Memory and Place in Rudy Wiebe’s
*A Discovery of Strangers*

Memory and place/history and geography are fundamental elements of personal and national identity. Mari Peepre-Bordessa founds her study of Hugh MacLennan’s National Trilogy on the parallelism between the process of attaining maturity by an individual human being and that of a newly developing nation and she affirms that as “ties to the ‘parent’ state loosened, Canadians learned to identify with their local community, then with their region and finally with their nation” (Peepre-Bordessa 30-31). It is a description that seems to fit the direction in which Rudy Wiebe’s imagination has evolved.

At first his imaginative genius was challenged by the fictional rendering of Mennonite communities, the most influential identity factor of his early upbringing: *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970), *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). Then, as he kept roaming the wide prairies of his native Saskatchewan, his imagination became haunted, as he confessed, by the earlier inhabitants of those places – the Native Indians and the Métis, whose perspective and voice he recreated in the Governor General Award winning *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and in *The Scorched Wood People* (1977), concentrating on the official discourse about the time of the Indian Treaty negotiations in the 1870’s and 1880’s and the Louis Riel Northwest Rebellions. *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) may be regarded both as a continuation of Wiebe’s imaginative interest in Native people’s spirituality and culture and as a culmination of his older sense of the North as a symbol of Canadian national identity – a notion revealed in his illuminating confession expressed in the Foreword to the River of Stone: Fictions and Memories: (“Love Letters from Land and Sea”): “North and Wilderness. When I consider my country as a place distinct and particular from all the other places I have seen and lived in, that’s it: north and wilderness” (Wiebe 1995b, ix). He then shows that in the age of air travel by plane or helicopter any Canadian could go and have an authentic experience of the North, which for him appears therefore to be a common national heritage leading to a sense of national identity.
In order to recreate the memory of the Native population and give it a voice that has never been audible in Canadian fiction before, Wiebe chooses to recount the events in *The Temptations of Big Bear* through an external narrator who uses Big Bear as a focus most of the time in a narrative discourse that also incorporates the more familiar version of the white population in first person narratives from journals or diaries, letters (such as Rae’s Letters to the Governor General and to the Prime Minister) but also newspaper accounts or the play script style of Big Bear’s trial and sentencing. At the end of the novel, readers “are left to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view they have been offered and like the jury [before which Big Bear appears] we must have an evaluation and interpretation of all we have been told” (Hutcheon, 65). The fact that the narrator never comments or condemns but simply juxtaposes viewpoints achieves the effects of greater inter-cultural awareness and consciousness of the past in all its complexity. Wiebe manages thus to give a portrayal of Plains Cree’s spirituality and lifestyle that carries an air of authenticity as it is the product of both minute documentation (as was later apparent) and of an outstanding empathic power. That is why John Moss has defined Wiebe’s method in *Big Bear* as visionary and this novel as “not historical fiction, not a recreation, but a form of transcendence” of facts and time “to worlds beyond words” (Moss, 371).

In the *Scorched-Wood People* the tone of the narrative changes as this time the narrator is internal. We hear the voice of Pierre Falcon, the Métis bard, who tells the tragedy of his people’s defeat and annihilation after Batoche. There is intense lyrical vibration in the voice of the narrator, which, however, should not be taken as a flaw but as a marker of his symbolic significance. The tone of the narrative is therefore partisan, it conveys the bard’s admiration for the great prophet and statesman of the Métis, who believed in his Messianic role, and for Gabriel Dumont, the Commander of Riel’s rebellious forces, with his simple faith and skill in cunning Indian war-style. The narrative also exposes the lies and deceit of the Governor General and of the white government. Official reports and documents are incorporated in the narrative in order to ensure the presence of the white people discourse. However, the bard denounces Macdonald’s treachery and praises Riel’s great faith in God and in his prophetic mission to ensure his people’s survival with dignity and the preservation of their culture (he kept writing about it even in prison).

