

**VOICES FROM THE PRAIRIE: ENGLISH
TEACHERS' RELATIONSHIP TO
PRAIRIE LITERATURE**

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of the traditions of and the appreciation afforded prairie authorship by Alberta high school English teachers. It is a search for the factors which determine teachers' understanding and use of the regional voice that expresses Western Canada.

Although there have been studies on the use of Canadian literature in the Canadian school system, the study of Western Canadian literature in relationship to the classroom is a very new field. It is hoped that there are some valuable components in this study which will add insight and information to the study of regionalism in the English curriculum, and that it will provoke in teachers some thoughtful consideration of using prairie literature in the classroom.

The literature review is composed of two parts. The first part of the study researches the literary patterns that emerge in post-colonial nations and reveals similar patterns emerging in Western Canadian literature. The second part of the review situates prairie literature within the history of Canadian literature and subsequently the formation of the Canadian canon. The social and historical events which have affected Canadian literary style and influenced the origins and development of regional literature are considered.

The field study component of the thesis includes interviews with four experienced Alberta high school teachers. The dialogue is recorded and the content analyzed for patterns and themes. The study highlights some realities of practice and practitioners in

Alberta high schools.

Certain themes that evolved from the interviews led to some principal findings. Reluctance to use prairie literature in classrooms appeared to be embedded in themes which emerged as oppression of voice, the classical canon, the backgrounds of the teachers and the dilemma of identifying the authentic prairie voice.

The study may provide teachers with an insight to the factors that suppress the use of prairie literature in Alberta schools, and an understanding of the importance of speaking proudly from and about Western Canadian narrative.

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CHAPTER I

THE PRAIRIE AND PRAIRIE CLASSROOMS

Introducing the Problem

My initial interest in this topic developed from my perception that there has been very little use of prairie literature in Alberta high school teaching. As an experienced high school teacher, I can recall very little emphasis on the teaching of prairie literature in any of the curriculum documents that are currently authorized in Alberta. As a marker of the provincially mandated diploma exams, I have observed that there are few major essays written by our students that are based on Western Canadian works. Even the Western Canadian Protocol which is currently being designed for all high schools in the western provinces is mandated to facilitate and coordinate physical movement of students between provinces rather than highlighting a western Canadian protocol of culture, cultural representation or both. As an Alberta trained teacher with a major in both history and English I do not recall much opportunity for the specific study of or training about prairie literature. As a lifetime resident of rural Alberta, I know that literature which reflects the farm and ranch life I live, or for that matter any lifestyle that I identify with the prairies: the oil patch, prairie urbanization, the Prairie Bible Belt, or frontier immigration is not particularly validated in our school system.

If then, I perceive that there is a deficiency in the way the culture of prairie people is portrayed in schooling in Alberta and if I assume that there is a universal respect in literary circles for self reflection, the answer to why there is an apparent lack of use of Western Canadian works must at least partially lie in the history of how this issue has

been handled in the province as well as in the motives and beliefs of the teachers who work with Alberta students. The more I know about the social context and attitudes of the people who inhabit this area the more likely I will be to understand the climate if not the causes for the way prairie material has been handled in our schools. I realize that this study reflects only a small area and sample of this phenomena in geographical and sampling terms and as such I am at risk of generalizing to answers that are not justified by the available information or may be unable to interpret the historical view without disabling personal bias which may be conscious or subconscious.

Nevertheless, there is a question here that plagues me about the way we have transmitted the literary culture of our environment. I believe the question can be studied as it is embedded: in the global and universal context, within the context of Canadian history and within a recognition of regional identity. I believe the question is important to the work I do and to the praxis of Alberta educators.

The Prairie in Prairie Classrooms

Canadian content has been specifically mandated in only the last two Alberta curriculum revisions, dating from 1982. The recognition of Canadian canon in education is then a relatively new area of concern. The Canadian content component is not broken into regional focus nor does the percentage of suggested Canadian content bear any relationship to the percentage of Canadian content specified or identified in the approved resources. As a result, the teacher is left with the interesting dilemma of calculating the amount of literature which would constitute the approved percentage of Canadian content

in the year's program. With these implementation difficulties it is no wonder that a Western Canadian canon has not emerged even on an informal level. To a great extent, regional literature is ignored in the Alberta high school curriculum. There has never been a concentrated effort to specify a designated amount of literature which reflects the prairie writing tradition.

It is true that since the 1982 curriculum document was written there has been an increase in emphasis and use of Canadian content in the Alberta classroom. However, it is relevant to this study that the emerging Canadian canon has not as yet appeared to filter down into a regional prairie canon which is mandated by government curriculum and acknowledged and used by classroom teachers.

Throughout my teaching career I have piloted a number of resources, reviewed material for curriculum use, done intensive work as a member of the Senior High Review Committee for Novels and Non-fiction, written for the Classroom Assessment Materials Project, written exam material for high School diploma exams and acted as a consultant on the validation of provincial diploma exams. In spite of a more focussed and deliberate effort to include the Canadian greats in curriculum and exam material, in retrospect I realize that not much of the material used or reviewed in these projects was reflective of prairie or Western Canadian literature. Perhaps it is simply that regional canon is in the early stages of formation in all parts of Canada although this does not entirely answer the question of valorization or respect for regional work.

In the last few years Alberta Education has established directive committees for special interests which have access to and do exercise a great deal of power over official

curriculum committees. Some of these directive committees have a particular interest in the presentation of regional literature or the protection of people or the portrayal of people in specific regions. In particular, the use of native works is subject to approval by a government committees, and the protection from stereotyping of nationality and religion is also closely monitored. Nationality, religion or special groups are safeguarded as they are used to reflect Alberta history. It is too soon to predict the effect of such lobby groups on the recognition and implementation of regional literature in our schools. Perhaps this is one policy route that will result in an emphasis on regional literature on the formal and curricular level and usher in an era which will include more prairie literature in the curriculum. On the other hand, it may stifle the true voices and emotions of the writers and characters of the prairies.

The lack of interest in or focus on prairie literature to date appears to be a result of sociological dynamics rather than an intellectual response from within the educational community. For example, although a number of review committees have been created to review, censor or encourage ethnic and aboriginal literature as it is being reviewed for use by Alberta curriculum committees; as of yet, there is no government requirement for the use of any particular works, topic, genre or author. As a matter of fact, the only named author in the Alberta curriculum is Shakespeare.

It is interesting that the lack or conversely the use of mandated Canadian literature is the result of lobbying psychology rather than the result of work and suggestion from the grass roots of the classroom. There has been no pressure emerging from within the teaching or academic community at large for the inclusion of more works that represent

the geographical area that the curriculum serves. To the contrary, most teachers seem to devalue regional works in comparison to the more established European and American canons.

I have observed some other phenomena regarding prairie literature that I suspect are steeped in the historical social conditions of Alberta. Textbooks I have used from the prescribed provincial lists include minimal prairie representation in any genre. Of what is available that is classified as prairie literature a great deal appears to have evolved from Whig interpretation. The nobility of pioneering and homesteading, noble savage metaphors, cultural mosaic, the great explorer image are all part of the one sided, positivist point of view of our regional literature. At the other extreme, much regional literature has been written which strongly reflects politically embarrassing periods of our history and culture. The dilemma becomes: What prairie literature can truly showcase the west in literary works in the most authentic sense of the people but which remains within the acceptable standards of curriculum descriptors and objectives and public approval. The tendency for use in schools is inevitably to the romantic. It is rare for an entire unit to be based on prairie themes but even rarer for a work to be taught that focuses on the controversial or unattractive elements of our social dynamics in spite of the fact that most teachers say that they do not concern themselves with repercussions from working with controversial works. Somewhere in this range of presentation the teacher must find a voice that is genuine of the prairies as well as to the values of the system teachers serve.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that teachers have no access to good prairie works; there has been a slow but gradual increase of Canadian content included in the

provincially approved lists developed since the original 1982 curriculum document.

More importantly, there has been an increase in the numbers of prairie authors and the amount of very fine work written by regional authors. The material is on the market and a teacher need only acquire local approval for use of this material even if it is not identified by the curriculum. In spite of this accessibility, there is a cultural hegemony that has dominated the value accorded prairie life and which seems to have pervaded the classroom. The value we afford our own artistic and cultural lives seems to be considered of less worth than material chosen from the more traditional and well established British and American canons. This opens the concern of the legitimacy of voice. It invites the exploration of the traditions of authorship and the understanding of the evolving regional voice within Canadian canon. To know the voice of prairie literature would be to know to what extent this work is author or character. It would be to know the value that canon must afford myth versus history. Ultimately, it would be to understand the worth of such knowledge to our high school students.

Another issue that emerges in questioning the regional issue is to consider the oppression of the voices in the Alberta classroom. Who are the voices of anger, loneliness, pride, isolation? Who are the voices who have been silenced? Why are voices silenced? What are the realities of the kinds of stories that can be told about this area? Must the topics of Western Canadian literature be only about the prairies or from prairie writers? Is the silence one of hesitation or fear or confusion; is it ostracization or simply a choice to be oral rather than literary? Is the material of Western Canada simply of no worth to our objectives for teaching lifestyle values to our citizens?

The effects of colonialism, the formation of canon, the emergence of regional voice and the scrutiny of the value of self reflection in the classroom become the rooted issues of this inquiry. My original questions were provoked by personal experience and observation and this study is initiated as an exploration of these questions. Ironically, and in keeping with the very problem being explored, there has been very little studied about teachers' attitudes and use of Canadian literature so there is negligible material written about the more limited topic of the use of regional literature in Western Canada.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING THE FRAMEWORK

The Words in Context

This thesis is controlled by the effort to identify factors that influence the apparent lack of study of the western voice in terms of historical and academic inquiry as well as the effort to explore the value and bias afforded this work in the high school classroom.

It is important to be clear about the literature, the geography, the communities and the subjects that will be discussed in this project. I have struggled with the number of details that could qualify literature as prairie, with the content that might be considered in the identification of Western Canadian literature and a process by which to allow subjects to freely talk about what they know best; the world of the classroom and the literature that they value.

Prairie Literature

Prairie literature as used in this paper will include any and all genre that reflects any aspect of living in this prairie region of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and parts of the Northwest Territories and Yukon. Geographically this area is isolated by the Rockies on the west side and the Laurentian Shield on the east. Western Canadian literature is used interchangeably with the term prairie literature.

This is the literature of the farms, ranches, and bush industry; it is the literature of weather, sky, cycles of nature; it is the literature of struggle, isolation, space. It is also the literature of people whose social structures have changed radically and rapidly. It reflects

the people of aboriginal origin, colonialism, pastoral myth, war evacuation camps and only more recently, rapid urban growth. Western Canadian literature is often used interchangeably with prairie literature in that tone, style, lyricism and regional identification are the criteria used to identify this particular regional literature.

Social History

The history of the characters of prairie story telling is the product of the realities of events prairie people have experienced. These events shape the myth and poetics of prairie narration and imagery. But whether the events in turn are allowed to be told or are suppressed on a formal basis comes in large measure from the deliberate choice to legitimize such works through the educational system.

The social and cultural climate of Alberta has undergone dramatic changes. The purpose of concentrating on this climate is to identify and eventually interpret the social, economic and political history which has shaped not only the recording of the stories of these people but the controls that are imposed on the telling. Understanding this climate is to understand the post-colonial nation or region as well as the place that prairie thinking and writing holds within Canadian culture.

Alberta Curriculum

The Alberta curriculum of any one administration is the major controlling factor of classroom usage of information. The English High School Curriculum specifies the primary resources to be used. The last curriculum document written for high school

English was published in 1982, the last document authorizing novels and non-fiction for the high school English program was published in 1993. References are made to the Western Canadian Protocol document but it is still too early to assess the influence this document will have on this topic. Teachers who choose materials not on government authorized lists must attain local board approval for such materials. Curriculum guides do suggest some prairie literature within the larger umbrella of Canadian content. Actual amounts of use of prairie literature used in classrooms could only be ascertained by compiling data from the teachers themselves as there is no specific reference or suggestion made in the Alberta curriculum about this topic. In fact, teachers could choose to use no prairie literature at all in their classrooms without violating the dictates of the provincial curriculum.

Approach to the Inquiry

The first two sections will include literature reviews which reveal the characteristics that frame literary expression which evolves from a post-colonial region. I propose a social and personal historiography as holistic study of this framework. My first step is to engage in a literature review of the post-colonial voice in order to determine factors which are common to regions who speak from the colonized experience. The second part of the literature review is to place western Canadian literature within the context of the Canadian voice.

In the review of some specific social and historical events in Alberta I have chosen to investigate and interpret the values that may have discouraged the use of prairie

literature in classrooms. These reviews allow for the investigation and interpretation of values that have encouraged or discouraged the use of prairie literature in Alberta classrooms. This context also illuminates the hegemony that guides the thinking and value systems of the teachers who facilitate in these classrooms.

In view of the lack of research of actual use of regional literature in the classroom, this study will break ground by describing the factors that come into play in teachers' conscious or subconscious decisions concerning the use of prairie literature in their classrooms. What if anything do they find interesting, thought provoking and or worthwhile in the topic? What aspects of teaching Western Canadian literature evoke anxiety in them? What qualifications do teachers bring to the perspectives they hold? What bias or attitudes from Alberta history influence the decisions they make?

Discourse and Praxis

The sample of teachers used in the interviews of this study included four high school English teachers from several schools in two divisions in southern Alberta. I have selected prairie born, raised and educated teachers for these interview discussions. All four teachers are currently teaching in southern Alberta and are experienced teachers familiar with the curriculum documents of Alberta and the entire range of high school English courses taught in the province. Each of the teachers interviewed has taught in more than one high school in southern Alberta.

The initial interview with each individual took the form of an informal conversation based on three general categories: biographical information, attitude

information and philosophy, use of teaching materials and educational practice. Each component is generally described below and the interview question format is included as Appendix I. Each category was initially designed with questions which would provide a framework for conversation rather than a formal questionnaire. The exploration of each component was carried out according to the unique conversation style of each subject. I took notes of direct quotes from each interview which are transcribed and organized by topic for the propose of interpretive reflection after the interviews were completed. These notes are included as Appendix II. I did not expect to discuss the information according to the order of criteria designed for the interview, or to restrict discussion only to the components I had outlined; however, it did provide a general system for gathering information and initiating dialogue.

