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# From a Poetics of Collision to a Hermeneutics of Discovery: Rethinking Knowledge, Ecology, and History in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*

Arnaud Barras

In this essay, I argue that Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) contributes to destabilizing and dissolving the rigid boundaries set up by monological and dualistic epistemology. This novel of historiographic metafiction illustrates well the dialogical nature of postcolonial environmental literature. The novel represents the exploration of Arctic Canada in the nineteenth century both from the storytelling perspective of the indigenous Dene community, the Tetsot'ine, and from the historical perspective of the English explorers. This narrative configuration is not antithetical, for it causes the reader to reexamine the hyperseparation of history and story, fact and fiction, and colonial and indigenous ecological knowledge. Instead of separating these binaries, Wiebe's novel unites them through a poetics of collision and a hermeneutics of discovery. In this context, the act of reading is both creative and critical: it consists in piecing together this polyvocal storyworld, and by doing so, to question North American colonial history from a double perspective. In reading *A Discovery of Strangers*, one enacts dialogism and is made to reflect on it. Ultimately, the reader's responsibility is twofold: it consists in unveiling the harmful exclusion of differences while asserting the need for creative dialogue.

## Introduction

Colonial history is a contested field of enquiry as usually the events of the past are told from the perspective of the victors, and because the voi-

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ces of the victims of colonization are too often marginalized, homogenized, idealized, and appropriated – when they are not altogether silenced. In this context, fiction offers an alternative to history; it offers the possibility of telling the ineffable, of narrating the untold, of capturing the meeting of communities and people who are long gone. This tension between history and fiction lies at the core of Rudy Wiebe's novel *A Discovery of Strangers*. First published in 1994, this work of historiographic metafiction provides an ethical matrix that destabilizes the rigid boundaries imposed by colonialism on indigenous epistemologies.

Rudy Wiebe was born in 1934 from “Dutch-Prussian-Russian Mennonites who immigrated to Saskatchewan in 1929” (Beck 856). As a descendant of settlers, Wiebe's position within the colonial history of what is now Canada may be seen as problematic, especially in regard to his recreation of a set of indigenous voices in *A Discovery of Strangers*. However, as Ervin Beck rightfully points out, Wiebe has been received positively by Canadian First Nations (860), not the least because he strives “to call attention to the injustices that indigenes have endured and thereby to foster social justice for them in contemporary society and politics” (862). Beck explains that “[e]xhaustive, creative research lies behind every one of Wiebe's historical novels about Canada's indigenous people” (859-60), and that the writer “gives the indigene a leading voice in his fiction, but in the context of many other competing voices, both indigenous and European” (860). Wiebe's efforts in dramatizing the entanglement of voices that characterizes the history of Canada become evident in *A Discovery of Strangers*: the tension between history and story, between fact and fiction, and between exploration and indigeneity is aestheticized to an extent impossible to overlook. “A discovery of strangers” is not only the title of the book; it is also the subject matter of the narrative, as well as the creative principle that lies at its core. The re-creation of indigenous voices by a contemporary author can itself be understood as a literary re-discovery, as a textual ripple caused by the initial encounter between English explorers and Tsetsot'ine hunters. Seen in this light, *A Discovery of Strangers* does not appropriate or violate an indigenous voice, but rather enacts the meeting of voices; it enacts a fleeting moment in the continuum of history where two conflicting communities discover each other's ways of knowing, being, and telling and in so doing dramatically affect each other.

The novel dramatizes the triadic relationship between individuals, communities, and their environment. It does so by dramatizing the process of reading one's environment and by establishing a poetics of collision wherein the colonial epistemology and ontology of the explor-

ers seem at first to clash with the indigenous system of knowledge and way of life. The story takes place between 1819 and 1822 and describes the Franklin expedition to chart the Dene lands in the Northwest Territories of what is now Canada. Contrary to colonial history, the novel offers two perspectives: it juxtaposes the *fictional* perspective of the indigenous Dene community, the Tetsot'ine, and the *historical* and factual perspective of the English explorers. The narrative system is therefore based on what seems like an antithetical configuration where contradictory modes of knowing collide; this is what I call the *poetics of collision*. However, instead of separating these modes into binaries, Wiebe's narrative unites them through the motif of interpretation; by making individuals of each community interpret the other's knowledge system and environmental practice, the novel displays a veritable *hermeneutics of discovery*. The narrative configuration makes the reader reexamine the hyperseparation<sup>1</sup> of history and story, fact and fiction, and colonial and indigenous ecological knowledge: the reader encounters a *de facto* situation of collision and has to make up their own mind. This is the principle of dialogism that subtends *A Discovery of Strangers*: the reader is confronted with a complex situation – the encounter of indigenous peoples and explorers – that the formal aspects of the work enact – the encounter of history and fiction. In the act of reading the novel, one refashions the colonial history of North America, but this time from a critical perspective that subverts imperialism and that does not exclude indigeneity: the reader enters into a dialogue with Wiebe's work of historiographic metafiction and discovers the liminality of the situation of collision, where European stranger and indigenous other paradoxically enter into contact. In this context, the reader occupies a critical and creative role that consists first, in acknowledging the socioecological differences in the depicted systems of knowledge and ways of life, and second, in piecing together a plural and polyvocal storyworld.

