

Dialectics of Postmodern Rudiments in George Bowering's *Caprice*

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ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this paper is to look at how George Bowering used postmodernist narratives in the fabric of Canadian postmodernism, how postmodernism canons in Canada and internationally have been influenced by different spatial epistemologies rather than genuine geographies, and how Canadian and international postmodernisms have been more directly influenced by two different readings of geography in his *Caprice* (1987). This article also looks at the novel's departures from the western genre, specifically its deconstruction of great historical narratives and the Wild West myth. It will do so by introducing multiple alternative histories and perspectives in the form of fragmented narratives and diverse conceptions of time and place, addressing the distinction between American and Canadian myths of the Wild and Mild West, which reflect the distinct ideologies and histories of inception of these bordering countries.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Geography, History, Myth, Postmodernism, West.

INTRODUCTION

George Bowering is one of the most influential writers of Canadian literature. He has become one of the more vocal Canadian supporters of writing as freedom, play, spontaneous occurrence, and happening in the process, and he shares postmodernist consciousness. He focuses on personal history, metanarrative, self-reflexivity, and self-consciousness; a self-conscious narrative perspective frequently reveals a self-conscious narrator who declares the discrepancy between the work's fictionality and the reality it appears to represent, either seriously or humorously.

Bowering's *Caprice* is a novel set in the West in the 1880s about a different woman. There are a lot of interesting personalities in it. Many of the characters in the story are still well-known in the area. It begins with the emergence of a rider on the Western horizon, which is the protagonist *Caprice*, who defies expectations, definitions, and labels within the Western genre. The novel's opening paragraph, which raises several concerns that are later elaborated on, demonstrates this disparity. The novel's first sentence, in keeping with Western norms, portrays the Western landscape:

If you just had ordinary English eyes, you would have seen late-morning sun flooding the light brown of the wide grassy valley and making giant knife shadows where the ridges slid down the hillsides, free of trees, wrinkles ... not be sure where the sun was because you didn't dare look up at that half of the sky. (1)

The "panoramic shot of the endlessly wonderful country" (Sisk 406) that is generally celebrated in westerns is this static depiction of the clear-cut lines of the prairie landscape in bright sunlight. The opening line, "if you just had ordinary English eyes," however, compels the reader to quickly alter his or her expectations, because the cliché of Western landscape is not simply provided, but is instantly portrayed as mediated, subjective, and so limited. What other eyes are there, and how are their perspectives different, if "ordinary English eyes" offer this picture of the area and hence of the story? The reader is made aware right away that these English eyes do not see everything - their viewpoint is limited, rendering their perception of the environment unimpressive. In contrast, the next paragraph introduces another set of eyes, "those famous Indian eyes," which can "look down into the wide valley and see something moving, perhaps a lot of things moving" (1) if you have them. These eyes, with their great eyesight, spot a rider on the horizon, whose appearance on the British Columbia Interior Plateau heralds the start of the story in the traditional Western way. These Indian eyes will provide a constant

and witty commentary on the whites' conduct in the valley throughout the novel, *Caprice*. Other eyes will appear later, including conventional eastern eyes and golden eagle eyes, which have the largest perspective and sharpest vision. Distinct pairs of eyes represent different levels of seeing, which reveal different aspects of the story. Not only are there at least two perspectives of the same terrain, but the Indians are also proven to be more perceptive focalizers than the whites because they "know what to look for" (128). In most Westerns, Indians are either mute figures or trusted sidekicks, but in *Caprice*, they provide a broader critical and contextual framework to the white colonial narrative, exposing the white perspective of Western space and North American history as a one-dimensional construct.

In the first paragraph, the narrator is in the second person, extradiegetic, and overt, generating a sense of morality and immediacy by juxtaposing the official recorded history of the Canadian West with the oral histories of its various communities. The narrator shifts between second-person overt and third-person narrators with zero focalization throughout the narrative, creating a dynamic text in flux. What appears to be a formulaic start reveals a slew of varied interpretations and subversions of the genre that serve to establish the "rhetoric of reading" (Garrett-Petts 556) for more perceptive readers, whose "eyes are willing to read between the lines" (van Herk viii). Bowering calls for eyes to see past the grand narrative of white history and its "imperialist/racist/sexist agenda" (Kröller84), which is so deeply embedded in the stereotypical Western, and instead seek out a new Western that does not drown out other histories.

