of his mother: *Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka* (1997). See my Conclusion for a brief discussion of this work.

[87] In her choice of setting, Marlatt may be responding to a 1955 lyric by her creative writing teacher, Earle Birney, entitled "Six-Sided Square: Octopan." The lyric is constructed as a rather condescending dialogue between a worldly poet and an inquiring "Lady." It depicts aspects of a typical *zócalo* and is framed by a hexagonal outline.

[88] Later the woman asserts her preference for her own medium: "Do you want to use the camera, he asks, offering her what he is here for. No, she waves the guidebook, I'll stick with this" (45).

[89] Freud's thesis can be fairly consistently applied to the imagery used by Ondaatje and Bowering, but for Kogawa enclosures such as the internment stalls in Hastings Park are associated with patriarchal violence and lawmaking.

[90] Consider, for example, the romantic misadventures of the history professor Jim Dixon in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1953). Ondaatje mentions in a endnote to my second chapter that he was writing against the style of Amis's novel, but Marlatt suggests an alternative to its plot, as well as to its portrait of Margaret, who has "cracked up" (Amis 2).

[91] Marlatt describes this kind of conversion as a "[l]yric strategy: Take words at 'face value' in their idiomatic currency, and, through an investigation of their sources and cognates, subvert their negative meaning, trace an other linguistic history that generates affirming ones" (*Labyrinth* 167).

[92] The erotic also simmers below the surface of the long lines of *Steveston*, as Marlatt recalls: "part of what I saw present in Steveston that was so delightful was the sensuality, even the eroticism of the place" (Arnason, Cooley and Enright 31). Diana Relke observes that in *Steveston* "the erotic dreams of the young [. . .] break open the containment of their lives. [. . .] Erotic dream is also the survival strategy of their adult counterparts who never go elsewhere" (Relke 41).

[93] An early version of this chapter was published in *Canadian Literature* 166 as "'Dazzling Hybrids': The Poetry of Anne Carson."

[94] I am fully aware that in discussing the serial novel I am contributing to this categorizing phenomenon. However, as I have demonstrated, there is considerable flexibility in the genre.

[95] Carson clarified this point of interest in a private email dated 1 February 2002.

[96] The passage could also refer to the long poem "The Anthropology of Water," which constitutes the latter half of *Plainwater*.

[97] This review of *Men in the Off Hours* appears only in the Canadian edition of *Time*, however.

[98] In translation, at least, "The Red Place" is a noun. However, the confusion of nouns and adjectives plays a key role in Carson's treatment of the epithetic proper noun "Stesichoros."

[99] Also translated as "whore that I am" (Fagles 3.128) or "shameless bitch/ that I am" (Lombardo 3.190-191). It should be noted that the translators make no attempt to lessen the pungency of these remarks. On the contrary, Lattimore's use of "slut" in a 1951 translation suggests a certain inventiveness and relish in the task.

[100] Also translated as "bitch that I am, vicious, scheming" (Fagles 6.408) or "scheming, cold-blooded bitch" (Lombardo 6.362).

[101] Nietzsche states in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the "Platonic distinction between the idea and eidolon is deeply rooted in the Greek temperament" (66).

[102] The quoted passage is a paraphrase of Stein's meditations on style in "An Acquaintance with Description." Carson's syntax echoes a construction that Stein uses repeatedly in the piece: What is the difference between a hedge and a tree. A hedge and a tree what is the difference between a hedge and a tree" (508).

[103] Consider, for example, the apostrophic dynamic in poems such as "Girl and Horse, 1928" (*Selected* 95), the descriptive doubling in "Younger Sister, Going Swimming" (107), and her figural use of photographs and mirrors in general.

[104] Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* also suggests a subject of inquiry. It extrapolates its premise from a passage of Genesis and is framed by a mock-academic afterword.

[105] See also *Warbrain* (1994), which is a collaboration between Stuart MacKinnon (poetry) and Tony Urquhart (artwork) dealing with the World Wars.

[106] While no particular poem from Michaels's early collections, *The Weight of Oranges* (1986) and *Miner's Pond* (1991), sets a stylistic precedent for *Fugitive Pieces*, nearly every one of her lyric sequences develops a theme (geology, piano lessons, the redeeming power of memory) that she weaves into her novel.