In colonial history, the encounter between English explorers and indigenous Tetsot'ine can only be told from the perspective of the members of the Franklin expedition, whose journals were the only source documenting the event. These journals are however not entirely reliable, for not only are the explorers writing for posterity and with their readership in mind, but their attitude towards both the Arctic environment and the Dene population is biased by a colonial ideology that considers

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<sup>1</sup> In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Australian philosopher Val Plumwood coins the term "hyperseparation" to criticize the process whereby "the other is to be treated as not merely different, but *inferior*, part of a lower, different *order of being*" (49; my emphases).



“native” populations “primitive” and thus inferior, of less moral value, and subject to instrumentalization. The complex interaction between these two very different communities whose systems of knowledge and ways of life are barely compatible therefore demands an approach that reflects on the colonial (mis)representations of land and indigenous peoples. Ecofeminism, and particularly its Australian version, critically confronts monological impositions of “truths” in the context of settler societies and thus provides a good starting point for analyzing *A Discovery of Strangers* as the locus of dialogue between Tetso’ine and English, storytelling and history, and reader and text.

### 1. Ecofeminism, Dialogism, and Hermeneutics

As Australian philosopher Val Plumwood says, ecofeminism is situated at the edges where the “four tectonic plates of liberation theory – those concerned with the oppressions of gender, race, class and nature – finally come together” (*Feminism* 1). Plumwood envisions ecofeminism as a movement arising from the critique of patriarchal, imperialist, and anthropocentric modes of thinking. She argues that these modes of thinking use “reason” as a discursive strategy to separate men from women, Europeans from indigenous peoples, and humans from nature (42). More than a mere separation, this dualism creates what Plumwood calls a “hyperseparation” (49), which is really a system of Othering based on a radical exclusion of the other, the latter being always constructed as inferior. Hyperseparation “establishes separate ‘natures’” (49) between self and other, and thus “prevent[s] their being seen as continuous or contiguous” (49). Hyperseparation does not only create “a difference of degree within a sphere of overall similarity, but [it produces] *a major difference in kind*, even a bifurcation or *division in reality*” (50; my emphases). Building on Plumwood, Deborah Rose explains that ecofeminism criticizes those types of discourse that create a “matrix of hierarchical oppositions [. . .] where the ‘other’ is effectively an absence” (176). In this rather perverse discursive strategy, inferiority, absence, and silence are used as justification for monologism. In monologism, Rose explains, “communication is all one way, and the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue” (176-77). In that way, Rose continues, “[p]ower lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one’s actions, but rather to go one’s own self-centric and insulated way” (176-77). As will be shown below, if hyperseparation

and monologism characterize the attitude of some explorers in *A Discovery of Strangers* – they instrumentalize and silence both the land and its indigenous inhabitants – socioecological dialogism characterizes the indigenous protagonists' way of knowing. By recreating Tetsot'ine voices, Wiebe moves away from the principle of hyperseparation that pervaded colonization and makes English and Tetsot'ine enter into dialogue through his work of historiographic metafiction. The ethical role of the novel then becomes to offer in dialogism and discovery an alternative to monologism and hyperseparation.

It is to be noted that the dialogism set out in Plumwood's ecofeminism is a socioecological dialogism that "is aimed not at self-maximisation but at negotiation and mutual flourishing" (*Environmental Culture* 33). This socioecological dialogism "requires a basic level of mutuality and equality, give and take, response and feedback, that is not available in monological systems" (33) such as those of imperialism. In that sense, Plumwood's dialogism provides a framework that sheds light on how the collision of communities in the diegetic world of *A Discovery of Strangers* can be read as dialogue rather than monologue, and how one's interaction with the environment can be envisioned in less dualistic terms.

To study the relation between history and fiction at the structural level of *A Discovery of Strangers*, however, requires another type of dialogical approach that presupposes an acknowledgment of the function of the reader in the production of meaning. In this context, Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin provides an interesting perspective on textual dialogism. In "Discourse in the Novel," he mentions two forms of dialogism: he differentiates between a "form of dialogism [. . .] within the object [i.e., the work] itself" (282) and a form of dialogism between the work and the "subjective belief system of the listener" (282). Bakhtin explains:

[A]n active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements. (282)

Bakhtin's "active understanding" amounts to a mutually enriching dialogue between context, reader, and text. This dialogism is nicely summed up by Michael Holquist, who edited and translated *The Dialogic Imagination*: in the glossary, Holquist explains that in a dialogical perspective, "[e]verything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole –

there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426).