Wolfgang Kloos highly appreciates the use of the Métis folk singer Pierre Falcon as a historically approved mediator. This German critic sees the
bards constant changes of identity in the novel as a technique of achieving a unitary yet multi-voiced commentary which leads to Wiebe’s success to recover the voice of an illiterate people that was silenced in the aftermath of the Northwest Rebellion. “It is certainly one of Wiebe’s major achievements” – Kloos concludes – “to have introduced the ethnic voice into contemporary anglophone narrative, whereby the term ‘ethnic’ has a double meaning, since Wiebe’s Mennonite background distinguishes him as a member of a minority group” (Kloos, 69). Frank Davey, on the contrary, considers Wiebe’s creative project “an Euro-Canadian appropriation of Indian culture” as recommended by Margaret Atwood in *Survival*, who suggested that for Canadians a knowledge of Indian peoples may constitute “a knowledge of our origins” (Atwood, 105). Davey deems that such narrative discourses project a utopian Canada. A Canada that can forgive and identify with the once imprisoned Big Bear or rehabilitate the once criminal Louis Riel as a national hero is for Davey a utopian Canada, “humane and non-directive, racially tolerant, rejecting of European hierarchy […] rejecting railway, army and other rationalistic systems of human management, and affirming sexuality, the wide sky, and the ‘The Green Grass World’” (Davey, 55).

In *A Discovery of Strangers* Wiebe entwines two typographically distinct strands of narrative, namely excerpts from the authentic journals kept by John Richardson and Robert Hood during the first Franklin overland expedition (excerpts which are written in italics and prefixed to each of the thirteen chapters) and a fictional narrative given by an external narrator that uses Yellowknife Indians as the focus most of the time, but also incorporates other points of view such as Back’s first person version of the events or John Hepburn’s imaginary deposition about the incidents that took place at Fort Enterprise in October 1820. Therefore the novel’s text iconically suggests the encounter and juxtaposition of cultures, the parallel discovery of “the Other” implicit in the title, discovery that obviously works both ways: the Natives’ gradual discovery of the white explorers (read “invaders”) but also the white explorers’ final discovery of the Yellowknives “degree of humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized of nations” (Wiebe 1995a, 295).

The novel records the last fifteen months of the Arctic explorer John Franklin’s expedition of 1819-1821 undertaken to map North America and find the North West passage. In his entry on Sir John Franklin in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* L.N. Neatby tells us that “he surveyed about 340 km of intricate ice-infested shoreline, but through cold and hunger lost
about ten men on the overland trek owing to the inadequacy of canoes in pack ice and his unfamiliarity with traders, voyageurs and Northern conditions” (Franklin, 838). It is a description that even in 1988 totally omits the Native presence. Wiebe is however interested in the Aboriginal people’s culture. Thus he recreates the events with a historian’s precision and the Yellowknife/Tetsot’ine Indians’ culture with an ethnographer’s accuracy, but breathing life into them with the power of his imagination. This faculty was also stimulated by the authentic experience of the Arctic as afforded by University of Alberta – Canada Council Research Project that in 1988 traced by canoe Franklin’s route of October 1921 (Starvation Lake to Ford Enterprise).

In contrast to his other two novels on Native and Métis people’s life and history, here Wiebe discloses his sources like a researcher, a multidisciplinary one at that, his reconstruction converging historical, ethnographic, anthropologic and even zoological data from books which he mentions at the end of his novel in his Acknowledgements. All in all, it is an impressive list of 16 volumes that Wiebe’s imagination processed and distilled to produce the two narrative streams that we have mentioned. It is in a dialogic form, but the sheer quantitative proportion of the two narrative strands reveals that Wiebe’s concern is to give an alternative or parallel version of the first encounter between the cultures of Canada that gives voice to lost memory. We do not share John Moss’ reading of the novel as “a confessional exposition, a confabulation of private dreams” wherein the narrator is perceived as a metaphysician within his own text or as “a sort of spiritual and moral autobiography” (Echoing, 44), and perhaps it would verge on the utopian to say with Diana Brydon that, like The Temptations of Big Bear, A Discovery of Strangers “creates the cultural dialogue that history itself never allowed” (Brydon, 13). But we consider it a dialogical braiding of white authentic explorers’ narrative and a fictional narrative that revives Aboriginal spirituality, an interweaving that sets off cultural differences.