Biographical Component

It was in this section of the conversation with each person I interviewed that I endeavoured to investigate the teacher's education, background of living on the prairies, and the level of understanding or recognition the teacher had of the issues or complexities that exist when living as part of or on the fringe of a minority group in prairie life. The questions centre on where the teacher has lived and trained, the history of university courses, themes that reflect the life the teacher lives and works within, how much input the teacher has had on curriculum, how the teacher would characterize the student community that is served.

Attitude Component

This component was designed to ascertain biases and prejudices that may influence teachers' choices. The questions include how the teacher views controversial issues of Alberta history specifically: German prisoner of war camps, native literature, aboriginal creation mythology, ethnic prejudice or stereotyping, the Japanese evacuation and how the teacher feels about avoiding such topics in view of possible criticism from parents, school boards and community. The question range includes identifying the comfort level a teacher has handling controversial topics, what specific topics would a teacher avoid discussing in the classroom, whether the teacher perceives there to be a literary culture worthy of use in the classroom, whether the teacher perceives there to be a cultural suppression of voice in certain geographic locations, if the teacher is aware of romanticized or conversely culturally biased or prejudiced literature in the approved materials, and finally if the teacher feels pressured by certain parties to avoid or use particular materials in the classroom.

Usage component

The questions of this component are devised to determine how much of the curriculum time is spent on prairie literature, whether usage is considered primary or secondary material, enrichment or off curriculum. Another goal of this section of questions is to determine whether teachers use regional literature as much as they would like, and at what grade levels.

Questions guiding this component centre on how familiar the teacher is with the

Alberta curriculum, how many Western Canadian works the teacher uses at each of the high school grade levels and whether Western Canadian film and/or other audio visual materials are included as media requirement of the curriculum. In terms of the acquisition and access of western Canadian materials, questions included if the teacher receives any specific material focussed on prairie literature from publishers and if in fact the teacher makes an effort to use regional publishers when buying material. Furthermore, does the teacher feel controlled by any aspect of the choices suggested or offered by publishers or curriculum documents. There are also questions based on whether the teacher uses folk literature, myth and oral story telling of the prairies in teaching and if so, how sensitive must the teacher be to elements of conservatism, religion or ethnic groups in using this strategy.

Interpretation and Reflection

The purpose of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 is to research and make an effort to reveal the relationship between literature and culture.

Chapter 3 is a review of the inquiry as it fits in a more global context. Some factors of regional literature are apparent in all regions that emerge from post-colonial experience. These elements are identified not only as the history of language as it evolves but also of language as it becomes regional voice while moving from the centre of colonized control to become story and voice which expresses a unique regionalism.

Chapter 4 is a review of the question as it is rooted in Canadian context. As characteristics inherent in the global view are revealed, it is interesting to find parallel

characteristics within the Canadian culture. For example, the voices of oppression play a very particularized role in the emergence of the post-colonial nation but there are also some very specific models that repeat themselves in the formation of the Canadian identity, the Canadian canon and the emergence and pride of Canadian regional literature.

The field study section of the inquiry explores the interpretation of actual interviews held with teachers. I have endeavoured to look not only at common themes but also at the uncommon or totally unexpected themes that emerged. In some cases I identified just one insightful response by only one subject which proved to be a response that reflected great intuition of the meaning of prairie life, identity or teaching. I was interested in recognizing the existential attitude of the teacher in private as well as public posture and I was concerned with not only self reflection but reflection on other which, depending on the situation may have been the author of the literature, the community at large or individual students. I gave the invitation to each participant to expand or extend our discussion beyond the categories of the guideline questions.

My personal reflection of the interviews came primarily from the poetic or lyrical elements of the interview conversations. I was particularly open to phrasing, colour, paradox, example, allusion and recollection. I encouraged dialectic within the interview as it surfaced naturally or at times coaxed it into exchange to verify a statement or observe the development of a thesis or argument. There was much discovery in the richness of the language of these teachers.

The attitude and biography components revealed the emergence of some patterns

and themes that verify connections between teachers' viewpoints and the post-colonial sense of identity. Some of the factors which bear an influence on why prairie literature is not used, or if and when it is used, what elements control choices emerged from this section. In some cases there was a correlation between teachers who do not use this literature and their desire to avoid local controversy. In some cases, teachers admitted to remaining silent in respectful deference to their minority student clientele. Certainly, both rationale and silence are important to an understanding of this topic. Finally, there is evidence that teachers at times avoid regional literature on the basis of their fear of misunderstanding or their perception of their lack of understanding of a particular cultural expression. All of these indicators point to the presence of the oppressed or silent voice in Alberta classrooms.

The purpose of these interviews goes beyond the answering of questions or explanations or rationalization for what is, to the illumination of some realities of the practice and practitioners of teaching. The interviews are an opportunity to open possibilities for ethical praxis based on the information revealed from the conversation of professionals about their roots and their work.

I am working from the personal premise that as Albertans we are the product of events that do produce the base of worthy literary expression; that in turn our literature is of at least equal literary value as other literature that has been selected for the Alberta curriculum. My focus in this study centres on why we appear to use so little of our own personal, cultural and geographical expression of life in our classrooms. This study is

driven by my interest in the factors that influence the way we perceive our identity as it is conceived from the narratives, history, culture and art of this area.

CHAPTER 3

CANADA AND THE EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL LITERATURE

Situating the Prairies in the Question

As a student in the Alberta school system I was confronted yearly with the ubiquitous literature theme: The Seascape. Sometimes it was presented in conjunction with the omnipresent human theme of loneliness and the homesickness that accompanies the author embarking on the frontier experience. Works were often portrayed with audio visual media focussing nostalgically on harbors and the ebb and flow of waves. In retrospect, this was a rather nefarious form of colonialism, since like most Alberta born and raised teenagers I was totally unfamiliar with the sea. About the closest imagery I could conjure was the familiar shore of an irrigation lake or mountain fishing lake, or the rather repetitive ocean paintings that often hang in prairie homes. In any event, I dutifully read the selections of the sea unit even committing the rhythmical waves of lines to memory for posterity or at least bonus points. However, I have yet to have a deep rooted sense of the sea except perhaps in the foundation of my subconscious where I equate it with grain fields. Oddly enough, and unfortunately so, I have little memory of studying work that did come from my life and heritage: land, space and sky and as W.O. Mitchell has put it, the accompanying vulnerability that comes from these elements.

To understand ourselves in literary expression we must understand ourselves through our land and history; we must understand the vulnerability we experience as a result of time and events. It is important to situate ourselves in the evolution of cultural awareness of a colonized nation. To a certain extent, we will follow a recognizable

pattern that frequently emerges in the post-colonial nation: acknowledge the colonial canon, develop a post-modern position that explains who our people are becoming and what they are leaving, and as much as possible recognize and validate the voice that comes from this history.

Canada as a Colony

In a writing convention which reflects the stereotype of the self effacing Canadian, Margaret Atwood speaks to the question "What's Canadian about Canadian literature, and why should we be bothered?" In Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972) she comments that in "in a self respecting nation 'why should we be bothered' would never be asked. But Canada isn't a self respecting nation and the question gets asked" (p. 14). To her credit and that of other CanLit critics, a good case has been made in answer to the question What is Canadian Literature?. But in terms of understanding Canadian literature and more specific to this study - regional literature, it is more relevant that the question why bother is still addressed and even more important to understand why the question is still asked so often. Consequential to the development and appreciation of what people consider the nation's literature is the agreement among Canadians that it is important that we understand who we are, that we consider knowledge of ourselves to be knowledge of worth. It is lamentable, considering Margaret Atwood's reputation in CanLit, that her response to this question alludes to a judgement of the quality of our literature based on a concept of national self respect rather than political, historical or literary criteria. Many Canadian scholars (Atwood, 1972; Birdsall,

1972; Cameron, 1989; Dewart, 1864; Frye, 1971) have in their studies made note of the disregard and indifference afforded Canadian works in our school system. Certainly the subjects of lack of implementation and lack of legitimization of Canadian content in schools are well documented in Canadian criticism. But it is the reference of this lack being rooted in a lack of national self respect that provides an interesting focus for this study. Whether the observation is true or false is significant in its own right but on another level of inquiry the general proposal should not be viewed in isolation to Canada and Canadian mentality. Such an approach is too insular and self preoccupied to provide a comprehensive explanation for the question of who a people are and how they value themselves. It does open the inquiry of what factors could bring any individual nation to this conclusion. The scrutiny of Canadian literature is perhaps part of a larger issue, one that is true for any nation which struggles with post-colonial history.

Factors that affect our national self worth are rooted in something more than just a Canadian view of life and literature no matter how self-effacing we perceive ourselves to be. In fact, the problem can be situated in the global view. Perhaps 'why bother' is the question or inquiry of the post-colonial nation. Perhaps this question is a response to the post-colonial nation's search for a voice that is truly reflective of a new world that has emerged from a tradition with a stronger and more prolific writing and speaking culture and a stronger sense of politics and economy. Perhaps the question is the query of a country whose people believe they are shaping a new politics, a new literature and a new direction of their history. A nation or a region within a nation speaks in the literature of the events and consequences that shape the story of the people. The voice of a nation's

literature is heteroglossia speaking through post-colonial experience at any given point.

The effect of culture on voice is critical in interpreting the legitimacy of voice and the integrity that accompanies the worth afforded the voice not only by the speaker but also by the listening world. Canada's dilemma as articulated by Atwood is one that many post-colonial nations experience. Furthermore, such humility is as much reflective of the manner of colonization of a country as it is an assigned definition of the character of the nation's identity. Such reserve is accented by uncertainty that comes from the colonial experience. Such nations inevitably contain vestiges of the identity of the mother country and therefore will be steeped in the canon of the mother country.

The Emerging Voice

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffen have argued in their book The Post-colonial Studies Reader (1995) that post-colonialism "begins from the first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being" (p. 117). The authors maintain that this tension has historically resulted in the overlapping of the concepts of post-colonialism and post-modernism. The theories of these two schools of thought are often used interchangeably. Certainly, the authors argue, the "major project of post-modernism - the deconstructionism of centralised, logocentric master narratives of European culture is very similar to the post-colonial project of dismantling the Centre/Margin binarism of imperial discourse" (p.118). Although the intent of the authors is to explore the nature of post-modernism and post-colonialism, such analysis also lends itself to the search of significance in isolating and distinguishing the voice of a

region. Both schools of thought are concerned with the story of people, the language of life and environment, the deliberations of criticism and parody, and the deconstruction of text. To decentre the discourse signifies that there must be a different or alternative construction of experience and a different signification in the language which describes experience. Post-modernism must be viewed through the imperial events from which a language and a legacy shapes a country. Taken one level deeper, one can discover the acts or language of deconstruction that attempt to review the same society which now exists in neocolonialism. Power and language of power have as much to do with the location of self in story as they do with the symbolic attribution and location of the post-colonial identity.

Appiah (1992) has identified that a post-colonial experience is one in which the de-colonised desire and search for identity, and accordingly it only makes sense that this identity will be centred in the language. This is ultimately becomes problematic in nation or region building. In terms of politics, language and literature, to use language is to choose and therefore identify with that which accompanies the language. These issues of colonial agenda and intent of language which subsequently follow such choices have been explored extensively as issues of the post-modernism versus post-colonialism debates as well as the study of deconstructionism in the neocolonial world. Most studies focus on the details of patriarchal power and political agenda. However, as much as Appiah acknowledges that these concerns increase the complexity and illuminate the differences of the two discourses; another scholar, Hutcheon (1989), submits that post-modernism and post-colonialism do share certain important issues that are bound to

cultural identity and literature.

She reminds us that scholars are beginning to do extensive research on the the discovery that there is a commonality of certain elements of literary device which emerge in post-colonial nations. In particular, many writers are studying magic realism, marginality and discursive literary craft, albeit to different ends in each of the schools of thought. Critics Berry (1988) and Slemon (1989) have explored the order and priority of these concepts in terms of what it means to be either post-colonial or post-modernist and if there may be a natural progression from one to the other based on an examination of a nation's use of any or all of these concepts. To research the study of language to these ends provides important information to the understanding of both discourses and most certainly to the discovery of voice in the new nation.

In considering what role colonial culture plays in the emergence of a literature that identifies a national identity, however, it is more relevant to consider factors of these concepts which can be identified as common to both discourses. The exploration of language choice, the emergence of particular styles of writing and expression and the presence of a tone that indicates identity which surfaces from a deep history of colonialism will show patterns that exhibit the power and importance of a nation's voice and the political domination that is destined to appear in any country that has emerged from this experience. This will be true in spite of the country being colonized or the country colonizing. These patterns will emerge in countries which survive parallel social/political domination even though the cultural expressions appear to be very different in many other aspects. The regional literature of Canada can be viewed globally

in that it is emerging with the very same patterns of tone and insight, language choice and writing genre all of which can be identified in other post-colonial countries with older and more established literature traditions.

Patterns of Cultural Expression

Magic Realism

Magic realism has been identified with countries emerging from colonial rule and has been primarily and most often recognized as a Third World literary style. Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean have produced world renown magic realist authors and have been best known for this style of writing. Magic realism has recently been associated with the evolving African "new realism" (Irele, 1981). It is interesting that magic realism has appeared in so much colonial literature and reflects not just the political historical locale as Irele observes but it has also been emerging elsewhere in countries like Canada. As Slemon (1988) suggests, it appears to be less a Third World occurrence than a natural evolution from colonial identity or as he indicates a "resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems" (p. 10). Magic realism has emerged in the Canadian writing tradition of the last generation of Canadian literature. Doubtless, one could argue that the roots of magic realism in Canada are found in early forms of Canadian myth and legend but this could be said for the roots of all magic realism. And yet it appears consistently in the writing history of post-colonial regions and it does also deliberately emerge in Canadian literature and expression. The specific emergence of this writing in Canadian literature as it is specifically used to express the

regionalism of prairie literature is dealt with in another part of this study.

