



## **Postmodern Dialectics Of Fiction And History In George Bowering's *Burning Water***

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the characteristics of historiographic metafiction manifest themselves in George Bowering's *Burning Water*. Bowering's reading and writing techniques and processes are revealed in this work. He is both reader and author, and his work is a synthesis of intertexts, personal, cultural, and reading experiences and recollections. His interpretations of George Vancouver, the protagonist, depend as much to imagination as to verified historical fact. *Burning Water* is a satire of exploration writing; one may refer to the work as a re-exploration parody that deals with history. All the central characters of *Burning Water* attempt to unveil the worlds of other texts. Bowering's interest in history has some biographical roots. He was influenced by the American's lessons.

*Keywords: History, Fiction, Metafiction, Postmodern, Identity.*

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## **1. Introduction**

George Bowering has had a multi-faceted career as professor, novelist, poet, editor, and radio-personality. In 2000, he was awarded Canada's First Poet Laureate in appreciation of his tremendous achievements. He employs documented history to create a new space for creativity, narrativization, and historical potential, a narrative space that deconstructs conceptions of history and fiction by forging them into a single strong, homogeneous alloy. By accepting and undermining his responsibilities as a fiction writer, he enters the domain of historical possibility in the Canadian context by positing alternative versions of Canadian history, and he parodies historian roles.

Canada has recently endeavoured to build a distinct cultural identity in literature and history that is distinct from that of internationally powerful nations such as the United States and Great Britain. Yet, at a time when Canadians are seeking and asserting a uniquely Canadian identity, postmodernism ostensibly refutes any claim that a nation can have a single unifying and stable identity, instead insisting that a nation is a kind of narration constructed through the accumulation of individual stories, histories, and points of view. Additionally, postmodernism stressed the blurred and difficult-to-locate distinction between real and imagined referents in writing. Rather than that, referents are always both fictitious and historical in nature. Because history and fiction writing are only overlapping regions on a

continuum, they are no longer always mutually exclusive. Postmodernism, on the other hand, allows for the existence of various interpretations of history and identity, allowing for the acknowledgement of a diversity of sources, all of which may be equally valid.

In English-speaking Canada, the postmodern framework has produced novels that affirm and criticise ideas of Canadian identity and history, as Bowering's *Burning Water* demonstrates. In this work, he constructs and refutes Canadian identity using the postmodern idea of identity-making and identity-breaking through narrativizing materials. He builds and inhabits a postmodern space that is both historical fiction and fictive history; a structure built on selected documents and surrounded by the remaining limitless possibilities. He creates a narrative and a history, or a (hi)story. It is writing which, as Kroetsch, in "Beyond Nationalism," claims are true for all Canadian writing,

takes place between the vastness of (closed) cosmologies and the fragments found in the (open) field of the archaeological site. It is a literature of dangerous middles. It is a literature that, compulsively seeking its own story...nightmare and the welcome dream of Babel.  
(xi)

Similarly, to how George Vancouver, the protagonist of *Burning Water*, departed home on a voyage of awaiting and unknown discoveries; similarly, to how Bowering's narrator feels the need to exit the scene of his story in order to perceive possibilities from the outside. The novel's author/conviction narrator's that present history and self are inextricably linked from the start permits Vancouver, the Indian, the author, and the reader to coalesce into a uniting narrative.

In *Burning Water*, literature and history serve as the unifying entities that Canadian writers seek when attempting to define their identity. While both history and fiction are available as narratives, they remain distinct in the perception of the layperson: fiction is made up, but history is true. Bowering opposes, deconstructs, and reconstructs this paradigm. His novel can be classified as both a work of fiction and a work of history. He coerces history and fiction, two generally distinct genres, into a postmodern book, so complicating their relationship through the author's search for an elusive Canadian identity. As previously stated, fiction and history have historically existed independently of one another due to the fact that each deal with a distinct type of referent. As Linda Hutcheon, in "History and/as Intertext," puts it, "what history refers to is the actual, real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe" (169).

Bowering's 1980 novel *Burning Water* is a retelling of Vancouver's 1792 exploratory voyage to chart the northwest coast of North America, to continue searching for the rumoured northwest passage to the Atlantic, and to reclaim sovereignty of that territory from the Spanish. It is not merely a chronological account of his voyage in the conventional sense. Rather than that, Vancouver is a human being with quirks, virtues, vices, love affairs, and an ego. While Vancouver receives the majority of the attention, other significant characters include Menzies, the Scottish botanist and resident scientific researcher, who serves as Vancouver's equally pedantic and perfectionistic antagonist and competitor; Captain Quadra, the commander of the Spanish navy, with whom Vancouver has a long-standing love affair; the Indians, whose impressions and thoughts on the white's inexplicable appearance serve as a humorous aside; and the author/narrator, who acts as a foil and competitor.