Set in the animal world, the first chapter gives an unforgettable description of the place and introduces the major archetypal motifs to follow – the joy of mating, the rivalry among males, lonely arctic death, a young mother’s pain when losing her young. It also stresses the fundamental impression that whites invading their territories make on the Native inhabitants: “these were strangers, so different [my italics] so blatantly loud the caribou themselves could not help hearing them long before they needed to be smelled […]” (Wiebe 1995a, 1). The first white cliché deconstructed by the Native
perspective of the fictional narrative is the North as an empty space waiting for the white explorers to discover it. What for them is a taking into possession by naming appears to the narrator as “their grand attempt to rename the entire country” (Wiebe 1995a, 14). The text also emphasises from the beginning the two different modes of conveying memories: the written one of the explorer’s journals and in the oral tradition of the Native peoples, much of the fictional narrative containing the stories the Tetsot’ine old wise man Keskarrah tells about their ancestors. It is through Keskarrah’s speech and stories, through his daughter Greenstockings’ stream of consciousness and through his wife Birdseye’s dreams and visions that the Native way of thinking comes to the reader. The narrative is going to follow Keskarrah’s “relentless memory circling [...] around that first and then that second moment of unforgettable English arrivals” (Wiebe 1995a, 14) throwing into relief the benefit of hindsight.

For all his kind heart (Franklin is later described as a man who could not have hurt a mosquito) the explorer hypocritically presents the colonial project as an altruistic enterprise, whereas the immediate consequence caused by the exploration is sheer economic havoc: The Indians have to expand their hunt in order to feed Franklin’s team made up of four English officers, their servant Hepburn and 20 Canadian voyageurs including two half-breed interpreters; they require almost a full ton of meat a week; that is, “a minimum of 20 large dressed deer” (Wiebe 1995a, 48-49) and twice that quantity to supply dry meat for the trip along the barren Northern coastline. If Robert Hood shows concern for the band of 120 Indians whose best hunters the English have hired and for the 3 voyageur women who would be over-worked to skin and cut and dry all that meat before it rots, George Back has nothing but scorn for the “greasy primitive[s]” (Wiebe 1995a, 50) and contempt for the humanity of Hood, whose concern for moral imperatives he class-consciously depicts as “his insufferable rectitude, the dry echo of a small clergyman on a very small living” (Wiebe 1995a, 50). Back also hatefully describes the natives as superstitious and always liable to commit acts of treachery (47), and finds the Native women repugnant because they are invariably “saggy and wrinkled” (45) yet he will be utterly aroused by the beautiful 15 year-old Greenstockings, Keskarrah’s older daughter.

Not all the Natives share the deferential attitude towards the white explorers. Greenstockings, who is presented as a clever outspoken woman with an independent mind, indignantly protests against the hunters’ agreement to provide that huge quantity of food for the ravenous English:
All our mighty men agree, listen to Thick English and they pile those things on us to carry. And they’ll kill all the animals so many they’ll go away to avoid being killed and we’ll have to drag what they killed here to our fires and skin them for These English and cut the meat into strips and smoke it and cook it and sew their winter clothes so they won’t freeze after we scrape and tan all their hides, these mighty English (Wiebe 1995a, 36).