The power of *A Discovery of Strangers* lies in the fact that through self-reflexive episodes of interpretive practices, Wiebe combines a "Bakhtinian" dialogism inherent in the narrative configuration – that is, the juxtaposition of the discourses of history and story – with a "Plumwoodian" dialogism of the Tetsot'ine in the diegetic world. In turn, this strategy enables the reader to perform a postcolonial revision of colonial history; the very process of reading *A Discovery of Strangers* thus subverts the monologism of colonial history by presenting a plural storyworld where competing voices intermingle.

## 2. Modes of Knowing and Allegories of Understanding

Knowledge features as a crucial aspect of the novel. At the diegetic level, Wiebe depicts the Tetsot'ine and the explorers' communities as being different on many sociocultural levels, and these differences in sociocultural processes manifest themselves in the text: the communities know differently; they live differently; they tell differently. It is important to keep in mind that Wiebe does not *impose* one way on the other, but rather juxtaposes them and describes each community's reflection on the other's similarities and differences. The reader is then made to understand the colonial knowledge exhibited in the science and practice of exploration in light of the traditional<sup>2</sup> ecological knowledge manifested in the Tetsot'ine way of life, and vice and versa. In this textual configuration, the two discourses echo each other to offer a dual perspective on colonization.

In the fictional chapters, Wiebe represents the Tetsot'ine traditional knowledge as relational – it is situated in an evolving web of relations. Relational knowledge is underwritten by a form of socioecological dialogism; that is, it is immanent in the land and emerges from the dialogue of organism and environment, from one's dynamic and mutual relation-

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<sup>2</sup> "Traditional" is used in a peculiar way here; it does not denote a type of knowledge that is "of the past and unchangeable" (Pierotti 11). On the contrary, traditional ecological knowledge "is based on empirical knowledge that has been collected over long periods of time and incorporated into an organized way of understanding how the world functions based on relationships observed and understood at a local scale" (14).

ship with one's surroundings.<sup>3</sup> Relational knowledge could be called "ecological knowledge" – it is tied to a given ecology – or it could be called "situated knowledge," for it is always embedded in a given situation. Relational knowledge is necessarily humble since limited – the very name "Tetsot'ine," Wiebe tells us, means "Those Who Know Something a Little" (4). Relational knowledge is not fixed, but relative. There is no end to relational knowledge, for it is dependent on the environment and is subtended by a care for the land and its beings.<sup>4</sup> The relational knowledge of the Tetsot'ine is transmitted in the form of oral stories that capture the dynamism of the land. Thus, the text explains that "every place was its true and exact name. [The Tetsot'ine elders] Birdseye and Keskarrah between them knew the land, each name a story complete in their head" (24). In the novel, this "storied knowledge" is contrasted with categorical knowledge and with the colonial practice of naming that tends to rigidify the land. The Tetsot'ine conception of knowledge as evolving means that the arrival of the Europeans will change the stories that subtend the Tetsot'ine way of life: in a sense, relational knowledge is always inclusive of the stranger. Paradoxically, Wiebe portrays this radical inclusion as one of several reasons that, combined together, cause the downfall of the Tetsot'ine people: the hospitality exhibited by the Tetsot'ine, the adoption of firearms and of a trade economy by some hunters, which alters the "animal circle that gives [them] life every day" (129), as well as the "strange and various sicknesses" (315) – amongst which smallpox – unwittingly imported by the explorers, exert too strong a pressure on the Tetsot'ine population and ultimately provoke their disappearance as a people.

In contrast to the Tetsot'ine, the fictional chapters present some of the explorers as valuing a form of knowledge that is monological:<sup>5</sup> it imposes meaning onto the world; it tends to be disconnected from the world; it is essentially a one-way movement. In Wiebe's depiction, the explorers' knowledge is not relative, but universalist; it is also positivist, for Franklin and his men think they know with certainty, and thus sometimes pass as arrogant. In the 1820s, at the time of the Franklin

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<sup>3</sup> This mutual relationship is exemplified when a Tetsot'ine elder named Keskarrah says that the "*stories the land told* [. . .] and the sky over it in any place, were the stories of all People who had ever lived there" (24; my emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> In the novel, the Tetsot'ine consider the caribou as kin (18) and their hides as gifts that belong to the caribou only (133).

<sup>5</sup> Mostly, this rather negative view of the explorers is given from the perspective of the Tetsot'ine, but it is also visible in the few episodes where Wiebe reconstructs the perspective of explorers such as Midshipman George Back and Doctor John Richardson.

expedition, this monological knowledge is geared towards fulfilling the goals of the expedition: subjecting the indigenous population, mapping the Canadian Arctic, and evaluating the natural resources of the land. The explorers' monological knowledge is dominated by an instrumentalization<sup>6</sup> of the land and its beings. This is made clear when George Back, one of the explorers, reads the "proclamation," an agreement that defines how Tetsot'ine and Europeans will interact:

This, our great flag, is the sign of the King of England's power, who is your king also! [. . .] We are not traders, we are the King's warriors. [. . .] We are not come to trade, but to establish good relations between us and yourselves, and to discover the resources of your country. [. . .] [I]f you show us the way of the other great river to the Northern Ocean, *and* if you hunt for us as we follow it, the King will be very thankful. (42)