Throughout the work, the distinction between truth and fiction receives much emphasis, particularly in light of Bowering's freedoms in truly (re)creating the (hi)story. On the return journey to England across the Atlantic in the midst of a battle against the French, Vancouver and Menzies clash one final time, culminating in Vancouver's assassination by Menzies. If, on the other hand, these novels as narratives may be both historical and fictional, then any clear distinction between history and fiction writing becomes a hazy mist.

History writing and fiction writing are positioned on opposite extremities of a continuum of narratives; they converge in the middle, where works like these Canadian books reside. Bowering

subverts traditional distinctions between history and fiction by situating himself in the midst of a history/fiction writing continuum. This is accomplished in several ways: he incorporates primary and secondary sources into his fiction to lend it authenticity; he meta-fictionally mimics his characters' explorations of land, people, or the mind while (re)searching for a story; he uses and abuses history to create new, divergent versions of it; he incorporates multiple points of view into each story; and they tell the story of and through a "other," non-traditional figure.

Bowering is also no new to the idea of integrating primary documents in a novel to bolster its narrative, however the legitimacy of the documents in *Burning Water* is highly dubious. For example, the fifty-seventh chapter finishes with Vancouver sitting at his writing desk and recording his deepest emotions in a diary entry that is subsequently cited. Bowering's narrator also quotes "what Vancouver had to say about the former Cook's River" (64) and summarises an unsettlingly ribald passage that does not warrant full quotation in which Vancouver describes three historical explorers making false geographic claims to one another while wearing their pants down and their noses in one another's apertures. He presents these quotations as legitimate, historically accurate materials that substantiate his assessment of Vancouver, yet he never names a source for any of them, implying that they could all be his own creation. Additionally, it is implausible that the historical Vancouver, a high-ranking British naval captain, would jeopardise his reputation and job by including that imagined and unseemly ribald scene in his log, which he would eventually be required to turn over to British officials as a record of the voyage. Regardless of validity, the inclusion of original documents, genuine or fabricated, appears to corroborate Bowering's Vancouver's historical possibility.

In other words, Bowering demonstrates how the author of a narration can or may fabricate documents to support a story and pass them off as authentic, regardless of whether the narration is historical, fictional, or a combination of the two. Combining extra-textual records, dubious- and pseudo-historical documents, and fictional writing inside a single text taints the authority historical documents wield over the narration of historical events.

In *Burning Water*, the author/narrator feels compelled to relocate his body from the story's ostensible setting, from the western edge of European America to western Europe's eastern tail. He embarks on his own physical trip to locate and unearth the story he wishes to write. In this search, he emulates the author's metaphorical examination of ideas and materials when writing a story or the historian's exploration of history when writing history. It is an expedition into uncharted, unfamiliar ground, with the possibility of unexpected outcomes. Canada's postmodern paradoxical search for and rejection of identity gives the writer with such a wide area of options. As a result, it is unsurprising that this novel portrays an exploration of a hitherto unexplored Canadian space. After all, the land plays a critical role in shaping Canadian identity.

*Burning Water* employs and abuses history and its documents in the writing process. The traditional history, as recorded in and extracted from its relevant historical documents, is destabilised in its role as the story. This occurs as a result of the expansion of new worlds of possibility, realms that provide additional versions, rendering the traditional history only a version. Bowering encapsulates the delicate scenario in which Vancouver's history-writing community has been living with a version of Vancouver for years - a statue of him on the lawn of City Hall. It was based on a well-known picture. The painting, it turns out, is most likely a portrait of Vancouver's brother John. Due to the fact that history writing is a human narrative construction, the connections drawn between the selected events may not reflect the historical situation in its entirety. Bowering exploits this flawed aspect of history writing by drawing connections between selected historical events without necessarily adhering to historical authenticity, and then creating and connecting fictitious events to the actual ones. He accomplishes this by abusing history's inherent proclivity for narrativization of specific events, so deconstructing the authority of history-writing.

In response to historians' criticism that *Burning Water* is historically inaccurate, Bowering says "I always simplified my defence by saying that the version of Vancouver's life we had before my book is just a version, and that I decided to make things better for him in my version" (Ken Norris' "The

Efficacy of the Sentence as the Basis of Reality: An Interview with George Bowering,” 22). While it is questionable whether or not Bowering’s interpretation is a superior one for Vancouver, Bowering did create his own version of the story. In the introduction, he justifies his liberties with history by stating that his novel is about the bizarre fantasy that history is given and the strange actuality that history is taken. Without a narrator, Vancouver is nothing more than another drowned sailor. As a result, the storyteller creates history by taking facts such as Vancouver being simply another dead sailor and transforming them into a storyline. These facts, along with Bowering’s fabricated events, create a narrative of Vancouver’s history.

