



Bowering's B.C. (Toronto: Viking, 1996; Penguin, 1997)

"In *Bowering's B.C.*, Bowering's tale is anything but conventional... [He] has produced a riveting retelling of events with all the racism, hypocrisies, lunatics, and charlatans left in." (*MacLean's*)

JESSICA LANGSTON / George Bowering's British Columbia, Postmodern and Post-colonial

In her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire," Linda Hutcheon distinguishes postmodernism from post-colonialism by the criterion of postmodernism's relative political ambivalence (72). Diana Brydon pushes Hutcheon's distinction further, arguing that, due to this ambivalence, a postmodernist text takes on the "personality" of its author and that it "seem[s] to suggest that action is futile," as compared to a text inflected by post-colonialism which, through "foreground[ing] the political," seems to offer the reader some kind of agency (95). Critics continue to debate this question of the nature of the relation between postmodernism and post-colonialism. If the two can in no way be equated, neither is it clear that they are mutually exclusive; in fact, post-colonial texts often employ postmodernist strategies to make their point. Moreover, many authors such as Fred Wah and Roy Miki, have often been described as both. That said, there are key differences between these two approaches. Where postmodernism has been broadly associated with an interrogation of grand meta-narratives and a network of self-referential and ironic formal characteristics that privilege *jouissance* or the irreducible playfulness that we have come to know as textuality, post-colonialism has emphasized the question of the power relations and the ethical dimension of identity formations that constitute the legacy of imperialism.

This article takes as its focus two of George Bowering's British Columbia books—*Burning Water* (1980) and *Bowering's B.C.: A Swashbuckling History* (1996). Separated by almost two decades, *Burning Water* and *B.C.* represent a shift in Bowering's approach to history. In *Burning Water*, Bowering adopts a radical deconstructive approach to narrative, ultimately creating a retelling of history that is discontinuous and elusive—a critique of not just official, capital-H History, but of the entire concept of historiography generally. What Bowering's magical-realist novel argues is that the past is entirely unknowable. Not so in *B.C.* For one thing, this more recent narration of the history of Bowering's province is not historical fiction, but, rather, a traditional, if playful, History book. Here Bowering tells the story of BC in a chronological fashion rooted in recognizable tropes of History,

such as causation and even progress. If *Burning Water* represents the past as unrepresentable, then *B.C.* attempts to recreate it as a lived and material reality.

The distinction between the two books nicely demonstrates the distinction made above between postmodernism and post-colonialism. Bowering's earlier text speaks to the futility of any attempt at accessing the past (and hence the impossibility of any action in the present), whereas his later return to BC's history suggests the importance and possibility of historical knowledge, which ultimately suggests the potential of political agency in the face of such knowledge. This difference in approaches is particularly significant when considering how it impacts Bowering's representation of BC's First Nations population. Bowering's distinct textual modalities in *Burning Water* and *B.C.* create distinct possibilities for the writing of Canada's First Peoples.

In *Burning Water*, Bowering uses of a number of postmodern ideas and strategies: the confusion of past and present, subject and object; the rejection of closed historical or narrative meaning; and the disruption of the historical document's authority or truth value in favour of a leveling of fact and fiction, of history and story through the recognition of the discursive nature of historiography. While this approach certainly inspires a questioning of nationalist historical narratives, it also potentially precludes any rethinking of colonial relations, since in *Burning Water* Bowering is primarily interested in playing with historical truth-claims rather than offering any potential for an alternative. Given his choice of subject matter, one might question Bowering's take on imperial politics and the violence and exploitation at the root of Canada's "discovery." It is not that Bowering ignores these issues, but, rather, that because the novel's focus is the instability of narrative and the impossibility of ever representing truth, things like Peter Puget's shooting a Nootka in the face or the sodomizing of this Nootka by a marine (two obvious metaphors for first contact) are equally destabilized. If this is just a version and no version is ever true, then with how much gravity will or can the reader treat these moments of damage in Canada's national history?

On several occasions Bowering imagines conversations between his "Indian" characters. These First Nations are not individuals; instead they are referred to as "first Indian," "second Indian," etc. Although Bowering is undoubtedly trying to mimic the perception of the explorers, poking fun at their Eurocentric worldview, the First Nations characters in this book remain tools, useful only in what they

reveal about the explorers and about Bowering himself. Furthermore, these “Indian” characters invariably speak in contemporary language, using Anglo-Canadian slang terms and speech patterns. For instance, the opening scene of the novel has two Indians watching the boats of Vancouver approaching their coastline. We are privy to their dialogue and to their inner thoughts about each other, and Bowering has them using words and phrases such as “lifeguard” and “[l]ittle prick” (16). Clearly by having these Indians speak and think in the modern, White idiom, Bowering is trying to signal the forced assimilation of these people that follows the invasion of these Europeans. The other argument Bowering is making is in line with Terry Goldie’s in *Fear and Temptation*. Bowering, himself a White writer, is explicitly acknowledging the fact that White culture has and probably always will recreate the Aboriginal in its own image. There can never be a true representation of the Aboriginal, Bowering seems to be suggesting, so why try? This disavowal of not just history but materiality in general is part of Bowering’s overarching disruptive treatment of imperial/colonial ideology, which, by signaling the impossibility of ever getting at the truth of the First Nations historical experience and contemporary existence, ends up muddying the post-colonial message implicit in both the Indians’ language and in what they are saying.