By asserting that the Tetsot'ine are under the authority of the King of England, and that the explorers are warriors whose aim is to "discover the resources of [the] country,"<sup>7</sup> the proclamation makes manifest how the environment is but an object of study and a potential resource to exploit. In the same vein, the passage positions the Tetsot'ine *not* as independent beings, but as instruments to the service of the exploration and exploitation of Arctic Canada. This point is reinforced when another member of the expedition, Doctor John Richardson, is talking with John Franklin about the sense of duty and discipline of the "Yellowknife Indians"; he explains:

We will never control any Indians [. . .] until we teach them the absolute, practical necessity of money. [. . .] [T]he fundamental problem in the economic development of primitives [is that they trade for what they need]. They must want more than they need. That is civilization. (59)

Richardson's conversation with the leader of the expedition illustrates the paternalistic attitude of the doctor, and betrays the explorer's assumption that the indigenous population is inferior and thus open to instrumentalization and "civilizing." This instrumentalist consideration of the Tetsot'ine goes hand in hand with a denial of their intimate

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<sup>6</sup> In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood defines instrumentalism as the process whereby "those on the lower side of the dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or centre, that they are conceived of as his instruments, a means to his ends" (53).

<sup>7</sup> Wiebe is here deliberately playing with the notion that in a colonial context discovery is the initial step that precedes exploitation.



knowledge of the Arctic ecosystem. Indeed, monological knowledge entails by definition that the self is deaf to input by the other, and Wiebe implies that this refusal to listen to the indigenous community, for example regarding the unavailability of food near the sea in winter, is what causes the demise of the expedition. This refusal to listen appears in a conversation between Keskarrah and Bigfoot about the explorers' demands regarding food supply for the expedition. Keskarrah begins:

"They want sacks of meat for summer, they want it dried now."

"No one dries meat in dark winter."

"They don't know what we do."

"I've told them, again and again, when the sun returns there are always other caribou."

"Not along the Everlasting Ice, where they want to go."

"But why will they go there?" Bigfoot is almost shouting. "We've told them, there's nothing there but ice!"

"I know," Keskarrah says quietly. "I think we have to understand this: Whitemuds hear only what they want to hear. [. . .] Nothing, nothing. For them the world is always wrong because they never want it to be . . . the way it is." (131-32)

In this conversation, the two Tetsot'ine elders are frustrated by the explorers' behavior, which seems erratic, "wrong," and altogether dangerous to them. Despite Bigfoot's repeated warnings that food will be unavailable in winter near the sea, the English will nonetheless go on their expedition and in the process will suffer dramatic losses. Keskarrah's last speech reveals the silencing of the indigenous voice and the objectification of the land that underlies the explorers' behavior.

At the level of diegesis, numerous such episodes stage the tension between monological and dialogical ways of knowing. Mostly these episodes present an indigenous critical perspective on the English explorers' way of interacting and understanding the land, though it is to be noted that some explorers also reflect on the indigenous way of life and of knowing. For instance, chapter 3 is a monologue that features Midshipman George Back's thoughts on the Tetsot'ine: he describes them as a "primitive people" (42); he explains that "the idea of wealth [. . .] is too much for their minds to grasp" (43); he states that "these natives live in a dreadful land with more than enough space quite empty around them. With no discernible social organization – and wandering at random" (44); finally, he affirms that "the Indian mind rejects accident" (45). Wiebe's rhetorical strategy is to exaggerate Back's fallacious understanding of the indigenous community so as to expose his colonial ide-



ology and to underscore its relegation of indigenous peoples to an inferior, silenced, and hyperseparated order of being. Back's monologue also shows how, in his mind, the environment is but a territory to explore (48).

It would not do justice to the polyvocality of the novel, however, to think that all explorers display a monological attitude that instrumentalizes the Tetsot'ine. Midshipman Robert Hood is a character that challenges the explorers' monologism: in a dialogue with Back, Hood questions the morality of hiring the best hunters of the Tetsot'ine community and wonders, "who will feed all their families this winter?" (49). He then explains that the Tetsot'ine women will necessarily have to help to "skin and cut and dry all that meat before it rots" (49). Interestingly, Hood's "moral imperatives" (50) irk Back, who describes them as "insufferable rectitude" (50). Hood critiques imperialism from within the group of explorers, which establishes him as a figure that transgresses the dualism of colonial knowledge. This is important, for this attitude is what will allow Hood to overcome the conflict of community and face the indigenous woman Greenstockings in a non-dualistic way (see below).