Magic realism in Canada, as in other countries, generates from the effort of people to explain who they are, where they originate and how they explain themselves in and through narrative. It is a style that reflects the dialogue of response to question, the response of invention to query, of naming the inscrutable. In this respect, notwithstanding differences of race, politics, language or historical culture, the magic realism of Canadian writers and particularly that of Canadian regional writers disclose a universality of response which can be attributed to the nature of Canada as a post-colonial nation. Just as we can identify many prairie narrators as magic realists; many writers from Africa, South America and the Caribbean have already gone through similar progression of literary expression associated with magic realism: creation, naming, myth and invention. Recognizing magic realism writing in Canadian and in particular western Canadian literature is to recognize a phenomena that situates this region within the global context which recognizes the narrators's response to the colonial experience.

Marginality

Hutcheon's general discussion of marginality (1989) is once again purposefully constructed to highlight the similarities of marginality in post-modernism and post-colonialism. But as with magic realism, marginality is an important concept of the literature of the disenfranchised culture. It can be extended to the existence and power of expression (specifically in post-colonialism) of people who speak with a newly developing voice. The self-effacing if not self-deprecating voice of a new nation or

region reflects marginality in dialogue. It is the voice which struggles to be heard, the voice which strives to establish a canon that is unique to the people and experiences of a land that is trying to shrug off imperialism. Hutcheon does, however, rightfully identify marginality as an identifying characteristic of post-colonialism but it also important to recognize that it is the genesis of the language, the voice, the tone of a people who begin anew.

Exiled Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972) rather inadvertently bridges the concepts of magic realism and marginality in his comment acknowledging that writers exist simultaneously in fiction and fact: "But in a new-colonial situation fiction seems to be more real than the absurdity of the factual world of a dictator" (p. 156). In this critical work he has identified how writers must function in the neo-colonial state. In his opinion they can choose silence, or become a state functionary, or speak and risk being exiled. In every case the writer cannot truly speak for the people. The choice to speak is just as impossible a task as ceasing to speak. The writer who chooses to speak faces the questions: What language? How does one speak without perpetuating the neo-colonialism being rejected? How does the writer acknowledge relationship to content? Although the study by this author is centred on the difficulties faced by neo-colonial and post-colonial authors of the 1970s and in this particular case of a specific, violent and censoring African nation, the questions explored and the dilemmas faced can be related to the feelings of marginality of not only the post-colonial writer in that country but of authors and for that matter readers in all countries who are separated from colonial rule and have not yet defined themselves as independent entities. It is true that in Canada the

consequence of speaking may not be physical harm or political exile but there is something in the selection of choices available to the writer that can perpetuate the colonial or imperialist voice even in this country. The strong call of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in calling for writers to liberate the heritage of the people is echoed by not only authors of other African or South American countries but also by Canadian writers who struggle with how to speak to post-colonial Canada and more specifically to post-colonial western Canada.. The concerns of scholars who struggle with the concept of nation are complex because speaking from marginality is so difficult but it is also the responsibility of authoring.

The concepts of neo-colonialism, post-colonialism and post-modernism are debated at great length and with a new consciousness of the dilemmas that affect the voice of a people. Paulo Friere's work with marginalized people (1976) has become a well documented study which has become a prototype for understanding how disenfranchised and disempowered people see themselves, learn and eventually attain the ability to critically view themselves in global society. Although Friere's theory and practice reflected Brazilian culture and marginality, it has been extended to all parts of the world as educators attempt to identify the issues of marginality and focus on a literacy and expression that makes sense to people and empowers them with dignity of regional expression in the global arena. Friere's models of teaching literacy have been tested extensively in Africa in the last few years (Kiwia, 1990; Rubagumya, 1994; Kress, 1989; Wallace, 1992). Although the use of regional literature in the Canadian West is seemingly remote from the preoccupations of these studies and Freire was not working as

a proponent of post-modern theory, many of the beliefs and structures of his work are paralleled in the phrasing of the neo-colonialist quandary surrounding how to study literature in a new society. The questions of what is to be read, why and how selection is made, how do we recognize our own socio-cultural influence and finally how do we acknowledge as well as empower the disenfranchised of our own area are the same questions that educators have struggled with in South America and Africa. Certainly as we acknowledge the writing voice of our own marginalized people we acknowledge the paradigms of the new voice, the voice of people who will rewrite history through magic realism or through the discursive strategy that allows for a different consciousness of the events or expression of the art of the post-colonial region.

Discursive Strategy

Discursive strategies identified by Hutcheon (1989) are identified primarily by the duality of experience which is characteristic of post-colonialism and post-modernism. She develops a case for the use of discursive strategy as representative of the people who simultaneously search for cultural unity and expression while at the same time setting a position of uniqueness in contrast to the imperial power. All of this is true but can be extended to the awakening style of writing of authors of the post-colonial state. As she identifies irony, allegory, and self-reflexivity as devices of subversion, it is also true that these same devices can serve as the voice of the nation which is constantly in tension with identity, the voice of people who are indeed self-reflexive but do not have the language to speak the identity or the cultural history that ratifies the voice.

Discursive strategy is perhaps a coping device of the marginalized and a way of expressing the magic realism, or for that matter any stylistic form that helps a region become one voice with pride. Sometimes it emerges as humorous self analysis of people in the becoming. On occasion it is the manner by which marginalized people can speak with duality when caught in threatening situations. In any case, it is from this origin that the marginalized can develop a style of cultural expression. Hutcheon's argument is too politically based to completely explain this topic but surely the recognition of the elements of discursive strategy lend themselves well to an understanding of the evolution of the new nation, of story that reflects all that brings people to any one point in the telling, of authors who are cautious in the telling. To this end, discursive strategy can be strongly identified with the Western Canadian voice as it searches for expression while embedded in canon and imperialism of the countries who controlled Canada as a whole and for that matter, especially in the Eastern Canadian tradition.

To understand that regional literature fits into the larger global picture is to acknowledge the natural development of styles of writing, to concede the marginality that is inherent in the post-colonial expression and to admit if not welcome the construct that allows the articulation of the dualities that are imbedded in our identity. To believe that we are culturally authentic is to know that we cannot go back to speaking as the colonizer nor can we speak only as the colonized. This is the dilemma of the regional voice. This is to understand the connection between literature and culture.

CHAPTER 4

THE PRAIRIE VOICE IN CANADA

Situating the Prairies in Canada

Chapter 3 has identified the post-colonial voice within global context and identified some significant patterns that develop in the post-colonial voice. In doing so there are some apparently aberrant occurrences in the regional Canadian voices that do begin to make sense. The first is the issue of canon; how does it come to be and what is the role of Canadian literature in respect to the British canon and in turn how do we discern the role of regional literature within or instead of Canadian canon. Also, how do we account for the marginalized in our regional literature and finally, how do we recognize the elements of myth, naming and the development of the discursive voice.

This thesis is shaped by the effort to identify how these factors, which are steeped in post-colonialism, influence the apparent lack of study of the Western Canadian voice in terms of historical and academic inquiry and the exploration of the value and bias afforded this voice in the high school classroom.

The Roots of Prairie Literature

Canadian prairie fiction is about a basically European society spreading itself across a very un-European landscape. (Harrison, 1977)

It is a world that persuades him to accept the fact of his own curious duality-that he is at once nothing and everything, at once the dust of the earth and the God that made it; a world that permits him to come to terms, perhaps subconsciously, with that dualism which is Sir Thomas Browne's mystic previsioning, "maketh pyramids pillars of snow and all that's past a moment". (McCourt, 1968)

Basically, to relate man to the prairie landscape is to become conscious of the striking contrast between the vertical and the horizontal. (Ricou, 1973)

Myth and fact reveal things about each other; the tension between them is generative. (Harrison, 1979)

Buried in these quotes by Canadian writers are the elements that situate western Canadian literature in the context of global understanding of post-colonial characteristics: magic realism, marginality and discursive strategy. Embedded in these words are the identification of voice and the valorization of voice.

Research of prairie literature must begin with a study of the philosophy that roots Canadian literature. One of the most famous and widely quoted documents of Canadian literary criticism is Northrop Frye's "Conclusion" to the Literary History of Canada (Klinck, 1976), in which he discusses the meaning of Canadian history, the meaning of tradition, and the meaning of life in Canada as it develops through or in spite of social change. Although the first edition was written in 1965, the "Conclusion" is still uncannily accurate in many respects. Perhaps the concept of future shock has changed from what it was in the '60s, but the prophetic control of his conclusion is still apparent. Frye suggested that the overwhelming question that confronted the Canadian writer was not as much "Who am I?" as "Where is here?". In the revised version of the "Conclusion" (Frye, 1976), he addressed the newer styles of writing that approached the same question, and to a large extent these are writing and critical movements that are still evolving. In a discussion of this specific quote by Frye, Robert Kroetsch responded with "Canadians do not ask who they are. They ask, rather, if they are" (1989, p.55). These

two quotes span two decades which include some very fine prairie literature and yet both questions are centred on regional identity and regional self worth.

The original intent of the Literary History of Canada was to capture the literary element of Canadian culture and to recognize that "scholarship...grows out of a specific environment and is in part a response to it" (Frye, 1982, p. 37). In the effort to capture this literary element, the work identifies the essence of regionalism which is encapsulated in the larger question. In the "Conclusion" (1976), Frye states "Canadians were held by the land before they emerged as a people on it". (p. 79). He goes on to suggest that certain facts of history made Canada different, "Canada had no enlightenment, and very little eighteenth century" (P. 77). In explanation, he asserts that Canadian history went from the Baroque expansion directly to Romantic expansion. His now well studied metaphor of Canada in centrifugal movement suggests that this movement has only been counterbalanced by our efforts at intercommunication while we remain mired in the struggle of self-identity and various conflicts of regional identity. He contrasts this to the horizontal continuum of American history which has produced a very different scholarship, one that is rooted in the nation's unified struggle for independence. This observation was ironically paralleled by Kroetsch (1989) decades later when he commented that "... Canadian writing tends to be Jungian whereas American writing tends to be Freudian" (p. 54).

This metaphor can be extended to the regional elements of prairie literature. Perhaps the struggle for the Canadian Voice is becoming less fierce since Frye made his first observations, and the battle has become a struggle for integrity of the regional voice.

The canon of the great Canadian authors is becoming better established in Canada and growing in distinction in other countries. Voice and legitimacy of voice become irrevocably intertwined in the schooling system and the status of the now inevitable CanLit courses in Canadian universities is somewhat indicative of this. This social and historical progression has not reached the point, however, that regional literature has become legitimized let alone promoted by the curriculum.

The search for self-identity and an understanding of prairie space as a geography or state of mind is dominant in regional authorship. The west was only vicariously affected by the Baroque expansion of the east. Authors may have endeavored to imitate styles of the colonizers but the difficulties of Western Canadian living did not help provide a climate conducive to the valued styles of European seventeenth century writing. As such, prairie writers skipped this entire first phase of emulation that was present in the original Canadian style of writing. The British French conflict that dominated eastern history in the eighteenth century was remote to westerners.

When Frye suggested that "Canada had no enlightenment, and very little eighteenth century" (1976), he was speaking primarily of Eastern Canada. Oddly enough, the observation was likely more true for the prairies. As such, the prairies were not only isolated but totally detached from the conflicts and preoccupations of the east. In some ways the east became the same type of distant colonial parent to the prairies that Britain was to all of Canada. It is an historical if not literary fact that "Canadian prairie fiction is about a basically European society spreading itself across a very un-European landscape." (Harrison, 1977). The truth of the writing that came from Western Canadian experience

was not parallel to European writing. The people were struggling with the land, with themselves. Prairie inhabitants were mired in trying to understand who they were and how they could live in this harsh and hostile land. Harrison attributes at least part of the history of prairie writing to this quest. He accredits to the style of writing known as prairie realism the search to understand the unnamed land. The work of W.O. Mitchell, Martha Ostenso, Valgardson and Sinclair Ross are writers in this tradition of prairie realism that illuminate the promise as well as the threat of the western spaces.

The stylistic form of prairie realism also embraces the mythical inventions of Hodgkins, Watson and Kroetsch, the genesis fiction of Wiebe, the character authenticity rendered by Groves and Ostenso, the political poetics of Kogowa. The stylistic inventions of these writers are set deeply in prairie life in the land, space and sky that embraces a pluralism that is at once wide reaching and isolated. A land occupied by power and pawn, strength and weakness.

The west of Canada truly did hold the people, pioneer and native alike, before they emerged/merged as a people of the land. Many noted authors of western literature have based much of their writing on the assumption that prairie land determines the artistic portrayal of character. Edward McCourt and Henry Kreisel write credibly and authentically in this style of social realism, and yet Eli Mandel (1977, p. 55) asserts that to assume this as the prototypical western literature is to deny the pluralism that exists on the prairies. He also suggests that this approach may also deny old legends and myths as well as the contemporary primitivism of Kroetsch or Watson. His argument profiles the problem of the realism of western Canadian symbolism and the degree to which the

western imagination is tied to this concept.

Consider Thomas King's or Sheila Watson's work in terms of T. S. Eliot's concept of mythic method and the reader will see not only aspects of one consideration of western Canadian literature but also the manner in which certain symbols and images of a particular story become immersed in the context of regional imagination.

Social and/or prairie realism is reflected in the work of Joy Kogowa, Thomas King, Margaret Laurence, W.O. Mitchell, Guy Vanderhaeghe, and Ruby Slipperjack. These authors reflect the nature of life as it truly exists in Western Canada without excessive romance, without apology, but with a certain poetic beauty, mythic tone and dry humour that acknowledges the prairie condition.

The marginalized have long been silent on the prairies. Certainly some of this is due to the history of Western Canadians who have lived primarily within an oral tradition. But Mandel (1977) has observed that "silence...has an historical dimension, a political dimension, an aesthetic dimension" (p. 35). Perhaps it is the silence that comes from these very dimensions that is being broken only now. It is difficult to break the silence with a language of uncertainty or break the silence only to speak to the void. It is even more painful to speak and have the poetry or the anger or the imagery of transcendence misunderstood, maligned, punished or ignored.

The prairies have always lived in the cultural shadow of Eastern Canada as well as Britain. Politics on the prairies have been conservative and fundamentalist. History has prioritized British literature over the work of our own authors and as a result the telling of our history tends to be in terms of British narration. Parochial and colonial influences

and traditions have pervaded our politics and are translated through our curriculum. In view of history, politics and aesthetics, certain events and people have been ignored in the telling in order to sustain the positive if not heroic approach to Western Canadian life.