Keskarrah’s words reveal his awareness of the inevitable interaction of the two cultures. “When you come to our land […] you cannot continue to be what you’ve always been” (Wiebe 1995a, 202). Yet, it is the Natives that are more open to influence. The English turn a deaf ear to what the natives tell them (Wiebe 1995a, 15) and self-confidently refuse the natives’ advice regarding their trip North at that time of the year. When Franklin hears about Hood’s intention of marrying Greenstockings, he is utterly shocked and would never accept such an unsuitable match, stating that “the pleasure of female companionship has no necessary relationship to marriage” (Wiebe, 1995a, 203). He clearly regards the Natives as objects of gratifying the needs or as mere tools for carrying out the white conqueror’s project: “You know the services of both the voyageurs as well as natives are essential to our proper progress; both must be treated with firm kindness and controlled. They cannot be allowed to disrupt our intentions” (Wiebe 1995a, 205). The whites practically treat the inhabitants of the land like slaves” (Wiebe 1995a, 72). Hayden White emphasizes that “[f]rom the Renaissance to the end of the 18th century Europeans tended to fetishize the native people with whom they came into contact by viewing them simultaneously as monotonous forms of humanity and as quintessential objects of desire. Whence the alternative impulses to exterminate and to redeem the native peoples” (White, 194) by conversion. The attitudes illustrated by Franklin’s team are merely pragmatic: they want to use the natives for their purposes. In the case of Franklin this purpose is economic support of food and the knowledge of the land which the whites want to appropriate. With Back racial contempt mixes with sexual desire symbolically reflecting a wish to rape the land, whereas Doctor Richardson seems to have a more professional yet humane attitude.

The whites’ behaviour is presented as contaminating the Natives. Thus Greenstockings is surprised to see her people “scrabbling into deliberate council as soon as they stepped ashore” (Wiebe 1995a, 72). This precipitated behaviour reminds her of the Whites and she finds it undignified and
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ludicrous. The Whites come to have the most dangerous impact on the way the small Native community is run. Before the encounter with the Whites, the Tetsot’ine live in bands of families where there is no “boss”, but decisions are taken collectively and they even have no word for “chief”. But after accompanying the English team of explorers for so many months and agreeing to hunt for them, Bigfoot assumes the role of chief, on the white commander’s model, and in this capacity makes his hungry people give all their food to save the English. Greenstockings meditates on the profound change this mimicking inclination has brought over Bigfoot, and Birdseye can grasp the cheap tricks the Whites use in order to get the Indian hunters hunt to feed them and their voyageurs: “I think Thick English will hang another shiny medal around Bigfoot’s neck, over the first one, and then give the hunters more tea and then whisky” (Wiebe 1995a, 35).

A Discovery of Strangers combines several genres: the journals of the White explorers and the narrative line centring on their expedition to Starvation Lake and back to Fort Enterprise is the masculine adventure story where the Northern hero, here Franklin’s team of explorers, is at the centre of a saga of territorial appropriation by mapping. It is also a saga of almost inhuman endurance of harsh climate and unimaginable starvation leading to cannibalism of dead bodies. Parts of the same events are also recounted by the imaginative voices of Keskarrah, his wife and daughter, this section of the narrative giving the epic account of a winter in the life of a Tetsot’ine band that have to cope with the additional economic strain of feeding the explorers. The stories they tell about archetypal events in the history of their people and about the deities that reign over a life of necessity is the repository of native spirituality. They consider nature and all forms of life sacred, they hunt by dreaming and they are filled with gratitude to the animals that they kill for letting themselves be killed in order to feed and keep them warm. Their tradition of sharing everything is sharply opposed to the white possessiveness and their ritual total willing self-dispossession of everything they own as a sign of grief and mourning fills the whites with shocked amazement.

The subsequent events corroborate Birdseye’s first perception of Hood as Snowman, a mythical bringer of everlasting deadly ice and wind, as well as her prophetic dream of his death, which she evokes in English words that she cannot understand (Wiebe 1995a, 92; 177-180). By this coincidence of prophetic dream and fact the implied author validates the cognitive value of Natives’ intuition, of their spirituality. Placing the beautiful love story between
Greenstockings and Robert Hood at the heart of the novel Wiebe conveys a vision of the ideal possibility of the transcendence of the borders and barriers of language and culture, implicitly through art as Hood is a painter. While working on Greenstockings’ portrait he becomes aware that “he does not want to understand any word she ever speaks. The freedom of watching, of listening with incomprehension, fills him with staggering happiness” (Wiebe 1995a, 158).