It is important to bear in mind that with *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe seeks to counter the dominance of monological imperialism in history; to do so, he presents and emphasizes numerous indigenous critiques of European interpretive practices. This includes making manifest the socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot'ine, and, by extension, to suggest to the reader another way of understanding text and place. Indeed, these episodes present the indigenous perspective on Europeans' understanding of the land *reflexively*, that is, in such a way that the text "points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture. Reflexive works [. . .] call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs" (Stam 1). The reflexivity of these episodes enables the reader to connect the socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot'ine with the textual dialogism of the novel. In a dialogue with his wife Birdseye, Keskarrah, a Tetsot'ine "mapmaker" (45), criticizes the colonial practice of cartography and reflects on how the explorers fail to understand the environment through writing and technology:

Everything changes when they come, and yet they mark it down as if it will always be the same and they can use it. [. . .] They're always making marks, marks on paper that any drop of water can destroy. As if they had no memory. [. . .] They always have to hold something in their hands, something to make marks on, or to look at things or through unknowable instruments. They aim their eyes across every lake and river with instruments that the

sun distorts first, and then they draw something of it onto paper, with names that mostly mean nothing. As if a lake or river is ever the same twice! When you travel and live with a river or lake, or hill, it can remain mostly like it seems, but when you look at it with your dreaming eye, you know it is never what it seemed to be when you were first awake to it. [. . .] [Thick English] and his men always stare at [the sun] through something else, and I think the sun uses their instruments to blind them. To make them think living things are always the same. (75-76)

Colonial cartographic practices constitute an allegory of bad interpretation<sup>8</sup> that invites the reader to question the act of reading. Here, Keskarrah reflects on the explorers' failure to *read* place and *write* text. In Keskarrah's view, this inability to interpret correctly comes from a misunderstanding of the dynamism of the ecosystem and from a misuse of technology and writing. To him, colonial cartography is problematic because it is based on an understanding of the environment as a finite object that can be measured exactly;<sup>9</sup> he thinks that this is erroneous because it blinds the explorers to the dynamism of the environment, and instead purports to control and seems to congeal and silence it. For Keskarrah, the explorers' mode of knowing is unable to capture the complexity of the Dene lands, which brings about an inability to represent it correctly. As the explorers perceive the environment as static, they can only repeat this stasis in their textual representations. Through Keskarrah's critique, Wiebe creates a connection between the understanding of place and the production of text. Through reflexivity, the allegory of interpretation thus connects socioecological dialogism and textual dialogism, which opens up an interpretive field that encourages the reader to envision an alternative hermeneutics based on the relational knowledge of the Tetsot'ine: one ought not to congeal the text and think that it is "ever the same twice," like the explorers do concerning the land. By extension, this suggests that understanding a novel demands respecting the dynamism and heteroglossia that is so characteristic of this genre (Bakhtin 263). By showing the Tetsot'ine response to the explorers' practice of understanding, Wiebe draws the reader's attention to the differences between the socioecological dialogism inherent in the way of

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<sup>8</sup> In chapter 3 of his *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man reminds us that it is crucial to question whether a "passage on [. . .] reading [may] make paradigmatic claims for itself" (58).

<sup>9</sup> In *Nature's Economy*, Donald Worster lays out the origins of this "mechanistic materialism" inherited from the eighteenth century, a mechanism that "reduc[ed] plants and animals to insensate matter, mere conglomerates of atomic particles devoid of internal purpose or intelligence" (40).

knowing of the indigenous population and the monological imposition of knowledge of the explorers. Because the character of Keskarrah is described as sympathetic and wise while the explorers are depicted as arrogant and careless, the reader is invited to adopt a way of knowing that does not radically exclude the environment as an inferior object, and a way of reading that does not consider the text as static.

Keskarrah's questioning of the Europeans' dysfunctional interpretive practice is developed when his wife Birdseye, who is also a respected and knowledgeable elder, tackles the explorers' way of knowing through written text:

the Whitemuds [i.e., the European explorers] can so easily sit on the water and observe the immense land pass inside the tubes they hold to their eyes, and see nothing except the folds of papers they always clutch in their hands, the tiny marks they continuously accumulate heap upon heap between straight lines, down in columns. What they lay out flat and straight and hold in their hands in these marks, which only they will know how to interpret, will be enough to guide them; that is how they know everything, and will know whatever happens to them. Sometime, somewhere, they have decided to believe this simplicity of *mark*, and they will live their lives straight to the end believing that. (147)

What the character of Birdseye criticizes is not necessarily writing in itself, but the written text as a source of knowledge that severs people from their environment – including other beings – and silences the land and indigenous people. The fact that *only* the colonizers can read written marks demonstrates how exclusionary writing can be. However, it is the self-sufficiency of writing as it guides any inquiry and makes “everything” known to the colonizer that is most problematic. Indeed, Birdseye describes the Europeans as having “decided to believe this simplicity of *mark*,” rather than the Tetsot’ine’s repeated advice; this suggests, as shown above, that in Birdseye’s understanding the explorers are also denying the traditional knowledge of the Tetsot’ine as a valid way of interacting with the land. Ultimately, this refusal to listen to the Tetsot’ine and to perceive the dynamism of the land is presented as the cause of the failure of the expedition. Indeed, despite the Tetsot’ine advice that “there’s nothing but ice” (131), no food, where the explorers want to go, the latter do so anyway, because they “hear only what they want to hear” (131). Because the explorers are taken up with their cartographic practice, they end up not paying enough attention to the land and its inhabitants. Blinded by the power of measuring, the explorers fail to see the complexity and unpredictability of the Arctic ecosystem.