Alberta, as most of the west, is a civilization that has grown from and is still dependent upon primary resources and therefore has developed and validated arts and cultural expression very late in provincial history. This in turn affects the attitudes of those providing the funding necessary to promote Western Canadian literature. It is also true that major publishers and for that matter the bulk of reading audience reside in the east. These are both issues that contribute to the problem of encouraging and disseminating Western Canadian literature.

The marginalized people of the west are the people who are not empowered; who are unsure of the worth of their noise. They are only beginning to exult in their myths, develop a language, respect the dualities of their geography and culture and appreciate and generate a discursive strategy of writing which explains them and their lives. They are a people who even in their marginality know that they understand myth and are beginning to see the worth of their voice especially in the international arena. But they are still fighting for a way, a place and an audience for their narratives. This is a beginning but only a beginning of the emergence of the Western Canadian Voice; a voice which is not yet fully recognized in the formal system of education.

CHAPTER 5

PRAIRIE LITERATURE AND THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Prairie Complexity and Contradictions

We Canadians used to have to read everybody else's literature. All of a sudden here are some books about us! Well, maybe it's more comfortable to read about other people. Reading about us is like writing about us; you discover our own complexity, our own contradictions.

Robert Kroetsch

In a strange way this comment by a western Canadian author captures not only the enigma that surrounds writing about this region but prairie people and even the prairies themselves. As an Alberta farmer and rancher I am rooted irrevocably in the complexities of Western Canadian life. As an educator I am immersed in the controversies of the explanation of this life to high school students who share this space with me. Sometimes my silence is as pedagogical as my conscious attempts to explain.

The stories about our lives on the prairies are created identities, the metaphorical imagery that immerses the local story into the context of human culture. These stories are creations woven with evocative language; language which names and discovers and recalls and predicts. Each story teller and each story is the product of verbal and collective memories of the past, with all the accretions and deletions that come of the continued telling. But always we are manifestations of the prairies themselves. Rudy Wiebe once said that the "lies of good stories are always, perversely truer than the facts" (p.vii). In any case it is the essence of language to create with it and so the function of literature is not always to tell the absolute truth of a people or region but to somehow interpret or bring the readers to an understanding of themselves as they are at any one

moment or could have been in any particular place in time and space.

The complexities of the prairie perspective are vast, but no more than the mysterious landscape that surrounds the people who inhabit the prairies. Western Canada is mountains, coulees, wheat, oil derricks and urban bustle; it is also all the human contradictions of chaos and peace, fertility and sterility, smugness and inferiority. Ironically, these are also the contradictions that dwell in the prairie microcosm called the high school classroom. Amidst the raging complexities of exuberant youth we try to make sense of the larger world to students. For readers to truly understand western Canadian life is to make readers understand this literature in the Platonic sense of "recollection", to know something they can call out of themselves.

As with most cultures, prairie people live out of or from oral narrative. But it is in this realm as well that we perceive our inconsistencies and contradictions. We are the strange paradox of cowboy/executive, oil/grass, native/white, immigrant/settler, oppressor/oppressed and yet always simultaneously storyteller and listener. As most peoples, we are at once proud and ashamed. Like most people we are strangers in our own land at times.

Why Shoot the Teacher?

So what of the educator in the midst of the inconsistencies and complexities; what of the teacher who transmits identity whatever it may be at any one given time and place. Thought and language patterns in schools are designed to transmit culture on a superficial social level and focus the consensus of society towards acceptable standards of behaviour,

achievement and self perception which translates as success in our middle class society. Pierre Bourdieu (1971) has explored what he has defined as the "collection of commonplaces" and discovered that problems, solutions, speech patterns even discussions are guided by this drive. He suggests that "a thinker is linked to his period and identified in space and time primarily by the conditioning and background of problem approach in which and by which he thinks" (p. 191). This is an important concept in terms of this study for it exposes to us the consequences of our curriculum choices as well as the subconscious motives behind the choices (or omissions of choice) that we make. Specifically, it reveals that the attitude about, the responses to and treatment of the topic of *Western Canadian literature* in Alberta high schools is deeply embedded in the macro world of Alberta life and history, in the numerous complexities and conditioned responses of a colonized and colonizing society.

The politics, culture and belief systems of our brief recorded settler community, arrest our ability to see ourselves clearly. For it is only through a historic walkthrough and the acknowledgment of the times and values of those who went before us, that we can discover or re-cover the process, event and beliefs which are compressed into the minds of those who choose, shape and interpret identity for and with our youth.

To understand any reason at all for curriculum choice is to understand the social contracts of every moment before this one. In an Heideggerian way the choice is always in terms of the past, present and future. One reality of this in terms of *Western Canadian literature*, is the obvious lack of use of prairie literature in Alberta high school classrooms. This lack occurs with impunity since the Alberta Department of Education

does not mandate the use of any specific regional literature, nor does it provide teachers with recommended or approved addendum lists of western Canadian literature for classroom use.

But realities like this one do not completely explain the voices that emerge in the questions of this study. This is an unusual search because of the voices that ebb and flow through the issue. It is unusual in that this study is literature about literature taught by professionals of literature who in many ways are the literature that they teach.

CHAPTER 6

WHERE IS THE VOICE COMING FROM?

Yeah, realism has become counter productive to art.

Robert Kroetsch

But I still have faith in the straight story...ordinary experiences. There's still something to be said for that kind of storytelling.

Rudy Wiebe

If life on the prairies is paradoxical, so must be the heteroglossia that surrounds this life. Authors present the wide range of voice that speaks for the prairies. Authors, and in their turn educators represent and re-present the noise of the land. Readers of prairie lit can 'recollect' the wind and earth of Who Has Seen the Wind, the sound of dust storms in As For Me and My House, the water and cracking ice in Northern Lights, the rustling coulee noises in Obasan, the small town talk of Medicine River, the city cacophony of April Raintree, and the unforgettable thunk of the fatal snowball in The Deptford Trilogy. This is a noisy region that constantly speaks to its inhabitants and through its writers to those who know this experience.

Western Canadian authors speak and their characters in turn speak - of sin, loneliness, alienation from community. Sometimes they speak realistically in ordinary experience as Wiebe suggests, sometimes metaphorically and symbolically as Kroetsch does. Sometimes the author speaks with the voice of othe. Sometimes the setting is not the prairies, but in many ways the prairies will always speak through the author. The imagery that pervades the Western Canadian psyche is irrepressible.

This is also the paradox that consumes the high school teacher who is often as

strong a voice of the literature presented to youth as the literature itself. For it is the power accorded the mentor, to choose the material which transports the student and to prioritize it in the value structure of students. Oddly enough, each of the subjects interviewed seemed caught in the dilemma of according importance to collective self reflection in the teaching of English literature while at the same time not using much regional literature their classrooms.

From these interview conversations it appears that the value that a teacher would put on Western Canadian literature is somewhat connected to what they think the western voice is. In all cases, the high school teachers had not taken any western literature courses at university, nor did they remember being impacted greatly by the Western Canadian writing tradition. In every case the interviewee began (in true Socratic teaching style) by acknowledging ignorance of the subject. There were numerous reasons given for this; the ones held most in common were lack of exposure to this material as students and teachers, and lack of Department of Education emphasis on the subject. However, in each case the subject disputed these arguments by the obvious personal value s/he assigned to the prairie voice and the concession that this is an area of neglect in our programming.

One teacher remembered the prairie literature he studied to be "bland-like the prairies themselves" (Appendix A); which was reinforced by another comment that CanLit was boring and most of it is tied to plot and conflict and tied up with the tools of telling the story (Appendix B). Another teacher felt that Canadian authors feel they have to focus on the Canadian experience too much and end up stereotyping the rural and

rough Canadian life experiences too much, which was further reinforced by the comment that "students know the reality is that we are not all cowboys any more" (Appendix C).

An interesting statement by an interviewee introduced the paradox of this prevailing initial rejection of Western Canadian literature. He was discussing a Rudy Wiebe story "Where is the Voice Coming From?" and he mentioned that the protagonist's name was Almighty Voice, "who is the voice that came from the divinity in the man" (Appendix D). If it truly is a case for and of the Voice, what these teachers seem to be struggling with is that the Voice is caught between the cowboy and the divine man. The voice that is authentic expression of prairie voice.

Although I perceived strong respect for students and intense professionalism in each of the teachers, in every interview I recorded comments that spoke of teacher observations of the prairie people which may reflect the general devaluation of the Voices of this region. In response to one of my questions of our identity and our own view of ourselves as speakers, one teacher replied "inferiority complex? - if we grouped enough we'd have one" (Appendix A), another said that he saw among Western Canadian people a pervading devaluation of spiritual and aesthetic values (Appendix B), a third mentioned that students here see themselves trapped in a small corner of the world and yet, she laughingly pointed out the contradiction that they simultaneously seem to view this corner as "the only corner of the world and the ways things are done here are the only way". She also noted that eastern Canadians especially the Maritimers seem to be more proud of their traditions and more cohesive culturally. Although she astutely outlined reasons for this: their insularity and homogeneous backgrounds (Appendix C), her comments

revealed the general opinion that these teachers hold that prairie people reflect an independence and antithetically a reticence with regards to the degree of importance that they accord their Voice. Later in the interview she mentioned that "as prairie teachers we seem to think we have to go beyond home to be legitimate...we have the false fear that our culture isn't cultural enough".

In discourse these teachers have revealed an uncertainty of the voice, but also the strained if not provocative relationship of Western Canadian identity. Distaste for the stereotyping of the prairie image was common in this study. There was admitted questioning of whose Voice is the authentic Voice of Western Canada and this challenge came through the voices of these teachers. One teacher noted that most teachers are not very aware of any of the new literature being published and what we do know of he resented for being too popularized. In general this same teacher felt that many teachers see prairie literature as being of poor quality. His literary comment was that it was "contrived, it is almost written backwards", as an example he said, "if Grove's wanted to tell a story, he would dump the psychological mumbo-jumbo; tell the bloody story and go" (Appendix B). In spite of their distaste for the hackneyed ruralism or what one teacher derisively criticized the lonely farmwife scenario, I dialogically introduced questions directed to challenge what students if not much of the population appear to identify with in regional literature. Naturally this led to a discussion of western music, art and fiction. Most of the teachers, although they disliked western music themselves, recognized that students' taste often runs to what they considered a formulaic style of expression. The teacher who is also an art major, said that a common student expression

in adolescent art, the picture of the horse and the cowboy, is a style she endorses only if she feels it is an authentic expression of the student. Although there is a negative thematic value on country and western music as being inferior literary genre, a couple of the teachers said they found a small proportion of it good, and one teacher said that "when a piece is rooted in the sense of place and land, I marvel" (Appendix D). These comments point to the sense teachers have of preserving an authentic collective voice, not accurate as reality but rather authentic. It also discloses their recognition of the western Canadian identity as it manifests itself in our students, and their even grudging appreciation for the same sense of rootedness in this country.

None of the teachers appeared to put a value on the oral storytelling traditions of the area, even though the origins of literary conventions in this country seem to be grounded in this tradition. Although they all said that they do not use this style nor folk narrative tradition in their classrooms, there is some contradiction that emerges in their very style of interviewing. All interviewees were extremely colourful storytellers and I would suspect that the stories of growing up in the country emerges in one teacher's style, the stories of myth and creation in another, the stories of art in another the stories of God in the fourth. Their very style of presenting themselves belies their words of praxis which is something that the theoretical interview cannot reveal well. However, this may simply be the nature of the English teacher, to speak in the language of images, memory, and metaphors. But in every case the images, memory and metaphors were so profoundly founded in the narration of Western Canadian life.

Nonetheless, there was only one teacher who said that he would like to formally

"liberate" the story telling tradition in classrooms (Appendix D). What appears to be a prevailing attitude, however, may be explained simply by the fact that there has been little effort on the prairies to preserve this story telling tradition let alone legitimize it in the curriculum. One of the subjects said that she did a thorough search on just this topic in order to prepare a unit on folk literature and was amazed that she could find so little information. It may be, she explained, because we don't see it as important, or that we are not bound by a common cultural background or religion. Surely these are all factors in understanding the deletion of this topic in our provincial curriculum, but there is no doubt even deeper issues that have emerged from these interviews. These issues include our understanding of what it means to be a Western Canadian and what Voice not only speaks the truth about this identity but also the art that imitates this life. One of the teachers, in talking about a prairie work, Angel of the Tar Sands, said that "Wiebe points to a time when the Hebrews were still defining God. It's a thought provoking whimsical story. Our job is to define ourselves in prairie literature" (Appendix D). It seems that these teachers see the role of prairie literature if not prairie teachers is to "define ourselves" and to do so with authenticity and integrity.

And who are the prairie Voices that speak within the confines of the classrooms? In every case when I asked study subjects why they were here on the prairies they responded with some answer that considered the importance of the community in their lives. All born and raised and educated in Alberta, they generally did not speak much nor metaphorically about the personal prairie experience. None could definitively speak of why they remained here as opposed to other places. One man said he "was not connected

to a place only to people and ideas"(Appendix B). Another said she didn't expect to stay here as long as she had, a third said "our choices rationalize us"(Appendix A). When I suggested that some aspect of contradiction seemed inherent in their denial of the connection to the land itself, they still did not speak with any conviction of the tie the land held on them. Although they did say that maybe it held them more than they knew, or that they do miss the flatness or freedom of the landscape when they left. They all seemed to acknowledge the love/hate contradiction that exists in people who know their climate and land to be harsh but feel compelled to stay there. Only one subject opened up on this particular theme with an effort to explain this antithesis of feelings. He began humorously, although it was revelatory in terms of the influence of colonization in this area, by saying that "he stays here because my grandpa came here and he wasn't looking when he stopped. If he had opened his eyes in Halifax I wouldn't be here". I suspect that in terms of most of our teachers who are prairie born and raised that the colonizing influence is still so much in flux that it is hard to explain the identity of the writers, their characters, or their readers. This is a land with towns a mere century old. We are too young to have the pride of the generations before us and too old to have the pride of opening the frontier. We are sick of the stories of the conquerors and have yet to metamorphose into creatures of the changing world.