Bowering’s version contradicts conventional history, which is possibly most evident in Menzies’ assassination of Vancouver before to their return to England. In the true account, Vancouver makes a safe return to England following his trip. Additionally, Bowering includes other facts that are not included in the official British account of the expedition’s accomplishments. For example, he focuses the plot on the growth of Vancouver’s character as a pedantic perfectionist with a preceding reputation for discipline, and as a man after narcissistic historical immortality, desiring his name and achievements to be a part of the world every Englishman would walk through. Vancouver’s angry and competitive relationship with Menzies, the expedition’s scientist, as well as his gay relationship with Quadra, the Spanish navy’s captain, are also explored in length. By presenting Vancouver’s personal tale, his historic mission takes a second seat to personal and interpersonal developments, resurrecting Vancouver from the status of another dead sailor. *Burning Water* is an exaggeration and embellishment of that traditional history, intended to demonstrate how susceptible history is to human viewpoint through these very exaggerations and embellishments. Facts are made to appear fictional in postmodern fiction, and fictions are made to appear factual.

The emotions of two Indians to the English’s entrance begin *Burning Water* and serve as an introduction to the English presence as a vision for both the Indians and the reader. By beginning the book with this outsider’s take on Vancouver’s story, Bowering emphasises the existence and effect of those outside Vancouver’s immediate social group on the city’s narrative. This is not rare, as the omniscient narrator can express the ideas and thoughts of minor characters in addition to the main characters, as is the case with every such story. As a result, Menzies and Quadra also receive occasional perspectives. What is odd, though, is the novel’s inclusion of the author/narrator as a character. This meta-fictional device emphasises the writer’s involvement in the story, and consequently his biases, prejudices, and predilections. Bowering establishes his personal position, as well as the reader’s, in co-creating the story with the characters in the preface, arguing that “we cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you” (10). *Burning Water* has three levels of points of view of the character, the author/narrator, and the reader. By incorporating all of them, Bowering implies that this is true of every recounting of history or a fiction.

The prologue to *Burning Water* establishes that this is not simply the story of Vancouver’s 1790s exploration of North America’s northwest coast, but also a self-conscious expedition into the epistemological realm of *énonciation* by the narrator/author, Bowering, an expedition on which the reader is invited to accompany. In *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon explains the French linguistic idea of *énonciation* as “the discursive context of the writing and reading of the text” (61). So, when Bowering, as the narrator, claims that he and Vancouver “cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you” (*Burning Water*, 10), he is referring to *énonciation*. He deliberately acknowledges the presence of three significant factors in the production of a text - characters, narrator, and reader. While postmodernism made a point of emphasising these aspects’ presence, they have always existed. “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,” (10) the narrator/author says. It is a form of Bakhtinian dialogism, except that the “other” is the reader, who is suddenly involved in the dialogue alongside the traditional participants.

As the narrator/author, in *Burning Water*, points out, there are significant temporal and spatial distances between the historical Vancouver and the narrator/author, since “in 1792, for instance, some

English ships appeared out of the probable fog off the west coast of North America, where Burrard Inlet is now, but in the late sixties of the twentieth century I was staring at the sea from Trieste" (9), not to mention when and where on the planet the reader might be. Without being present at Vancouver's side, the narrator/account author's is at best speculative.

Even if he were present at Vancouver's side, history will always exist outside of history writing, as narrativization persistently resides between the two. As Hayden White would find, the narrative of Vancouver's story "becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of story" ("Value of Narrativity," 4); if instead we realize that history-writing, like fiction-writing, is a creative act, then the discrepancies between the two Vancouvers are explained. In this explanation, the authority of history-writing is obliterated. Bowering emphasises the narrator's and reader's roles in history-making. His narrator even asserts that the narrative is partially about the bizarre fantasy assigned to history and the strange truth that history is appropriated.

## 2. Conclusion

Bowering introduces the text, which is essentially a collection of written language, to the reader. Vancouver is then only perceived by the reader through the author's chosen language for the piece. Thus, Vancouver appears to the reader as a fabrication of the author's chosen language. Additionally, the reader has his or her own interpretation of the author's language, which reflects the reader's own. Thus, Vancouver is a synthesis of the reader's and author's languages as reflected in the text. Metafiction uses énonciation to connect the reader to the historical character by hinting that Vancouver is a verbal fabrication. If language, rather than reflecting, reality, readers become the actual and actualizing linkages between history and fiction, as well as between the past and the present. As a result, the reader, along with Bowering and the traces of history, contributes to the construction of a version of the historical figure Vancouver. Bowering's work demonstrates through historiographic metafiction that establishing a source or definition for Canadian identity is an ongoing effort for both the writer and the reader.

After all, if Canada is a postmodern nation, no single meta-narrative can claim authority over the country's identity. If a metanarrative exists, it exists alongside a plethora of different metanarratives, each of which is available as a distinct option. This is because the search for identification by the Canadian writer is a genealogical one. Bowering's objective in *Burning Water* is to establish a starting point from which the reader can define his or her own interpretation of Canadian identity. Bowering is not average, and his novel is not average either. However, they do construct the Canadian story out of Canadian history when they come together in their differences. As a result, there is a plurality of people, a plethora of stories, a polyglot of histories, and a plethora of identities, each claiming to be Canadian-ness.

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