What Birdseye's view makes manifest is that interpretive practices that are disembodied from the environment to which they relate and that objectify the environment they seek to understand are senseless. Indeed this type of monological reading is not attuned to its surroundings, which is clearly a fatal mistake when one travels in unfamiliar and arid territory. Through Birdseye's view on the practice of writing the environment and of reading text, the novel enables the reader to reflect on their own process of reading and, more generally, on the effects of "science as the writing of the world" (Massey 25): the reader ought not to believe in the "simplicity of mark" (Wiebe 141) and think they know "everything"; the text should not sever organism from environment, and it should not exclude the indigenous voice; the text is not a *container* of meaning. Through Wiebe's literary work, one is made to understand that colonial scientific writing is no substitute for traditional ecological knowledge.

Both Keskarrah and Birdseye criticize the explorers' attitude towards the environment. From their perspective, the colonial practice of cartography both seals off the organism from its environment and congeals the world into stasis. However, the novel is not a unilateral critique of colonialism and a mere praise of indigenous knowledge. The criticism of the explorers' way of knowing is also echoed by a critique of the Tetsot'ine's storytelling practice. Indeed, if the novel suggests that imperial science has shortcomings in its radical exclusion of the other, it also points out that indigenous orality poses problems in regard to the arrival of strangers. This problematic is brought forth through Greenstockings, Keskarrah and Birdseye's daughter, and in her criticism of her mother's mode of knowing.<sup>10</sup> The young girl is very critical of her people's radical *inclusion* of the expedition and of the inability of the Tetsot'ine to cope adequately with the arrival of the English explorers:

As the sun sinks completely into winter, Greenstockings watches for the lengthening line of Whitemud story that her mother's voice draws up out of darkness. [ . . . ] She wants to hear her mother tell why all the People stood there so heedlessly, as if nothing but curiosity was happening, and watched These English arrive

But Birdseye's murmured story explains nothing about what happened to the People then. (148)

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<sup>10</sup> Greenstockings repeatedly voices her criticism of her people's blindness to the fact that their hospitality and willingness to transform their hunting practices will result in their extinction (36; 149). Particularly, she criticizes Bigfoot's servile attitude towards the explorers (133-34).

Greenstockings wonders why her mother does not weave into story the rest of the encounter with the explorers, for she intuitively knows that the refusal to face the reality of the Europeans' presence is problematic: it places Birdseye and her family in the position of disempowered witnesses to an immutable and unstoppable force. This passage offers an interesting perspective on the internal politics of the Tetsot'ine,<sup>11</sup> who do not blindly follow arbitrary authority, but discuss their way into action. This form of collaboration is stressed earlier in the text when the narrator explains that "[w]ithin the shifting groups of Tetsot'ine for a time agreeing to live together, as necessity arises, one person decides finally where they will travel, where they will stop – but that implies nothing like boss. They have no word for 'chief'" (34). In light of the collaboration inherent in Tetsot'ine decision-making, the episode where Greenstockings questions her mother's story acquires a deeper significance: it functions as an allegory of good interpretation that shows that listening to a story does not necessarily mean accepting the narrative as an authoritative truth, but that on the contrary it consists in interrupting, questioning, and dialoguing. Silencing the presence of the Europeans is a mistake that Greenstockings picks up on as she refuses to take her mother's story at face value. Metafictionally, this passage suggests that receiving a narrative is not a unilateral assimilation of information, but a dialogue between reader and text – or listener and speech – where the reader is made to question the textual configuration and to refigure proactively their horizon of understanding. The novel proposes that good interpretation entails interacting actively with history and story: good interpretation ought to fill in the blanks in the text and to question the deliberate silences that punctuate it. The numerous diegetic episodes of self-reflexivity invite the reader to conceive the narrative system in a dialogical way. In this context, the collision of epistemes that pervades the whole novel can be read in a new light: not as a radical exclusion of the other and a radical inclusion of the stranger, but as a mutual discovery of difference and a responsible dialogue with alterity. History and fiction, as well as the writing of science and the telling of stories can mutually enrich one another, if one allows them to enter into dialogue.

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<sup>11</sup> This internal politics is to be contrasted with the hierarchical system of the English Navy, where authority – as opposed to necessity – is the primary factor that regulates social organization.