This same teacher said "I love the sun and the horizon on the prairies but the winter is too bloody long"(Appendix D). This echoes the love/hate that the other subjects had about the climate, the wind, the flatness, the sparsity of population. In a metaphor which did fix this teacher's roots if not some of the others' haunting feelings about their

choice of home, he said "still, if given a choice, it would be the prairies, the coulees.

Maybe it's like running up and down your mother's thighs. I wonder if I could leave"

(Appendix D).

CHAPTER 7

DISEASES IN THE METAMORPHOSING WORLD

I looked for stories that tell us something about ourselves, but tempt us to look past the deceptive surface; stories that sting, stories that raise questions and challenge our fears and dis-eases in this metamorphosing world.

Aritha Van Herk (1990, p.3)

The dis-ease of using Western Canadian literature in our high schools began to emerge strongly as a theme of this study, and with it grew my speculations on the theme of identity and Voice. Some strong statements emerged from my conversations with teachers about educators' lack of comfort using material that reflected our prairie lives. The incongruities of this theme are closely associated with the contradictions that emerged in interpreting the identification of Voice. In some ways our reluctance to use Western Canadian literature is merely an extension of the complexities of discerning the Western Canadian voice. Perhaps our dis-ease is that we don't want to capture the mystery of the story of this place. Perhaps it is part of the prairie psyche that we are afraid that we are a madman's dream or that our story like Hamlet's Mousetrap will trigger our own self-doubt and guilt.

A common thread of the interviews used in this study was the lack of comfort we have as educators in dealing with our own literature. Comments about prairie people by this group of teachers acknowledged that they believed westerners to be a people of strong independence contradicted by insecurity. Observations ranged through a wide spectrum; "we have a fear of discovering something more wonderful outside of here" (Appendix B), "we don't have enough confidence in our life" (Appendix C), "there is a

community attitude with an unspoken community norm; it's not even an ideology(Appendix A). I sensed that these comments were not so much negative responses to society as the articulation of teachers' frustration at being bound by regional culture.

However, there was also some personal signification inherent in the interviews which may explain the larger issue. Asked to try and articulate the discomfort we have with our own literature and identify possible reasons for it, one teacher responded that maybe it "traces back to 'no prophet is welcome in his own land'." He went on to explain himself by suggesting that "we see a Ukrainian pumping out his story and a native pumping out his story, and we think nobody has seen me yet" (Appendix D). This is an interesting place to begin talking about the lack of confidence that teachers appear to have about regional literature and the uneasy feeling they have about reading, let alone teaching about the personal and social dilemmas that evolve from this region. Each of the interviewees mentioned at some point in the conversation the difficulty they had ratifying only one utterance of experience that speaks for the roots of this area. Perhaps it is because we are too close to the many voices of pain that call out; perhaps we empathize with but do not prioritize the many voices we hear in the daily arena of the classroom. It may be that we are too guilty or too embarrassed as educators who recognize the full ramifications of colonization, to elevate one voice of pain above others or to speak of any concern with full knowledge that we are at once oppressors as well as oppressed. One teacher said that "literature has to rise above the pain of personal experience to the universality of art" (Appendix D) which seemed to speak well for comments that were

made by other subjects: "that's something we can assume, if we talk about the prairies it's hardships, isolation and loneliness" (Appendix C), "western lit is like the 'lonely farm wife' which isn't there any more, people have to be able to see themselves for the literature to be universal" (Appendix B), "the Wasteland...western Canadian literature makes us look at ourselves and it's not always good" (Appendix A).

In each case I perceived the uneasiness that teachers seem to have with the issues that express the prairie experience. There was a tendency to look for more universal material to work with, a disregard for the platitudes of theme that most people associate with prairie literature, and an expression and consensus that Western Canadian literature has yet to grow up. And yet, this last comment from Appendix A identifies what I think to be part of the paradox of this particular self reflection. Most prairie teachers, confronted with the not always attractive aspects of our cultural and political history, as well as the unyielding hold of classical tragic literature on curriculum development and implementation of the majority of the senior high school courses, choose to use the themes that might illuminate our own characters from peoples and history that are remote from us.

One teacher, while acknowledging that regional themes are important, best explained this when he said "western literature is reflective of the inner landscapes, the barrenness of soul - who wants to identify with that?" (Appendix A). Although important and relevant literature has traditionally concerned itself with these very themes it seems that put in our own regional context teachers believe students will find the themes of literature, "loneliness, struggle, nature, being against Big Brother down south,

nature, infancy, bust/boom/bust/boom sound bland to students, and too familiar.”

(Appendix A). It seems in analysis that teachers find the regional experience to be too navel-gazing to be of value for study either because they perceive that it will not be germane to the lives of their students (albeit good for them to read), or because they as consumers themselves do not regard the themes or style of the literature with any reverence.

And yet these are the very themes that compose what teachers verify as art in the older more accepted canons of English literature. At one point, one of the teachers said that if you could translate Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur" into a myth it would be Wiebe's story Angel of the Tar Sands. This superimposition of a selection from the established canon on newborn work from the prairies reveals not only the scope and vision that our educators do have for understanding and working with prairie literature in terms of the universal, but also their innate respect for the work of our authors. Nevertheless, contradiction rages in the teachers themselves. These very beings of the prairies see at once in their own stories the potential to be at once hero and villain. These teachers reveal even within their discomfort using western Canadian literature that they recognize the beauty of their own literature and country as well as their disdain for the cliched troubles and stereotyped characters of this area.

Another theme that emerged in analysis was the association of prairie literature to pain; pain in the created characters, in the authors, in prairie people themselves. One of the interviewees said that he thought Joy Kogowa embarked on the right idea in her work Obasan because the work articulated the pain of prairie people. He commented that "the

bitterness in Obasan was not unique" (Appendix D). He went on to talk about the pain of growing up on the prairies "in my town people begrudged each other". This pain was echoed in the other interviews in different ways. One teacher recalled that when she started school in a prairie city, having moved from eastern Canada, she was taken to be native because of her dark skin and long dark hair. She recounted the negative comments made to her so many years ago and the surprise that she remembered having about the whole incident. She had come from a more integrated and diverse cultural community in the eastern school she had attended and she was amazed at the amount and kind of pain that prairie people imposed on one another. As a result of experiences like this one she said she has always considered material and approach very carefully in the classroom (Appendix C).

Several conversations centred on the native student who is searching for identity in the public school classrooms of the prairies. One person stated, "What happened to me in my youth is what is happening to them now; I was also required to adopt a culture...there is a tremendous anger and fear in trying to root in this culture" (Appendix D). I believe the empathy shown by this teacher was reflected in all my conversations concerning the care the educator must take in curriculum selection. These teachers told many stories which signified their concern for students and they often mentioned incidents which required sensitivity of selection, consideration of the comfort level of students, and the thoughtful identification of potentially painful issues in the natural course of their dialogue with me.

In the flow of conversation all of these teachers talked about how "problems

stemming from culture, religion and politics seem to be stronger here" (Appendix B), and all spoke of the fundamentalism, back to the basics, and/or redneck philosophy, that pervades curriculum decisions and even the level to which they could work with certain ideas in their own classrooms. One of the male teachers indicated that there is a male chauvinism in the western community that he finds still a raw emotional issue but is willing to challenge. However, the same teacher said that the cultural suppression of homosexuality would be a taboo that he would avoid in the classroom. This pain, he admonished "is not worth the fight...unlike the women's issue it has not developed into a cluster of things energized" (Appendix A). Although he laughed at this and commented "pretty Jungian eh?", he articulated another of the `taboos' of the Western Canadian standard that is not, cannot be violated by most teachers.

It seems that the dis-ease that exists stems from the complexities and contradictions of the subject and the subjects and is inextricably bound to the proximity of the two.

CHAPTER 8

LITERARY TYRANNY AND OPPRESSION OF VOICE

Canon and Curriculum

I heard about the job. Bad break. Government's got no sense of humour.
Thomas King

Within our dis-ease is the insinuation that prairie literature does not have a canon that is recognizable as important universal literature. English teachers metaphorically live by the canons of their trade. "I think British and American lit have a stranglehold with their canons on English studies-there probably is a Canadian canon as well but I'm not sure what it is"(Appendix A). The canon issue is one that appears to move and shake every teacher in the province. The questions become the same for every English teacher who makes selections for the classroom: What is the literature of most worth? What is the curriculum of most worth?

Michael Posner (1992) suggests that "what schools and universities teach in the end is not so much literature or philosophy or politics but values ". He considers Arthur Schlesinger's opinion that "to eviscerate the classical canon ...is evidence of multiculturalism run amok" (p.C8). This introduces some of the dissension that surrounds the issue of mandating not only prairie literature in its entirety but all the multi-cultural voices of Western Canadian inhabitants. In effect, to not include and thereby validate the multi-cultural voice in the canon is to endorse and legitimize a literature devoid of the history and validation of the colonizers.

My study exposed or perhaps reflected all the same variance that plagues the larger issue of canon. In analysis of the transcripts of the interviews I see two problems that emerge in the issue of the canons. One is the general issue of legislating prairie literature in the Alberta curriculum and the other is the more sensitive issue of dealing with minority literature and/or writing that attempts to deal with the aspects of our Western Canadian history that is unsavoury.

One teacher fused the two issues when he said that there is almost a theme of breaking open in Western Canadian literature with the introduction of minority writing (Appendix A). He was fully prepared to support what Posner calls the 'pluralistic imperative'. He supported a government mandate, citing the 40% Can content in the Alberta English curriculum as a way of trying to support Canadian authors and likened it to the directive on Canadian programming ruled by the CRTC on radio and television. He maintained that literature doesn't have the same thread of identity in literary arts that the CBC has provided for media. He even exhorted that the "CBC was the last Canadian voice". In this conversation he weighed the possible loss of the Canadian identity against legislating use in the classrooms of the province. He echoed other the teachers' opinions that they were fearful of a mandate that would result in unqualified or unprepared teachers dealing with these issues especially issues that reflected some of the controversial or painful aspects of our society.

The pluralistic imperative was an issue that was far from attaining consensus among the interviewees. Both sides of the issue: preserving the sanctity of the classical canon versus the pluralistic imperative emerged in the interviews. The theme of

emancipation of voice became discussion of great interest to each of the participants of the study. Many times I heard teachers speak to the very same issue raised by Henry Gates, Afro-American Studies scholar, who rejects the high canon because it stands for "an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented and the unrepresentable" (Posner, p. C8).

Each of these Southern Alberta teachers spoke to this same matter in terms of recognition of the "voiceless" that they encountered every day. In various ways and intensity these teachers discussed the voice of the controversial issues that surface in the material that we as educators deal with in the lives we touch and the literature that represents these lives. "You have to be gutsy about this stuff" one teacher said, he went on to talk about teaching different issues through literature in his classroom and concluded that part of "truth" of the history of people is the that problems and controversy have to be accepted. This issue of being "gutsy" also surfaced in other conversations. This particular speaker rationalized his aggressive approach by his strong belief that the presentation of both sides no matter what each side revealed was the key to successfully teaching sensitive material. His rationale was the ethical and pedagogical responsibility we have to face our past; "to overcome our past prejudices or cultural indecencies is worthy of study" (Appendix B)

However, this aggressive teaching approach was unusual. The other teachers agreed in both theory and discourse that care must be taken: "I remember being struck for the first time by what natives face when I read Rhyga's plays" (Appendix C), "if kids have just come off a reservation, Shakespeare is alien to them", (Appendix D). But in most

cases the issue of the canons became a dilemma in terms of actual classroom practice. Most teachers were very concerned about the comfort level of the students in the room and in three cases the acceptance level of the community. Most seemed anxious about the responsibility immanent to communicative praxis. They felt being of the culture they speak gave them more scope and realization of the ramification of their words in the classroom and/or the power of their pronouncement on issues they recognize to be at once delicate and powerful. The "stories that sting, stories that raise questions and challenge our fears" (van Herk, 1990) are at once the obligation and the curse of the English teacher.

This paradox became more apparent as I listened to teachers prioritize the issues that they would or could handle in the classroom. Each teacher had stories and personal narratives of particular incidents that required dealing with the subjugated, voiceless, the invisible the unrepresented and the unrepresentable. In each case I was also aware of the vulnerability of these teachers as they had handled the situations or issues in full knowledge of the fragility of the topic as well as their own reputation or tenuous position in the community or with a particular school board.

Echoing Schlesinger's opinion that isolating ethnicity only exaggerates and isolates the minority and "drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities" (Posner, 1992, p.C8), one teacher said that "we may stir up prejudice that is already there...it would be terrible for them, they are trying to fit in and we're pointing out how they are different" (Appendix C). She went on to say that if a minority group were well assimilated she would have no problem being specific about the material.

In every case, I sensed a disdain for using multicultural literature only because it is multicultural or because we live in a melting pot rather than because it is what is considered to be good literature. Another teacher believes that tokenism and "deliberate selection and liberation of voices just sets the speakers up on pedestals...it creates more distance" (Appendix D). However, these teachers are also very well aware of the consumers of this province considering the language they used about them; redneck outlook, strong fundamentalism, unspoken cultural norm, bitterness among cultural groups, elitism. In this study I perceived that the ironies that occur between the discourse of the issue and the realities of practice are an ever present dilemma for the classroom teacher. The variables are constantly changing and the emotions and ideology are highly charged which intensifies the complexities that circumscribe the classroom teacher.

Similar ironies exist with regards to the concept of mandating material on the curriculum. The theme of emancipation and tyranny extends to this issue as well. Not only must teachers consider the value accorded the selections made but they must also consider the power accorded certain people or groups who make these selections. Quoting Dylan Thomas, "a guy writing on spindrift pages not for any rewards", one instructor felt that "you have added to literature a mercenary nature when you mandate it" (Appendix D). This sense of the mercenary evolved from my re-reading of the interviews. Teachers are somewhat resigned to the remorseless sense of dollars and cents (if not sense) on what they teach and who has power over the matter.

In spite of these educators saying that they appreciated provincial authorization and the protection provided by the existence of the Alberta curriculum, there was a strong

voice from these teachers in favour of the liberation of their own voices as teachers rather than technicians. Technician was a term that came up in dialogue several times and indicated a definite concern among these educators. They feel that as scholars, as educators, their professionalism should be trusted more than it is and more than it is allowed for in the provincial curriculum. They believe that the classroom teachers should be used more as consultants in decision making, that the English teacher is the best judge of what students need to hear even, or perhaps especially, in the case of controversial issues.