Bowering's *Caprice* does not follow a single storyline, but instead creates a rhizomic structure of various narrative fragments that the reader must piece together to uncover the story, further subverting the one-dimensionality of both generic westerns and white history, as hinted at in the first paragraph. Character subplots are told in an indirect freestyle format with the narrator's strong sardonic presence, and contain anecdotes and observations from two Indians - the proprietors of those Indian eyes. The elder teaches the younger, who learns about the landscape and his and white people's customs. Then there is *Caprice*, a former poet in Paris who is now an assassin; her lover, schoolteacher Roy Smith, a Nova Scotian who came West "in the hope of developing the Canadian nation" (173); Luigi, an Italian born in Istria who has travelled the world but now works for a Chinese, putting him on the lowest rung of the Western social ladder; and the Chinese Soo Woo, the boss-man of the Chinese settlement in a town in the British Colum.

Another set of subplots emerges, establishing historical, political, and social backgrounds and indicating the novel's critical engagement with the Wild West myth's grand narrative. The processes of storytelling that transform the Western 'reality' of everyday life into the Wild West myth; Aboriginal and white settlements and the colonisation of the British Columbian Interior Plateau; Indian residential schools; white and Native mythologies; differences in politics, policies, frames of mind, and setups between America and Canada; and the shaping power of language are all intertwined with the former group.

Bowering uses the narrative approach of *Tapinosis*, which he characterises as a deceptive form of rhetoric - it means speaking very important things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang - to actualize this sophisticated framework of various layers, perspectives, themes, and narratives. Bowering's deconstructive approach to the western genre, which includes *tapinosis* and narrative fragmentation, allows him to conduct a postmodernist critical investigation of the past as portrayed by white Western historians while also experimenting with the genre's form. The result is a parody, which Linda Hutcheon defines as "the unmasking of dead literary conventions and the establishment of new literary codes" (Hutcheon 38).

As a result, *Caprice* stays within the western genre while expanding its borders by undermining traditional western clichés that make Western women and non-Anglo-Saxon peoples and ethnicities invisible, such as cowboys and Indians, the dominant role of the cowboy, and masculine dominance of the West. Bowering thus constructs a new form of Western, one that questions the genre's traditions and literary codes and replaces them with more appropriate ones.

Bowering thus creates a satire of the Western genre that works on multiple levels. The key stereotype in *Caprice* is that of "cowboys and Indians," which is introduced and refuted at the same time. Bowering's core protagonists are cowboys and Indians; therefore, it appears that he has kept this ancient phrase. The stereotypes, however, do not hold up under scrutiny. He deconstructs the concept of the cowboy, and thus the West as a male domain,

with the character of Caprice, for example. The cowboy is a symbol and metonymy of the Wild West myth: a great horseman, a quick shooter with a keen sense of justice, a nomadic figure with a trustworthy steed, and a mysterious character. He is a potentially dangerous stranger, with a rumour about his past and an uncertain future. Civilization, enclosed spaces, and regular working hours irritate the cowboy. He is more concerned with retaining the West as a preserve for the unrestrained male on his noble steed than with conquering and civilising it.

Caprice takes up the role of the cowboy in Bowering's story. Her iconic stature is further enhanced by the fact that, unlike the novel's other more ordinary characters, she has only a first name and no surname, in keeping with the idea of cowboy heroes. Furthermore, her name signifies "a fancy, a whim" (van Herk v). From the start, she defies expectations: as the Indians gradually detect a rider on the horizon, it becomes evident that it is a woman rather than a man, and a debate erupts over the right title for such an unusual rider. She is referred to as a horsewoman rather than a horseman, a cowgirl rather than a cowboy, or possibly a bull-girl or a cow-person. The Indians experiment with several labels, highlighting the language's inadequacies in describing such a strange appearance.

Caprice, like the majority of western heroes, is not a cowboy in the strictest sense because she does not work on a ranch, but she does conform in another way: she has a background that is unrelated to her current vengeance goal. The narrator is self-conscious about her physical appearance: she stands six feet tall in her boots, has freckles all over her body, enormous hands, and muscular thighs, and red hair braided. Caprice, unlike the traditional figure of a cowboy, is not a great shooter and does not own a gun for the majority of the novel. Instead, she whips her way through the story with a coiled bullwhip on her thigh. This bullwhip is of European origin, adding to her exotic appearance.