## 3. The Poetics of Collision and the Hermeneutics of Discovery

In *A Discovery of Strangers* Wiebe creates a situation wherein seemingly contradictory epistemes are voiced. After the initial moment of encounter the two systems – English explorers and indigenous Tetsot'ine – gradually collapse. Their respective community, knowledge system, way of life, way of telling and of interpreting the world begin to decline as the narrator's description of the moment of encounter attests to:

suddenly a fireball smashed through the sky: crash! – here are the Whites! Now! And immediately the world is always on fire with something else, something [the Tetsot'ine] have never thought about or had to do before; always, it seems, burning out of its centre and rushing, destroying itself towards all possible edges. Strangely, for ever, different. (17)

If at first glance it may seem that the encounter between explorers and indigenous people is a *collision* – the explorers being a fireball smashing and crashing into the world of the Tetsot'ine, making this world “destroy [. . .] itself towards all possible edges” – the last sentence of this passage opens up an alternative interpretation that emphasizes the *discovery* of the implications of the collision: the stem “strange” functions as an echo of both the title of the novel – *A Discovery of Strangers* – and the novel's epigraph by Rainer Maria Rilke – “*Strangely I heard a stranger say, / I am with you*” (i). This repetition connects three characteristics of the colonial encounter: the *discovery* of the stranger mentioned in the title, the *presence* of the stranger expressed by the epigraph, and the *permanence* of this presence, which is expressed in the irrevocable transformation of the world in the passage quoted above. If this irrevocable transformation can be seen as a direct consequence of the collision of communities, the novel rather chooses to emphasize the first aspect of the colonial encounter: the discovery of the stranger. By emphasizing not the dualistic hyperseparation of colonizers and colonized, but rather their initial collaboration,<sup>12</sup> the novel suggests that the collision of binaries may also be interpreted as the gradual understanding – i.e., the discovery – of the other. When one adopts a dialogical approach to the text, the

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<sup>12</sup> This collaboration is exemplified in the hospitality of the Tetsot'ine and in the “agreement” between indigenous people and explorers that spells out the modalities of the trading of fur and meat against firearms and the transport of the explorers on canoes (265, 299, 42). From a postcolonial perspective, of course, this collaboration is really one-way: what Wiebe makes the Tetsot'ine call hospitality the explorers consider servility.



conflict between explorers and indigenes, history and story, fact and fiction, and scientific and storied knowledges recedes into the background while the collaborative processes that can be seen at the narrative's structural, diegetic, and linguistic levels take center stage. The reader's real discovery in *A Discovery of Strangers* is the unveiling of a common ground that is based on an ecocentric understanding of the world and on a dialogical approach to life. This common ground recognizes alterity but does not create a hierarchical system out of difference. At the diegetic level, this common ground allows collision to be envisioned as discovery. At the extradiegetic level it allows to move beyond poetics and towards hermeneutics. In other words, instead of conceiving the novel as a fixed narrative configuration where polarized communities, ways of knowing, and discourses collide, the reader is made to conceive of the novel as the process whereby Tetsot'ine and English, traditional and scientific knowledge, and story and history discover and interpret each other.

The most obvious element in *A Discovery of Strangers* that enables the move from a poetics of collision to a hermeneutics of discovery is the juxtaposition of narrative modes in the structure of the novel: history and fiction enter into conversation with one another. The novel is incomplete if one dismisses either discourse, or if one envisions them in isolation. This entanglement of modes of telling is alluded to in the paratext. First, before the narrative proper begins, appears the Rilke epigraph, in translation: "*Strangely I heard a stranger say, / I am with you*" (i). This quote is but loosely translated, however: the subject in the German version is a third-person feminine "sie," and the line reads "und hörte fremd einen Fremden sagen: / Ichbinbeidir" (Rilke 132). The poetic license taken by Wiebe in the translation draws attention to the process of re-creation that subtends his fictional account of the historical moment. Second, after the epigraph, two historical maps of the explored area are provided (ii-iii), with the dates, places, and journeys of the expedition. Interestingly, the maps present both the Tetsot'ine and the English nomenclature: the label "Everlasting Ice" is followed by a parenthesis indicating that it is also the "Coronation Gulf"; the "River of Copperwoman" is also the "Coppermine River." This juxtaposition of Tetsot'ine and English names shows how the two knowledge systems are to be read in relation to one another. Third, a prefatory note follows the maps and warns the reader that excerpts of the journals of two explorers are interspersed between chapters (iv). Wiebe makes manifest the creative dialogue between history and fiction, for he cleverly notes that the "dated selections between chapters are quoted (*with some minor*

*rearrangements*)” (iv; my emphasis). Overall, the paratext combines poetry, geography, and history and prefigures the combination of poetic meta-fiction and historiography in the main text. This juxtaposition of fictionalized journal excerpts and historicized fiction forces the reader to examine the relationship between history and fiction in the production of storyworlds. This interpretive examination thus echoes the diegetic encounter of colonial and traditional knowledge. Moreover, the narrative configuration gives a voice to both parties, thereby avoiding presenting a one-sided account of exploration and colonization.