While throughout *Burning Water* Bowering seems to be able to conjure his version of Vancouver through the records Vancouver has left behind, the Nootka are always already invisible. As we are told when Menzies, the ship’s botanist, turns to gain a final glimpse of the Indians, “They were gone from his sight, and so why think about them more” (113). The observation that links this invisibility of the First Nations with the decision to not think about them could be read as Bowering’s comment on the general treatment of these people throughout history. However, he does little himself to rectify this situation; there is no sustained attempt to demythologize the First Nations people through depicting them as individuals. Bowering, in fact, continually seems to suggest that it’s a hopeless task both in his labeling of the Nootka peoples as simply “first Indian,” “second Indian,” etc. and in his allusion to the impossibility of these “Indians” accessing the Europeans—first Indian remarks that they can’t know who these “Mamathni” are when they leave the Nootka’s sight (199)—and, thus, the implicit impossibility of a White person ever accessing the truth about the First Nations.

Because Bowering has been so playfully meta-textual throughout the novel, readers end up in a double-bind. If we can only see Aboriginal people through the

lens of our own ideology, then the postmodern treatment of history and nation in the text acts as another instance of this. The First Nations characters in *Burning Water* are not representative of any material history; as Diana Brydon underlines about postmodernism generally, they are receptacles of Bowering's own voice and his European, post-structuralist-based perspective of history.

The erasure that Bowering's meta-fictive approach seems to perform on his "Indian" characters in *Burning Water* is counterbalanced by an approach that is grounded in materiality and presence in *B.C.* For one thing, Bowering never attempts to speak for the First Peoples in his more recent text.¹ This narrative decision is noticeable especially because Bowering does imagine the thoughts and conversations of the White explorers and settlers of the region. There is a post-colonialist's sensitivity in this careful avoidance of voice appropriation and assumption of knowledge. Moreover, unlike in *Burning Water*, which at times suggested a pan-Indianism approach, *B.C.* recognizes the myriad separate nations living in the province, both along the Coast and in the Interior: "Tlingits and Kootenays are as different as Vikings and Greeks" (9).

In *B.C.* Canada's First Peoples are far from silenced. Bowering ensures that their lived reality (or what we can know of it) is given a space within the overarching narrative of the province. For example, he provides details about the economic systems of various nations, such as the wealthier Coastal nations like the Salish and Haida versus the resource-poor peoples living in the Interior. Such information helps underscore the material impact of colonialism as the scramble for resources by White colonizers diminished the supply for First Peoples:

In 1859 the Thompson fishermen took up their traditional posts and waited in vain for the salmon run.... White fishermen had stretched a net across the Fraser downstream. Commerce had come to the water. It would get worse every year.... The Native peoples of the Interior and the Coast were salmon people. The yearly salmon run was their life, literally, and the basis of their religion. Now in the nineteenth century... the whites were looking at the pink flesh... as a money-making proposition. (125)

Bowering is also careful to distinguish the cultural practices of the nations, noting that the potlatch ceremony was not largely practiced by nations living in the Interior

1 Aside from one brief instance, tellingly in the section of the book about George Vancouver (59).

of BC. Again, this type of concrete knowledge assists the reader's understanding of how Christianity and capitalism negatively affected the long-held traditions and beliefs of BC's First Peoples. The potlatch, for instance, was banned in the Indian Act of 1884 because "the Christians did not like the idea of people giving away the fruits of their labour or business sense. And the governments wanted some kind of governable order they could understand" (15).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Bowering does not represent BC's First Peoples population as extinct. While *Burning Water* seems to write the Native out of history through its meta-fictional strategies, in *B.C.* Bowering concludes with a discussion of previous and ongoing land claims as well as with a discussion of "En-owkin," the notion of consultation or exchange of views that is held in great regard by the Okanagan nation. In the book's last paragraph, Bowering refers back to the opening chapter where he introduced Native mythology and tradition in the form of the character of Coyote. Closing the book with a discussion of people in Vancouver who "were alarmed by the presence of coyotes" in their neighbourhoods and backyards, Bowering writes that when they asked what could be done about these animals, experts replied "[g]et used to them" (394). The coyote and the land and First Peoples—all here before the settlement of Canada by Europeans—were here first, and they are not going anywhere. In the end, Bowering's approach to Western Canada's history and to the representation of First Peoples in *B.C.* is post-colonial in its suggestion that certain colonizing practices can be known and can be judged unethical and that political action can be taken in the present in reaction to current and past injustices towards BC's first population.

Works Cited

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