However, contradictions abound in this area as well. The same teachers who desired autonomy in curriculum matters, feared possible mis-use by other teachers and there was a hesitancy about the extent to which new or beginning teachers could deal with this pedagogical emancipation.

There was a strong feeling that a mandated regional canon might romanticize prairie literature. These teachers expressed strong indignation that the words of Western Canada would or should be popularized or institutionalized. Nearly every interviewee felt that the literature must and in many cases has come of age on its own. These teachers seemed to reflect the feeling that if Western Canadian literature were mandated, other literature which was in their minds more important literature could be jeopardized. They believed that reserving a number of positions on curriculum lists for selections of regional literature would begin to diminish or devalue the classical canon or at the very least jeopardize the use of literature they considered to be more valuable (for any number of reasons) to their programs. But at the same time they all expressed that since it is not at

this time mandated, there seems to be "no lobby group for western lit...we have a tendency to stand still; we don't take initiative about ourselves and our literature" (Appendix C). Even the teacher that saw the value of the CRTC media mandate and talked knowledgeably and well of the value of Access Radio as the Voice of Alberta literature, could not wholeheartedly endorse a curriculum mandate for regional literature. Each of the teachers were vehement about retaining the maximum amount of autonomy within the approved lists. There was a strong directive from this group to reject the pluralistic imperative as one teacher said, "it is important to engage in self-reflection but not if it is acquired through censorship and mandate...that is re-writing and it's a form of tyranny" (Appendix D). Some of this feeling I perceived to be driven by the regard often held by English teachers for the classical canon but I also believe it to be driven by what I interpret to be the feeling of oppression that the teacher often feels when choices and mandates are government initiated and controlled.

Subjects reacted the same way to the idea of changing the canons for reasons of political correctness. In nearly every conversation, I detected the value system in the speaker that embraced the unedited, unabridged versions of Voice. This may simply be a general characteristic or posture of teachers who are trained to teach English but I sensed a strong sense of moral authenticity emerge in my analysis of this theme. This was evidenced on two levels. The first was the need that teachers saw for presenting literature from this area, without re-writing the past, altering history or the language of history for political correctness. Rather, they opted to present our tragedies with truth and self awareness. And, second, these teachers felt that as professional experts in their field as

well as in their schools they should be able to enjoy the autonomy of deciding for their own particular programs. On more than one occasion I heard a teacher bemoan the fact or expand an opinion that teachers are becoming more like technicians than scholars or professionals. They believe that ultimately this alteration in teacher identity will affect the legitimacy of choices made for school programs.

This theme of tyranny and oppression introduces some interesting analysis because it encapsulates so much of the paradox of teaching Western Canadian literature in the west. It exposes literature with a territorialism that is different than its geographical or physical or political or moral regionalism and yet at once incorporates all of these. It is in itself the microcosm of the simultaneous reticence and exposure that teachers have about the land, and the people. In a way it shows much of the dis-ease that teachers have in using their own literature by showing all the ways that the discourse as well as the praxis is in-valid or not valid as well as invalid as a result of the crippling way we have dealt with the subject.

Discovery and Disclosure

The conversations that I engaged in with teachers of English provided a base for uncovering, discovering and disclosing ideas, viewpoints of praxis for me and hopefully for the subjects of the study. I was also aware as we talked and themes of analysis emerged that we were also recovering a lost respect for our own prairie words. van Manen considers thematic analysis in terms of that which is embedded in text and how it evolves from the text. He suggests that "Theme is the process of insightful invention,

discovery, disclosure" (p. 88). It is through this combination of unveiling the text that I have tried to capture some sense of my original quest.

I can see emerging from these conversations that all motif and theme radiates from the voice not just of the teacher, the system or even the writers but the true and authentic collective Voice of prairie people and all that means to these teachers and subsequently their students. The fundamental, perhaps overriding element that emerged in this work is the metaphorical and literal use of Voice. It is the voice of the weather, the land, the history, the fears of people who live here. It is also the literal words spoken in the classroom designed by government mandate and translated through the curriculum. Sometimes the metaphorical stance is contrary to the actual words the teacher speaks to students. Discourse and practice are often revealed in binary opposition. The beliefs and opinions of teachers are at times in opposition with the formal stance of their practice.

Certainly, then, one serious aspect to be explored is the uncertainty of Voice. Listening to the stories of these educators heightened the dilemma that consumes them of what they believe to be the authentic voice. This extends to the image of the prairie inhabitant and the prairie author. Their concern for the search of the authentic resonates through the transcripts of the interviews of this study. Teachers were especially concerned about the presentation of the stereotyped citizen, the romanticized native son, the legitimization of pain - who owns that pain and who has the right to speak of it.

Inherent in this set of contradictions is the recognition of the dis-ease of the identity in prairie life. In thoughtfully regarding this uneasiness, these teachers began to explore ideas or themes of the "breaking out" of Western Canadian literature.

The recognition of the repression of the classroom teachers voice in the business of education uncovered some interesting paradoxes and inconsistencies in the power and authority accorded the voice of the teacher. The same teacher must in turn answer to history, community, students, and government as well as to the soul, the heart, the mind and God. It is a tall order for a teacher and it is particularly relevant to the work of the English teacher to be cognizant of the privilege and responsibility of representing a post-colonial stance with candour and accuracy.

Other revealing themes centre on the emergence of the oppression of students, of minority voice in our writing, of rights and privilege of stakeholder. Within this analysis of text I see insightful invention on the part of these prairie teachers. They use literature always in the essence of self discovery but yet are the first to acknowledge self doubt, self contradiction, even self deception when speaking of the lack of prairie literature in Alberta high schools. In a more practical vein, I see the insightful invention that surrounds the classroom teachers use of mandated materials and the emphasis they place on established canons whatever they may be in a specific school division.

Hans-Georg Gadamer in his work Reason in the Age of Science notes that "Practice consists of choosing, of deciding for something and against something else, and in doing this a practical reflection is effective, which is itself dialectical in the highest measure" (1981, p. 81). This is perhaps the quintessence of the possibility of change, that teachers constantly engage in the dialectic of the potential and the conventions by which they live.

Prophets from the Prairies

Leonard Cohen wants to be bare knuckled and smash whatever illusions people have about the time in which they're living and what they can expect.

Irving Layton

The purpose of this thesis was not to institute a Western Canadian canon, nor was it to convince teachers to use their own regional literature. I searched for: insight into the question I had set for myself, some good conversation with colleagues about the stuff we do, and whatever revelation I could uncover of what emerges as important in the Voice of prairie teachers and prairie literature. To that end I have discovered and so the pilgrimage has been successful. But along the way teachers revealed important things that I wish could be heard by a larger audience so that these educators could find realization of some of their beliefs and ideas could happen in their world of teaching.

I think there is the ability in teachers' voices to articulate identity on levels that has never been formally addressed. The title of one of the sections of this study Where is the Voice Coming From? has greatly manifested itself in the voices of these four teachers. The source of the voice in each case is strong and deliberate and considered. But it is these same teachers that feel the pressures of a society whose people have not decided yet if they want to talk about themselves and if they do, how and when. Perhaps Cohen, who comes from a more recorded element of our identity has perceived part of what we need to initiate our own self exploration, perhaps we "need to be bare knuckled and smash whatever illusions" we have about what our voice is, about what needs to be said about Western Canada, about what we are allowed to say, about what would be

romantic to say. Irving Layton called Cohen the "Jeremiah in Tin Pan Alley" (Pearson, 1993, p. 48). Maybe as we grow older with the colonizing forces of this world, our anxiety will diminish and our voice will be stronger and more effective and we will become more comfortable speaking out from our past. Possibly the prairie teacher has the power to be the Jeremiah of the west; the authentic voice that speaks of our literature with pride and conviction and the knowledge that it is true of a culture in flux. Perhaps, the Western Canadian teacher is the prophet in the tin pan alley of the western cities, but also of our wheat fields, our mountains and our plains, of our loneliness, our guilt and our identity.

CHAPTER 9

PERSPECTIVES, EXCAVATIONS AND HORIZONS

Perspectives

I began this study with the perception that there was a deficiency in the amount and the manner of presentation of prairie literature in the Alberta classroom. I assumed that I would find clear cut and understandable reasons for this lack which would evoke logical, realistic options once they were identified. My search became a form of cultural archeology of the relationship between voice and culture on global, national and regional levels. I finished the study by realizing my initial perception was true but solutions were far from obvious nor could they be easily implemented. It also became apparent to me that the study had become a dig and that perhaps discovering the mystery that surrounds teachers in process of self-discovery and pedagogical praxis was in itself both question and find. It would be superficial to say the lack of prairie literature in the classroom could be resolved simply or even that solutions should be imposed on a question that may be contingent on a natural social progression through a course of post-colonialism. But on a basic level of understanding, there are certain suggestions that have emerged from this study that offer new approaches or possibilities from within the framework of the quest.

A number of possibilities have surfaced which illuminate the whole topic of the responsibility of the teacher in creation or recognition of regional voice. For those looking for practical direction in this subject area, the observations of the educators who were interviewed would be invaluable. At the very least, it has been valuable to me to understand the context of this exploration, to uncover the sense of my own regionalism.

Excavations

I have unearthed some very straightforward observations and criticisms of the use of Western Canadian literature in our school system in my conversations with educators. Teachers were not reluctant to speak of the system as it affects their work in the classroom or the documents that guideline their attitudes and course material. Their forthright responses reveal a number of issues which if attended to could improve the recognition of prairie literature and encourage a clearer understanding of our regional voice as it is located in national identity.

Interviewees have indicated that teachers would like more direction from the government, publishers and universities: "teachers are not aware of it ... I wasn't trained in it." (Appendix B); "publishers don't present it", "I have a brother teaching university comparative lit and he says it's time to break out but we don't do it" (Appendix A); "it is a political curriculum. if you have a right wing government (as we do) it will especially affect the humanities", "the Department of Education should publish supplemental lists that have been reviewed and approved that include the western Canadian selections but this isn't cost efficient" (Appendix C); "most of us are classically trained and this influences our choices" (Appendix D).

All of these teachers have acknowledged that they do not have enough formal training in prairie literature to feel comfortable legitimizing such study in the classroom; all identified the fact that publishers do not put an emphasis on publishing or selling Western CanLit. Every one of them noticed the lack of ratification of this literature in the

Alberta curriculum guides and the Teacher Resource Manual. This poses an external problem for the classroom teacher in that publishers, government committees and university curriculum are perceived to be, and in fact are far removed from the influence of most classroom teachers. Based on the information discussed in this study, I can assume it to be true that a mandate by the Alberta Department of Education to include more regional literature, an effort by government and curriculum committees to balance the Canadian literature component with prairie literature on provincial curriculum, and a focus in universities to train teachers more effectively in their own writing traditions would not only strengthen the background of specific teachers but ultimately affect following generations of teachers with regards to their respect for Western Canadian literature. If the evolution that occurred following the mandate concerning Canadian content in the Alberta curriculum were to repeat itself in terms of Western Canadian literature certain projections could be made. Once mandated by the Department of Education, usage would likely follow the same course of development and procedures that followed the mandate of Canadian content. That is, proof of the effect government can play in increasing content usage can be envisioned by observing what happened to the development of CanLit. After the implementation of the Canada Council recommendations and more regionally the introduction of the Heritage Fund to develop CanLit, there resulted a greater use of and greater respect for Canadian authors and works.

Woodcock (1992) identified the decade stretching from 1957 when the Canada Council was founded to be the most significant time for Canadian writers. This was a

decade that offered public support for the arts and especially for publication of Canadian writing. This resulted in what Northrop Frye coined the “verbal explosion of the sixties”. No doubt, with similar funding and attention the same pattern would likely occur with Western Canadian literature.

But as simple as this sounds, this study shows the paradox that exists in educators who exhibit reluctance about the use of any form of mandated curriculum. It also presumes a clientele that is different in that they have at least been able to observe or be aware of the events of the last thirty or forty years during which there was a ripening and growing awareness of CanLit. As such, they have had ample opportunity to recognize the possibility of a similar emergence and transference in the evolution of prairie literature. In spite of this, educators remain reluctant about mandated material, and they still exhibit reticence about their own writing tradition.

Certainly it is preferable that educators be a critical part of the process should the government choose to mandate this material. Likewise, this same ratification from educators is necessary to petition action from the Alberta Teachers Association or to sell the concept to the public or to even buy into the concept enough to use this material in their own classrooms.

Social awareness and appreciation of western literature which evolves from the grassroots is certainly possible and probably evolving right now in any case, albeit at a very slow pace. Perhaps, for the clientele for the next century who will live on the prairies this is a satisfactory if not a preferred style of evolution. Woodcock (1987) has noted derisively that "at present there is a tendency to oppose regionalism to nationalism"

(p.23). Although certainly Quebec has proven a late date exception to this observation, Woodcock has acknowledged in Canadians that propensity to see Canada's geography and writing tradition shaped primarily by history. In reality it is the specific land, climate and passions of the particular regions that shape the life and culture of people.

As for publishers, they can only be influenced by public demand and/or profit. The hope teachers hold that publishing companies might take a leadership role in this matter is futile. Such involvement would become reasonable or possible to publishing companies only as a result of high demand or high profit margin, both of which are unlikely at this time. Again, to return to the CanLit mandate, government support of regional publishers played a large part in the emergence of CanLit publishing. This entire process would likely repeat itself if a mandate model were to be initiated the same way for prairie literature. There would be an immediate call by publishers for material centred on Western Canadian literature if these companies were assured of Department of Education recognition and subsequently a large market across the province. As well, it is true that publishers would increase their focus on regional publishing were the Department of Education to ratify and thereby guarantee expanded sales of this literature. But again, I am theorizing in a realm which must acknowledge the controversy that surrounds teachers' attitudes towards mandated literature, a business market that could realize a profit and an economy that could sustain such production.