The book consists of thirteen fictional chapters and thirty historical journal entries. If most chapters are separated by clusters of one to three entries, there are eight journal entries that separate chapters 9 and 10. The unusual presence of historical discourse at this point of the narrative is striking, especially since this profusion of history is placed at the climactic moment of the story where the “Expedition has begun to break into pieces” (220). These eight entries indeed cover the beginning of the expedition per se, on 4 June 1821, and its gradual failure as ice thickens and food becomes scarce. As for chapter 10, as if to remind the reader of the horror of the expedition, which is somehow idealized in the historical account, it details the protagonist Midshipman Hood’s slow and agonizing starvation before the Mohawk Michel murders him. In this narrative configuration, the journal excerpts and the fictional chapters work *in concert* to offer a kaleidoscopic representation of the failure of the expedition. Wiebe’s novel thus functions as a dialogical matrix that is performed in reading. However, like *Greenstockings* in the allegory of good interpretation above, and unlike some of the explorers, the empirical reader is not to take the narrative at face value, but rather is to engage critically with it, to ask questions of it, to actualize it creatively. In this sense, colonial history is not to be thought of as a separate realm of knowledge more apt than fiction to represent the expedition, for colonial history is never purely objective: it is written by *men* who have a particular agenda and a particular audience. Ultimately, by conflating historical and fictional discourses, Wiebe draws attention to the constructedness of both fictional and historical work. As William Closson James argues:

[Wiebe may be] suggesting that the role of the storyteller is not merely to record and report past events, nor to imagine in unfettered fashion a radically open future. The narrator is more like the prophet or dreamer who activates or helps make happen what is happening, but who is also present as an ingredient of the narrative itself and determinative of what will happen. (81)

In this sense, the textual dialogism that makes story and history converse with one another can be seen as a narratological technique that performs and “make[s] happen” the socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot’ine that Wiebe hopes to reproduce in the reader’s mind.

There are numerous other elements in the novel that exemplify the primacy of dialogism over monologic dualism: for instance, the love story between the midshipman Robert Hood and the indigenous girl Greenstockings enacts the move from collision to discovery in a sensuous way that allows the reader to experience the corporeal discovery of the other. As was shown above, Hood and Greenstockings both constitute subversive figures that question their respective community. Their relationship thus acquires a particular significance. Moreover, their relationship transgresses the military code of conduct, contradicting Franklin’s orders not to interact with indigenous women. Hood is aware of this transgression, for during his intimate encounter he is flooded with analepses reminding him of his “imperial duty under oath” (176). Despite Hood’s subversion of his rank as English naval officer, under the lodge of Keskarrah and Birdseye’s family, around a fire, Greenstockings and he tell each other stories; they learn to know each other; they feed each other and finally they make love. In the intimacy of the firelight, the two youths laugh together and in this intense personal moment they begin to form one being. As Greenstockings tells Hood a story about caribou, “Hood’s body [is] intense, listening. No one intrudes with an acceptable understanding, and her happiness begins to dance with him” (161-62). In this episode, storytelling is not about content, nor is it about the transmission of information, for Hood is not “understanding a syllable of any word she has ever spoken” (157). The relationship shows us that understanding stories is about discovering the other: sensuously, empathically, listening with the whole body, and not with a separate transcendental “reason.” In this dialogical dance, Hood and Greenstockings learn to accept the ineffable complexity of Other and Stranger, as well as their irreducibility in language. Monologic dualism is overcome and replaced by dialogism, for in their case communication is not about exchanging information between two distinct entities, but about sharing an experience *together*. It is about including the other into your midst and about letting the stranger in. After all, Hood is invited *inside* the lodge, and in an explicitly sensual way, he is invited into Greenstockings, for as the final words of their meeting conclude: “Forehead and skin, and lips, and tongues” (177). Obviously, this relationship is not about instrumentalizing the indigenous woman, who here would embody an Other-figure, nor is it about subjecting her into obe-

dience.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the function of this scene of love is to show that if there is an apparent clash of cultures at a certain level, as this situation of collision trickles down to the level of individuals it transforms into an intimate meeting of beings who meet on equal grounds. In this meeting of entities enacted by dialogism the boundaries of what constitutes the Other shift, thereby transgressing the colonial imposition of meaning and shedding light on the power of the novel to transform collision into discovery.

#### Conclusion: Encountering the Other, Discovering the Stranger

The narrative configuration of *A Discovery of Strangers* juxtaposes history and stories, historical facts and poetic fiction, colonial and traditional knowledge. By interacting with this configuration in the act of reading, the reader is made to perform dialogism. In this context, the reading process is twofold: it consists in unveiling the harmful exclusion of differences while asserting the need for critical dialogue. This dialogical perspective then serves to question the nationalistic narrative of exploration as heroic undertaking. By telling the untold story of sorrow, death, and extinction alongside the official history of exploration, conquest, and settlement, Wiebe not only subverts the national narrative, but he also undermines the hyperseparation of European and indigenous communities as well as that of colonial and traditional knowledge systems. The dialogism that Wiebe weaves into existence allows us to move away from a hyperseparating narrative and to get closer to a dialogical understanding.

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<sup>13</sup> Here Hood contrasts with other male figures, such as George Back, the Tetsot'ine hunter Broadface, and the Mohawk Michel who all treat Greenstockings violently.

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