In a western, a horse has a personality just like the hero; in fact, they share a steadfast individualism. To use Propp's seven spheres of action, i.e., character-role terminology, Caprice's horse Cabayo is as iconic as any: he is her companion on the adventure and her helper in the completion of a tough task. Even the fact that he has a name attests to the heroine's and her horse's friendship and familiarity. The baddies, on the other hand, are unconcerned about their horses, viewing them solely as a mode of transportation. Loop Groulx's behaviours exemplify this, since he spends a significant amount of time abusing his interchangeable steeds. Caprice only speaks to Cabayo in Spanish expressions of fondness because he is Spanish, and endearments are the only Spanish words she understands. Cabayo is a stunning purple-black, full-blooded stallion who, like Caprice, is tall and powerful. His body is emphasised, accentuating his presence in the conventional Western setting. Cabayo is as unusual and distinctive as his mistress, so it is no surprise that the Indians are stumped for a phrase to describe them. "You should see her," says the younger Indian to the elder. Her back is upright, and her hand rests on her upper leg. "When the horse steps, she does not bounce at all... She drives like a man... She rides like a Native American" (Caprice 3). From her riding like a man to the highest praise, riding like an Indian, a harmonious meld of man and beast, the gradient of praise is noticeable.

Caprice and her horse cut a striking image as they traverse the prairies together, a Centaur-like unity of rider and horse. In "On Coyote or Canadian Otherness in Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* and George Bowering's *Caprice*," Cabayo, according to Georgiana Colville, has a symbolic function: because he is black, he signifies "Caprice's bereavement" (136) for her departed brother. In the shoot-out preceding the final resolution, he is also a collateral casualty of her quest, killed by a bullet intended for his mistress by the desperado Loop Groulx. Following this fight, in which Caprice apprehends her brother's killer while also saving the town, the inhabitants present her with Hisan, a white Arabian stallion that may prove to be a worthy replacement for Cabayo. She rides Hisan out of the western story she is writing.

Typically, women appear in westerns as a farmer's wife or a prostitute, with the occasional schoolmistress thrown in for good measure. In the wild west, where men were men and life was hard, women were supposed to be one of two things - commodities or prizes, the narrator quips. "Bad women... were the commodities, and went along with whisky and gambling ... and likely to inherit land or stocks" (183). There was a third type of women who were neither commodities nor prizes: the wives of homesteaders. They were utilised as devices to prepare the dream of a future, a new society away from the East, just as anything else that was probable to produce.

Caprice is ineligible for any of these roles because she has already established herself as a prominent cowboy hero and wandering bringer of justice to the West. Caprice is true to her purpose in the western genre, and after it is completed, she leaves not only the location but the entire West, which is unusual for her.

The dyads of violence and peacefulness, colonial and non-colonized frames of mind, frontier and metropolis theses, and trust in a viable legal system in Canada vs the lack thereof in the US distinguish the American Wild and Canadian Mild Wests in Caprice. Bowering employs these binaries to critically examine the grand story of white settlement/invasion and its various forms, including the western genre. While preserving the traditional characters, plotlines, locations, and period of the western, he adds historical, cultural, political, and economic truths from nineteenth-century Western Canada. At the same time, he deconstructs the western genre not just by introducing many views and fragmented narratives, a female protagonist, and an Indian perspective framing the major action, but also by continuously laying bare myth-making itself, in postmodernist form.

Thus, the novel's metafictional dimension debunks the grand narrative of Western history's ostensible objectivity and neutral rendering of facts, which the Western genre stereotypically maintains. In the words of Patricia Waugh, metafiction "simultaneously... creates a fiction and... makes a statement about the creation of that fiction" (Waugh 6), and Bowering does exactly that: he creates a uniquely Canadian western while putting metanarrative processes front and centre not only in his novel but in broader Western history and postcolonial policies. The metanarrative dimension of the novel works in the same way as myth-making processes and historiographic metahistorical inventions do.

Bowering uses western clichés to elevate the entire genre of the western, which is a by-product of this myth-making process. He examines it critically and alters its narrative from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional, resulting in a new, self-reflexive, and multi-layered Canadian western through the use of heteroglossia. Bowering reconstructs the genre by producing a parody that both undermines and relies on its literary norms, integrating the concepts of 'creation' and 'criticism' into the concepts of 'interpretation' and 'deconstruction.' Bowering creates a postmodern and postcolonial rewrite of the classic Western genre and myth with his work.

To conclude, Caprice is a text that deconstructs the mythopoeia of the Wild West by revealing the processes of the myth's creation in the East and subsequent materialisation in the West; it is best described as a meta-western because it reveals the processes of the myth's creation in the East and subsequent materialisation in the West. The subversion of the genre works by introducing an atypical protagonist and refocusing the optics by introducing multiple focalizers with varying levels of insight into the novel's history; differentiating between Canadian and American Wests; fragmenting the narrative; playing with different notions of time and place; manipulating western tropes such as cowboy, Indian, and the West; and, most importantly, introducing a metafictional level to the novel. All of Bowering's techniques in Caprice widen the genre's breadth, providing a counterintuitive reading of white history as represented by the most macho and nation-forming myth: the Wild West.

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