[107] In quantum mechanics, to cite a final scientific example, sub-atomic particles cannot be located so much as predicted according to a model of probability. To cope with such uncertainty, scientific storytelling models must have indeterminacy built into them. One finds a surprisingly familiar evolution in the structure of poetry in the 20th-century, as Marlatt states:

> we know language structures our world and in a crucial sense we cannot see what we cannot verbalize [. . .]. here we are truly contained within the body of our mothertongue. and even the physicists, chafing at these limits, say that the glimpse physics now gives us of the nature of the universe cannot be conveyed in a language based on the absolute difference between a noun and a verb. poetry has been demonstrating this for some time. ("Musing" 27)

Indeed, the novel has been demonstrating the protean quality of form and language for some time, as well.

[108] Robertson is a satirist and Pyper is interested in crime writing (which naturally emphasizes plot), but their views are given space in Canadian literary publications because they are shared by a wide range of authors and critics, as will become clear when I discuss Marchand.

[109] The building blocks of narrative do not have to be linear or chronological. Indeed, as Terry Eagleton explains, the mind's modes of processing narrative is multidirectional:

> Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair: our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our original understanding, highlighting some features of it and backgrounding others. As we read on we shed assumptions, revise beliefs, make more and more complex inferences and anticipations; each sentence opens up a horizon which is confirmed, challenged or undermined by the next. We read backwards and forwards simultaneously, predicting and recollecting, perhaps aware of other possible realizations of the text which our reading has negated. Moreover, all of this complicated activity is carried out on many levels at once, for the text has 'backgrounds' and 'foregrounds', different narrative viewpoints, alternative layers of meaning between which we are constantly moving. (Eagleton 67)

In reading, then, time's arrow is an illusion not an imperative.

[110] To Tihanyi, Crosbie complains that as "feminists we don't want to believe women are evil. We tend to not want to believe it even though it contradicts everything we've ever known about women. That's a point of feminist interrogation for me" ("Shapeshifter" 3).

[111] Crosbie also uses this phrase to criticize what she sees as the self-consciously "arty" quality of Mouré's poems. While she admires Mouré's "great flair for language" and respects "those who wish to make beauty convulse, [Crosbie] wonder[s] if there's a new trick with a knife this author may learn to do" ("Artful" D7).

[112] Note that Crosbie's article changes the verbs in the mission statement from the imperative "must play" to the present tense "plays," thus making Carson's classicism seem less relevant to popular culture. Crosbie would probably dismiss the imperatives, like the rest of the prize material, as "Griffin propaganda" (D7). She also overlooks the popularity of the TV adaptations of Greek myth that Carson parodies in her "TV Men" series.

[113] The etymology of "thesis" provides an excellent example of the importance of context to semantics. In literary criticism, of course, a thesis frames an argument by placing emphasis on a particular perception of how a text functions. In the metrics of classical poetry, however, thesis can refer to either a stressed or unstressed metric foot. The term belongs to a long story of changing cultural contexts and semantic indeterminacy:

> The Greeks beat time with the foot; raising it (Gr. *arsis*, raising) [. . .] and putting it down (Gr. *thesis*, putting [. . .]. The Romans, however, used the term *arsis* for the raising of the voice with the first syllable of a foot of verse; hence the same word *arsis* meant 'unaccented' to the Greeks and 'accented' to the Romans. Gradually the Romans substituted their own word, from *cadere* to fall, It. and Eng. *cadenza*; so that now we speak of the *cadence* of a passage, where Shakespeare, in the opening lines of *Twelfth Night*, asks for "that strain again; it had a dying *fall*. (Shipley 109)

[114] Turner's popular novel in verse, *Hard Core Logo* (1993), is about a punk rock band and has inspired a film directed by Bruce McDonald. The movie is based on a screenplay by Lynn Crosbie and Noel Baker, and features a soundtrack (to which Turner's contributed and for which he won a Genie award). The movie has also inspired a tribute album by Canadian musicians.

Turner's novel *The Pornographer's Poem* (1999) is written in the frame-by-frame manner of a screenplay and stages the dynamic between lyric and narrative as a love affair between two very different filmmakers.

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