And so these are workable, practical responses that could make a difference but are unfortunately of such a nature that the classroom teacher feels distanced and disenfranchised in the decision making process and powerless to effect any change in

curriculum. Ironically, I believe if the commitment were there, teachers could have much more effect than they believe on these institutions. But it appears that they are immobilized by their concept of voice, their concern for freedom of selection in curriculum and their predetermined views of education of great worth which has been formed in a colonial background.

Every one of the teachers interviewed had strong views about mandating literature: "you have added to literature a mercenary nature when you mandate it" (Appendix D); "we don't have a lobby group for it... the one teacher I remember using it was an American teacher, she thought it was really important." (Appendix C); "Western Canadian Lit has to grow up on its own... without the glitz and without being mandated or affected." (Appendix A), "It's not our job to find and sell the stuff" (Appendix B). In spite of the self effacement and reluctance they display in these comments, these are people who take great pride in their work, their roots and their narratives. Beyond an understanding of the topic and these particular people, this study helped me recognize, and accommodate the inherent conflict that I also have shared with these teachers about the antithesis that exists in teaching prairie literature.

Horizons

On one hand educators strongly exhibit their pride in Western Canada but this is countered by the colonial mentality that pervades all of Canada and therefore seems to control the value that educators afford the literature or sounds that emerge from regional literature. By sheer virtue of the difficulty Western Canadian people have of

understanding the prairie voice and the present lack of mission in teachers to make changes, developing the study of Western Canadian literature will, I suspect, have to evolve at a rate controlled by the development of Canada's post-colonial awareness and the degree to which teachers take ownership for their profession.

Coming out of an historical, philosophical and religious tradition established as ours has been, many teachers are caught primarily in the classical international canon, then the Canadian canon and perhaps somewhere down the road an acknowledgement or an appreciation for regional literature. The potential for such respect does exist in that we are prairie regionalists; we have "formed perhaps quite unconsciously a deep attachment to its landscape and speech, its traditional customs, its food and drink, its songs and jokes." (Priestly, 1966, 1.13). Educators will eventually see the horizons of the prairies are not the same as the ones we have been trained to see and that it is possible to view our position as one which shows western Canadians simply coming to an understanding of the prairie voice within the larger and established canon.

Perhaps the next stage after awareness should be rooted in Freire's participatory research (1984) in that those who believe themselves to be voiceless are given voice. Of course it is a privilege we must afford ourselves since in a strange way we are our own oppressors. Involved in our own emergence or transformation we can use our own voices. We can, as William Carlos Williams as termed it, lift our own environment to expression by exploring the themes of our lives on the prairies and by exploring the way these lives are represented in literature. Stephens has suggested that "the garrison mentality so obvious in the writing of Eastern Canada ... is not prominent in that of

Western Canada." (1973, p. 2). This can in a way be connected to the landscapes (both mental and physical) of the land and people of the West. It is a world of overwhelmingly big sky, natural disaster, expanses, mountains and yet we are an area of narrative more so than poetry or perhaps it is that our narrative is so very poetic. We are after all a world of oral story telling, on ball diamonds, rodeos, bars, family reunions, hunting or camping trips and past and present versions of the box social. And as for the land? It is lonely, expansive but noisy. As Stephens says "it is poetry they speak in their prose, an elemental voice that shouts to the rest of the world that survival is better than no life at all" (P.6). But this is our voice and as Margaret Laurence has said "the truth about ourselves must be divined".

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APPENDIX I

Prairie Literature Interview Guide Sheet

1. Biographical Component:

This component will explore the background of teachers and will include such topics as living on the prairies, public schooling, teacher education and teacher understanding of the minority considerations of prairie life.

- a. Where have the teachers lived and trained?
- b. Have they taken courses at a Western Canadian university?
- c. How many Canadian studies courses have they taken and have they taken a Western Canadian literature or history course?
- d. What themes of literature would best reflect the life they live and the work they do?
- e. How often have they worked on curriculum committees or any project that would enable them to influence the authorization of materials used in Alberta classrooms.
- f. How would they characterize the student community that they serve?

2. Attitude Component:

This component is designed to ascertain biases and/or prejudices that may influence teachers' choices. This section will question such controversial issues as the German prisoner of war camps, Japanese evacuation camps, native literature, aboriginal creation mythology.

- a. What (if any) topics would you be uncomfortable discussing or handling in the classroom?
- b. What kind of controversial issues would you be uncomfortable discussing in the classroom?
- c. Do you perceive there to be a literary culture worthy of use in the classroom? If so, what is it?
- d. Do you perceive there to be any cultural suppression of voice in this geographical area?
- e. Are you familiar with or concerned about romanticized literature in the approved materials?
- f. Do you feel pressured by certain parties to avoid or use certain materials in the classroom?

3. Usage Component:

This component would include questions that would prove how much of curriculum time is consciously spent on prairie literature and for what reasons. If Western Canadian material is used the teacher is questioned whether the material selected is primary, secondary or enrichment literature or if it is in some cases completely off curriculum and simply a reflection of student or teacher literary taste.

- a. How familiar are you with the Alberta curriculum requirements of Canadian content?
- b. How many western Canadian works do you teach at the high school grade levels?
- c. How many Western Canadian films and or other medial programs do you implement in the classroom?
- d. Which publishers do you order from and do you receive any specific material focussed on prairie literature from any publishers?
- e. How, if at all, do you use folk literature and oral story telling of the prairies in teaching high school?
- f. How sensitive are you to elements of conservatism, religion or ethnic groups?

APPENDIX II - A

INTERVIEW A

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

My father was the first of his family to get off the farm so as a child I remember spending a lot of time on the farm...I think I am more tied to the farm than I know.

Choices rationalize us, therefore choosing to be here as opposed to somewhere else (like a city) says something, maybe it's the sense of community and of course my teaching - I don't mean community in teaching but in other aspects of my life.

I went to school in Saskatoon; I was in the agriculture faculty - I was studying horticulture. I am taking my graduate degree at Lethbridge so I guess my schooling is definitely Western Canadian.

I took one CanLit course and was disappointed; it was bland (like the prairies themselves). I took no specific course in western Canadian Lit nor prairie lit - the course I did take had a diversity of regionalism.

I was heavily schooled in New Criticism that is: literary theory and analysis and I feel it doesn't fit Western Canadian literature as well as it does British or American literature. Western Canadian literature is not as compressed and as dense with symbolism. For example, As For Me and My House.; I remember studying it and the symbolism was

more extended and descriptive than in other literature.

I think British and American lit have a stranglehold with their canons on English studies-but there probably is a CanLit canon.

There is a theme of breaking open in Western lit because English literature is dissolving with the introduction of minority writing. Some of it (minority writing) may be crumbly but then it won't hold up.

Are we coming of age? I have a brother teaching university comparative lit and he says the department says it's time to break out but we don't do it. It's like a classroom, we validate brilliant conversation but it can't be legitimized - I mean a student like S.H. asks a brilliant, interesting question but because of the system I can't explore it the way I'd like to.

Our system creates a validation theory.

Do we have an inferiority complex? - if we grouped enough we'd have one.
There's also the conservatism out here.

Major themes I see in Western Canadian literature would be: barrenness, loneliness, struggle, nature, being against Big Brother down south (even some of that is

nature), infancy, bust/boom/bust/boom, inner struggle especially women (The Cat's Eye became popularized and became an institution).

The themes of western lit sound bland to students and too familiar.

I don't class western music anywhere near western literature I think it is Nashville popularism, faddism except that it's almost like a canon/ you don't knock that stuff they think it's local.

When teaching student teachers at the university I found they didn't know enough, when it came up, to even ask questions about the 40% Canadian content component in the curriculum. They focussed on if it's there how do I teach it? Where is it? How do I get some stuff to teach on it? Nor do I have a conviction to this subject. I always say that dentists are mechanics and teachers are technicians we train the profession that way.

ATTITUDE COMPONENT

With regards to biases and prejudices I would consider the community comfort level. I found that women's issues is one area that I have encountered. I had one student say "Cut it out with that women's literature stuff". I think there is male chauvinism in the community.

On most issues even if it were accepted on curriculum, I would consider student

comfort and maturity.

We should be dealing with some of the tough issues (the German prisoner of war issues touch my background) but I still would weigh the comfort level versus the risk factor.

I believe that I could deal with any risk level on most topics. One that I wouldn't use is the homosexuality issue - it's not worth the fight. I have a tolerance for the other issues and even this issue but it's taboo in this region and that has never been admitted. There is a cultural suppression of homosexuals here and unlike the women's issue it has not developed into a cluster of things energized (this is pretty Jungian) but it has not energized enough yet to break through.

USAGE COMPONENT

In terms of community ideology, there is a community attitude with an unspoken community norm; its not even an ideology.

With regards to Alberta Curriculum mandates, I think with the 40% CanLit mandate they were trying to find a way to support Canadian authors like the CRTC did with radio and television. CBC used to do that for the radio and television arts; it was the thread for Canadian identity in the arts. Literature doesn't have that same kind of thread. I think the CBC was the last Canadian voice.

In a way CKUA has been the Alberta voice especially since they anthologize literature on Anthologies.

I do think, though, that Western Canadian lit has to grow up on its own.

I really don't see folk literature, western music, or oral story telling as important as literature.

I don't use Western Canadian lit much, I don't think it is used much at all, publishers don't present it.

But I would hate to see the literature popularized as institutionalized canons the way American literature is, or western music which is almost faddism. We can't even put western music down around here because it goes so deep. I think this is because people identify with things outside themselves. You see, western literature is reflective of the inner landscapes the 'barrenness of soul'. Who wants to identify with that?

How can you popularize something anti-popularized (opposite from what they want to believe).

CanLit in general is introspective and Western Canadian literature is especially. The Wasteland - Western Canadian literature makes us look at ourselves and it's not

always good.

I think we should let the literature stand on its own and this is happening and without the glitz and without being mandated or affected.

I think there are many teachers very well equipped to teach it and many I'd be afraid to have touch it. It wouldn't do any good to mandate specific material if we were taking a chance that it would not be taught well.

APPENDIX II - B

INTERVIEW B

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

I have lived on the prairies all my life and was educated here; it is the ties to my family that keep me here. Whether I lived in B.C. the N.W.T. or down east I could be equally happy. My roots are here. I was born here and my connections are here.

I don't love flat land or wind; I am a man who does not attach himself to a place. It might have something to do with memories, I attach myself to people and purpose. I turned down a central office job recently in Saskatoon because I believe smaller communities with Catholic schools need somebody with my background.

Western Canadian students are characterized by a lack of identity. They are driven; they are goal oriented towards money and being noticed and appreciated.

There is a lack of willingness to develop any aspect of themselves if it doesn't get them a house or car or material goods.

I see a devaluation of the spiritual and aesthetic in the Western Canadian people.

ATTITUDE COMPONENT

We should face our history here. People always act and react as a result of our past

especially if we have overcome it. To overcome our past prejudices or cultural indecencies is worthy of study.

With regards to teaching native literature: there's a lot on native treatment by the missionaries right now. Literature has been written on both sides but there seems to be mostly a onesidedness (of the cruelty by missionaries and the Church). I have taught this subject because in order to resolve in the modern world the differences and sides have to be brought to be. The truth of the existence of the problem has to be accepted. Really, this is no different than the abortion issue or other like controversial issues, students are willing to be open and listen if the subjects are dealt with appropriately. It is wrong to point out only one point of the issue.

I have dealt with the Japanese evacuation history, creation mythology...you have to be gutsy about this stuff. Besides, Grapes of Wrath was banned in one of the divisions around here a few years back on the grounds of political ideology. Maybe the boards are more accepting now.

Controversial issues should not be romanticized, ignored or watered down. If it is good literature and honest it should be dealt with and I do.

If a person has the background to be able to present both sides and be able to handle both sides people will accept it. You have to be able examine the issue without

pointing fingers.

Alberta seems to be divided at Drumheller and the north seems to be more liberal than the south...and more open.

Problems stemming from culture, religion and politics seem to be stronger here. The south tries to pretend there is nothing outside here that is worthwhile.

Maybe in Western Canada we have a fear of discovering something more wonderful.

There is a prairie understanding that we are strongly independent, we are just as good as anybody. If we accept ideas from outside it diminishes us. If we even elect to eliminate a previous government we have to be pushed I think we have the government and the department of education that we deserve.

Westerners ignore political responsibility except on big issues or in crises.

USAGE COMPONENT

If Western Canadian literature is good it will hold on its own; it must make it in evaluation.

I see literature in a broader concept (letters to your cousin etc.) and yet country and western music is contrived; it's bad music but there is some valid folk music.

I don't use the oral narrative or story telling traditions.

When selecting literature I don't consider or look for the origin of the literature, it is not my primary criteria to maintain the Canadian content.

Literature has to prove itself through universal acceptance and so far there hasn't been very much Western Canadian literature that has been universally accepted.

Grove's appeal is not there because the writing or style is contrived. Western Canadian authors think they have to focus on the "Canadian experience". We stereotype the farm experience, rural life, roughing it.

Eastern writers are more cosmopolitan; the writing goes beyond characterization, goes beyond situation to the thematic.

In most CanLit the works are plot and conflict...and they don't develop out of that. I took a CanLit course at university and was bored. The authors are too tied up with the tools of telling a story.

I teach Solzhenitsyn so that I can deal with humanness.

I don't know much about Western Canadian literature. Why don't publishers push it like record companies do. I have all kinds of books from publishers on my desk but no Western Canadian literature. It's just a rare occurrence if a publisher comes up with a Western Canadian literature book.

After all, Leacock sold himself but nobody sells the new stuff. This is not our job to find and sell the stuff. The literature has to sell us.

I think there is a devaluation of CanLit in general.

I recently read the Fourth Horseman which talks of plague and doesn't rely on setting like most Western literature. After all, Mark Twain didn't rely on setting, or even Leacock.

Western literature is like the lonely farm wife - people have to see themselves to be universal. Western literature is too regionally applicable. I think I choose literature that speaks to that lack (A Man for All Seasons).

I don't think prairie literature is used because teachers are not aware of it and what we know of is too popularized. I wasn't trained in it, it's never spoken to, it is of poor

quality, it's bad stuff very contrived if there is any attempt at all to universal appeal it is contrived. (I've got a theme how can I make a story out of it). It is almost written backwards. If Groves wanted to tell a story he would dump the psychological mumbo-jumbo - tell the bloody story and go. If its written well enough it will flow out of itself.