Robert Hood embodies the humanist attitude which Wiebe offers as a possibility of “a harmonious accommodation of difference without violence” (Hulan, 177). Hood’s intentions to marry Greenstockings illustrates an acceptance of the Native as an equal, a stance Franklin would never subscribe to. Greenstockings would like Hood to marry her in the Native style, i.e. taking her to live with him, which would entail his protection. Yet she accepts the situation although she knows it to be rather fragile according to the native cultural tradition of stealing wives: “In the fixed conjunction of her mother’s and father’s power, they two have lived this strange – almost as if they were hidden sweetly under furs in the long darkness – lived this strange short moment of profound difference” (Wiebe 1995a, 207). Hulan remarks that by imagining the relationship between Greenstockings and Robert Hood as a love story, Wiebe retells this story as if it were not part of the history of colonialisation which entails territorial possession, enforced power and violence. She affirms that by transferring the violence to Michelle Terohaute, the treacherous half-breed interpreter who rapes Greenstockings most brutally, Wiebe has used stereotypes of Northern representation – the treacherous half-breed, the erotic triangle, the acquiescent female (Hulan, 177).

However, we think that the point Wiebe wants to make is different. Terohaute was historically recorded as a treacherous adventurer, a murderer and even cannibal. Moreover, the attitudes of the other white explorers, with the exception of Hood, perfectly illustrate the conquering hero of colonising imperial narrative. It is most likely that Terahaute was chosen because he was known to be a brutal man and it is the terrible brutality of the rape that drives home the point of the tragic consequences which the incomprehension of cultural differences may have. Thus, we deem that Wiebe drives home the idea that Hood’s dream of “uncomprehending” happiness is a harmful delusion. Had he comprehended Greenstockings language and culture, he might have realised her dangerous position and would have protected her. As it is, the scene becomes one of archetypal significance in the terms of a native woman’s unvoiced thoughts that denounce male oppression:
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But the log walls built by These English and Michel’s groping fists have shown her what she has always known and should have remembered: they were all men and there are too many of them. Wherever many men are, they can exist only within a certain violence, and they will try to break you again and again. If you were to live in delight and difference with one for long you would have to kill all the other men in the world (Wiebe 1995a, 207-8).

The transcription of the young woman’s stream of consciousness makes the point that it is the incomprehension of cultural difference that leads to the brutal ending of the love story and actually of the love itself: “Her head is still breaking. She cannot look at Hood with longing or even tenderness. There is no strength in his tears, he is so weak and useless. And stupid” (Wiebe 1995a, 208). Greenstockings is presented as a woman with a mind of her own, who would like to follow her own inclinations in her choice of a mate, but she has to accept the culturally established pattern of the beautiful attractive woman as a prize for the strongest or boldest man who desires her.

For many Canadian artists traveling North means getting to and stepping into a romantic blank white world that infuses a “participation mystique” into the beholder as in Lauren Harris’ famous paintings. The North may also be a place of great physical harshness where the conquering hero of the imperial narrative tests his qualities, or for any quester to prove his masculine identity and strong survival skills, as in Kroetsch’s Gone Indian. By analogy with the blank page the North has also favoured, particularly among the post-modernists, the metaphor of the writer’s craft. “To write is, in some metaphoric sense, to go North. To go North is, in some metaphoric sense, to write” Kroetsch declared in his A Likely Story: The Writing Life (14). Rudy Wiebe uses the North in A Discovery of Strangers as a place where memory and imagination inscribe not only the white explorer’s conquest narrative but also where they recreate the voice of the Native people. Relying on the tradition established by Howard O’Hagan of using ethnographic materials as a basis for fictional representation (as in Tay John), Wiebe draws on ethnographic documents in order to imaginatively recreate, in addition to the more frequently heard voice of the male hunter, the voice of the so far silenced native woman, giving artistic representation to the important role she played in a community with a gendered division of labour. Wiebe realizes a postmodern dialogic narrative where the narrative perspectives do not cancel each other but achieve a mosaic picture. The North may be described as “A Land Beyond Words” in the Acknowledgements, but the
implied author of *A Discovery of Strangers* believes in the power of the
Word to convey truth, even though it be the relative truth of cultural difference.
And we hope to have demonstrated that what inscribes meaning in the
Northern places described in this novel is memory, either as written record
or as voice recuperated through documentation and empathetic imagination.

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