At one time teachers were scholars now they are technicians. I would have a fear of tokenism if this were mandated which would eliminate something good.

APPENDIX II - C

INTERVIEW C

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

I lived and went to school in Regina, Ottawa and Lethbridge. I went to the U of L.

I took a course in the history of Canlit and I liked the course but it was not a good overview, there was no Western Canadian literature at all.

I live here because of the small community lifestyle. I don't think it was a conscious decision to stay around here necessarily.

The prairie exerts subtle influences, when I go to the mountains I find it refreshing to come back to the prairies.

If I weren't here I would miss the open space, the sense of freedom, I'd miss the diversities.

When I think of Western Canadian literature themes I think of depression - Sinclair Ross stuff. I also think of the earthy, rural themes. I guess that's something we assume: if we talk about the prairies; it's hardships, isolation and loneliness.

Western Canadian students see this as a narrow place. They see the prairies as a

small corner of the world. There is a contradiction in these students because sometimes they see this corner as the only corner and this is the only way.

There is a redneck look on other cultures. When I moved (in junior high) from Ottawa to Lethbridge the worst thing was that everyone assumed I was native. I had long dark hair; I was really dark and there were a lot of negative comments made to me. I remember thinking "why are they like this?". The whole thing surprised me. Eastern Canadian natives are more integrated; the east is a more diverse cultural community.

The Taber community accepts Japanese and yet Indians are not accepted. As a result I think using native literature in the classroom would be a struggle especially if there were native students in the classroom.

ATTITUDE COMPONENT

With regards to controversial issues, I could teach the Japanese evacuation more comfortably because they are respected in this area so the students themselves could deal with the issues but with the native issue I think the teacher would stir up the prejudice that is already there and if there are native students in the room I think it would be terrible for them. They are already trying to fit in and we're pointing out how they are different. They tend to be quiet in class anyway and they wouldn't comment. On the other hand, the Japanese are so respected and successful here that a study of the evacuation would be a good study, a good reflection for the students.

The German prisoner issue is far enough removed that it would be no problem.

Creation mythology: that would be... ooooooh that's a tough one, I would be uncomfortable because...this is something that is fundamental to some people. Parents would see it as an affront to what they are teaching or doing at home.

If you are going to spotlight students don't make it negative. I guess we can handle the American black issues because we have no blacks in our classes. And yet when I teach To Kill a Mockingbird I (and probably most teachers) talk about other prejudices, or other kinds of prejudice in humans.

Is prairie literature romanticized? Well, prairie literature is changing and we have to remember that and use both. Students know the reality is that we are not all cowhands.

This is the Bible Belt and I'm cautious of explicit sexual connotation and prairie literature has a lot (French Canadian lit has too I suppose) but prairie literature definitely does ...and yet maybe we need to be more daring. We can make some advancements in this area.

It is a political curriculum, if you have a right wing government (as we do) it will especially affect the humanities. there is strong fundamentalism here.

Considering the past and present, think about the people who make decisions- there is a back to the basics mentality. I have really noticed this out campaigning politically with my husband.

I don't think we should pick literature because it is prairie literature but we do have some literary traditions that are worth picking because they are worthy. Mitchell, Ringwood, Rudy Wiebe, Ross, Roy, Lawrence. The tradition exists but oddly enough I have never tried to make a unit or theme around it for the classroom.

There is enough there that is good we should be using it. Actually the way we see the prairies is the way we write about it. I don't like the romanticism of prairie art, however. You know - the horse and cowboy picture. But I do think it may strike a chord with rural people. You look at high school art students they still select to draw their horses etc.

We seem to think we have to go beyond home to be legitimate and this is so false. We have the false fear that our culture isn't cultural enough.

Western Canadians are very non-supportive of their own people; we are not sure enough of our own identity. we don't have enough confidence in our life.

USAGE COMPONENT

It is still our job to search out prairie literature and use it and if the curriculum department would do that we would use it. Especially since the prairies have changed so much and so has the literature.

I would like to see prairie literature published with prairie art. But the art curriculum has no focus on prairie art. They only designate eastern art as required study, (the Group of Seven)

I'd like to see the curriculum branches send updated lists of good new things. Perhaps even the up-to-date newsletter process, letting us know what is out there and good. The curriculum department and regional offices seem to watch teachers instead of help them. I've never seen anyone at the regional or provincial level that has helped me with the new materials in this field (or any for that matter).

Even the new TRM for English with all those themes developed for teachers... there is not one theme developed on Western Canadian literature.

I am not saying that it is the responsibility of everybody else because we need to make time ourselves as well but they could give us a great deal more information than they do.

I think the Department of Education should publish supplemental lists that have been reviewed and approved that include the Western Canadian literature selections but this isn't cost efficient. And yet, this is the only way especially now when teachers are so "accountable". If we are to be held so accountable then we need help through authorization from the provincial Dept of Education.

Publishers do not promote western literature either; they don't encourage educators to use it or develop marketing around it but after all they are a business. It's the job of the Department of Education to indicate our interest and requirements to the publishers. If the publishers really thought there was a market out there and the Department of Education was pushing it they would be after the market in a hurry. Teachers also need the Department of Education approval to make it easier to use in the classroom.

But publishers certainly do not focus on Western Canadian literature nor do they promote it they never produce examples, or themes, or units as they do in other areas of literature.

I looked for material for a folk lit unit that was regional and I couldn't find anything. I only found Maritime folk literature. The Maritimes seem to be good at that, on the other hand there was nothing from the west probably because we do not see it as important. Also the Maritimes is more cohesive culturally. They seem to respect their

traditions more and are more proud of themselves. However, very few people move into the Maritimes, they are insular and they stay for generations and are proud to do so. Maybe the Roman Catholic Church has something to do with this same thing in French Canada.

I don't listen to country and western music much but I think it's been given a bad rap. Much of it is written on stereotypes like lost love and it tends to be depressing and exaggerated...but it's not necessarily true that it's bad. In general though it is not of the same quality as more formal or classical music. I do like some of it and listen to some of it but I couldn't tell you the names or artists of the country cds that we have.

There is not much on Western Canadian literature in media or film either or I don't know where to find it if there is.

We have a Canadian canon (Mitchell, Atwood, Lawrence) but even that is not all that reverently regarded.

Western Canadian literature should be mandated, not a major portion but perhaps a small portion of the Canadian content should be designated regional.

I've always used Margaret Lawrence's Stone Angel (which isn't a prairie experience but a human experience) and W.O. Mitchell, Earle Birney (I think we need his

work), Roy, George Rhyga (I was struck with his plays it was the first time I'd read what natives face in life).

I remember in one district I had to make sure that I hit the 40% mandated Canadian content. I don't think this is a bad concept. Teachers should direct people to Canadian content but we need some direction perhaps by a regional office.

Do I like Western Canadian literature? hmmm... some of it.

I think we should teach western lit in its true nature, warts and all. We have to be careful of too temporary and too isolated experiences.

Since it isn't mandated and we don't have a lobby group for it we have a tendency to stand still. We don't take initiative about ourselves and our literature. You'll find a few but on the whole teachers don't or can't use it. The one teacher that I remember using it the most and most effectively was an American teacher. She thought it was really important. Other than her I don't know many teachers that use it.

This is a good question and I think an important one- one that teachers should be interested in. especially why we don't use it (Western Canadian literature) more. I'll think more about this.

APPENDIX II - D

INTERVIEW D

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

The Mennonites have a history of assimilation, the whole history of immigration and assimilation of these people is not new-it happened in Prussia and Russia....

There has been, in this tradition a failure to accept responsibility for state.

The Mennonite community has been splintered-a Protestant division of church and state...that's also in Shakespeare, Divinity that rough hew that we will...the community surrenders to God what they should take responsibility for. I guess I'm a repository of perceptions from this history.

In terms of a literature of the prairies, perhaps that literature has yet to be born. I remember reading a Rudy Wiebe story, a nice compact piece. Suzuki says that our Judeo-Christian heritage has dammed us to own and possess the earth, but in Angel of the Tar Sands, Wiebe points to a time when the Hebrews were still defining God. It's a thought provoking, whimsical story. Our job is to define ourselves in prairie literature.

If you could translate Gerard Manley Hopkin's poem, God's Grandeur into a myth it would be this story.

I came from an area where there was a lot of different cultures all assimilating into the western Canadian experience. There was a lot of pain connected with this; on the other hand, my wife came from a town that was more idyllic and would likely say that she did not see the same kinds of things that I did nor did she have any of the same experiences that I had.

Some themes of Western Canadian literature might be pain, desecration to land, the maimed prairie. The land wants to revert-all we have is scars on the flayed earth -
hmm...Henry Kreisel's The Globe.

Kids now are multicultural, no...multinational. They have compact discs, television, advertising - they are all immersed in the same media and detached from their roots...except those students off the reserve, or new immigrants. Most kids on the prairies aren't first or second generation.

I stay here because my grandpa came here and he wasn't looking when he stopped. If he had opened his eyes in Halifax I wouldn't be here. I love the sun and the horizon on the prairies. The winter is too bloody long but if you give me a choice, I would stay on the prairies. I would choose the coulees. Maybe its like running up and down on your mother's thighs. I wonder if I could leave. Maybe if I lived on the shore and could see way out to the ocean.... I can relate to the love/hate relationship people have with the prairies.

ATTITUDE COMPONENT

Maybe some of our discomfort with Western Canadian lit traces back to "no prophet is welcome in his own land". We see a Ukrainian pumping out his story, and a native pumping out his story, and we think nobody has seen me yet.

I think Obasan (Joy Kogowa) is hitting the right spot when articulating the pain of prairie people. I know people my age who were so hurt growing up. My town was supposed to be idyllic but it was very painful to grow up there. The bitterness in Obasan was not unique. It was not necessarily bitterness against Anglo-Saxons it was bitterness among all cultural groups. I can certainly think of exceptions where friends and neighbours crossed this barrier but it was pretty prevalent. Maybe it was the first and second generation that sensed their vulnerability at not fitting in. My father came with nothing and we worked very hard in the beet fields, and then there was the "man on the white horse". There was an elite.

In my town my people begrudged each other. In my wife's town everybody needed everybody, maybe because it was a smaller community. The essence of the prairie experience is feeling one's own experience. I don't like the idea that the prophet is not appreciated in his own land because it is a bit mean spirited but literature has to rise above the pain of personal experience to the universality of art. I don't want to read the regional literature of Quebec either until I find my own roots. Writing only becomes

great literature if it becomes writing of the universal experience.

You should be able to judge literature of a particular time in terms of that time with no political agenda. You can't use the correctness of any one time to judge literature. This reminds me of that short story the "Glass Roses" which manages to bridge prejudice and differences with no regional prejudice.

Art is first and foremost didactic; to use it because we live in a multicultural society and it is multicultural literature is the wrong reason.

We shouldn't mandate literature, if it's good enough we'll use it. Like that line from Dylan Thomas, "a guy writing on spindrift pages not for any rewards". You have added to literature a mercenary nature when you mandate it.

In terms of romanticized literature, western Can lit is full of noble savages and noble settlers. The Little House on the Prairies type literature. I read this to my kids but when I think about the literature it offends me.

Tokenism and the deliberate selection and liberation of voices just sets them (the speakers) up on pedestals, it creates more distance but who am I to make that judgement. I think about the Canadian identity issues and the constitution talks. I resented the distinctness issues because who isn't distinct. We won our rights, dominion of church,

state and language . This is Orwell.

I feel like Salman Rushdie - the heart of the matter is freedom of speech of the artistic voice from any interference. I believe in respect for voice but there are universal principles of the artistic voice that give us identity and recognition.

I would like the freedom to teach what I want well, particularly at the grade twelve level. If I want to use a native story that a certain class needs or wants I should be able to. For example, I used Chief Dan George's speech as a selection on a final exam once because I thought it was needed in the situation. As it happened, one of my silent native students aced it, really opened up and one of the students whom I felt needed to hear the speech had nothing to say. There was some follow up on this incident but all of it was necessary and the right thing to do at that time.

I am a professional and you have to trust me in the classroom. At my age I can look back and I can see how things have happened.

I don't really begrudge other voices but I think that there are many voices in our past. I think good for you as a writer but there are other voices and stories in this area.

I especially see my native students searching for identity and their struggle for assimilation. What happened to me in my youth is happening to them now; I was also

required to adopt a culture. The native students are really trying and there is a tremendous anger and fear in trying to root in this culture. They really make an effort but at the same time, if they have just come off the reservation, Shakespeare is alien to them.

Kids don't read Western Canadian literature. Because they are looking out at the modern world , we tend to teach what we think will be most relevant to them. For example A Doll's House and 1984 are old but valid..

You want to provide a legacy from choices that you make for students. After all, cries of pain from a mud patch in Alberta are not that relevant.

USAGE COMPONENT

It is important to engage in self-reflection but not if it is acquired through censorship and mandate...that is re-writing and it's a form of tyranny. Certainly qualitatively some of it stacks up.

It's a case of the voice. Wiebe's story "Where is the Voice Coming From?" has a protagonist named Almighty Voice-who is the voice that came from the divinity in the man.

I don't think I deliberately use a lot of Western Canadian literature but I like some of it - stories by Kinsella, Wiebe, Mitchell and native stories. My students like Who Has

Seen the Wind.

I think practising English teachers should be utilized on committees to get ideas and lists out to teachers.

I think the humanities approach is a good one. We can study the literature of a time and a history of a time. We can't exorcise the past but this approach is worthwhile. Everybody has to look back and people do search for their past.

Most of us are more classically trained and this influences our choices. I would like to liberate the story telling tradition as well though...I recently heard a guy publicly use this technique. He identified the uniqueness of experience and gave voice to it. It took me back to being that high and it blew the audience away.

On country and western music. Now-a small fraction is supremely beautiful but probably only a small percentage. But when a piece is rooted in the sense of place and land I marvel.

The naked, awful, and ugly side has to be told as well especially from the past. If I leave it to my kids to tell it they won't be able to. But we cannot change stories from the period they are written in. We cannot change language or omit or add things for political correctness.

If you can write about it so somebody across the world understands then you have transcended time and place.

Per instructions from Dr. Cynthia Chambers this project is not to be placed on the internet in any manner.