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Canadian Fiction Meets History and Historiography: Jacques Poulin, Daphne Marlatt, and Wayson Choy

By MARIE VAUTIER

IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY, traditional methods of “doing history”—what the French historian Paul Veyne calls the “histoire-traités-batailles” school of thought—have been challenged by more contemporary theories regarding the writing of history. Scholars such as Hayden White, Louis O. Mink, Linda Gordon, and Dominick Lacapra have laid bare the assumptions that underlie traditional forms of history, exposing the occulted construction of historical narratives and proposing alternative means and methods of historiography. Francophone scholars have conducted similar investigations, as is evident in the work of Michel de Certeau, Paul Ricoeur, Paul Veyne, Marc Angenot, and Régine Robin, among others. Methods range from expanding the scope of “historical documents” to oral legends and personal anecdotes, through an examination of the past as it was lived by particular marginalized or minority groups, to studying a short period of the past with what might be called a “holistic” approach, such as Marc Angenot’s detailed study of one year from the past in *1889: Un Etat du discours social*. In literature departments, similar conflicts arise between the traditional way of studying and teaching literature and the investigations of new ways of writing culture and history, with literary historians and structuralists facing a challenge from literary theorists who deal in terms like postmodernism, postcolonialism, new historicism, cultural studies, feminism, and “queer theory.” One of the potentially conflict-producing arenas is the investigation of how fiction meets history.

This article examines three Canadian novels which provide different yet somewhat complementary approaches to the current theoretical discussions in English- and French-speaking Canada regarding the strong presence of historiography, briefly defined as “the writing of history,” in fiction. Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* (1984, published in French despite its English title) recounts a trip across the American continent undertaken by a francophone Québécois writer and his part-Amerindian companion. From the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec to San Francisco, they follow the famous Oregon Trail and reflect on the interaction of history and historiography. The second novel studied is *Ana Historic* (1988) by West Coast feminist writer Daphne Marlatt. Marlatt’s intriguing novel notes the absence of women in the records of the

building of the city of Vancouver and investigates ways and means of writing women *into* history in a fictional work. The third text, Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1995), documents historical events such as the Depression and the Second World War against a backdrop of growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown.

A fascination with history is of course rooted in the evolution of the novel form itself. Before the technological inventions of the twentieth century, as Georg Lukacs points out in his seminal work, *The Historical Novel* (1936-37), novels were both sources of pleasure and pedagogical vehicles which transmitted knowledge of the past and knowledge of a culture. In nineteenth-century Europe, emerging "nation-states" underlined the necessity of knowing one's history as a prerequisite to constituting a "nation," and the novel was seen as one way of transmitting that body of cultural and historical knowledge. The twentieth-century invention of other communication technologies, in particular radio and television, freed the novel from its pedagogical role. In the mid-twentieth century, the experimental "nouveau roman," which went hand in hand with structuralist studies of literature, offered a genre of writing in which the entire focus was on the form of the text—and the traditional novel's links to history and culture were decisively ruptured.

Canadian literature, however, from its origins to the present day, in both English and French, frequently subscribes to the ideological thrust of historical fiction. It is perhaps significant that the three novels usually studied at the beginning of any chronological survey course of Canadian literature are all historical novels: Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863), Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769), and William Kirby's *The Golden Dog* (1877).¹ In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the Canadian historical novel continued to project a pedagogical and ideological function: it taught certain aspects of Canadian history to its readership. Thus, Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* (1941) draws on the Halifax explosion of 1917, and Léo-Paul Desrosiers' lesser-known but representative historical novel, *Les Engagés du Grand-Portage* (1943), tells the story of the Northwest Company. In the last third of the twentieth century, in what is alternately called the "postmodern" or the "postcolonial" age, many contemporary experimental novels from English- and French-speaking Canada continue to address issues of history, historiography and nationalism. Indeed, this practice appears to puzzle international critics of postcolonialism, such as the authors of the very well-known postcolonial study, *The Empire Writes Back*: they are surprised that the fertile field of cultural com-

1. All three novels discuss the history of New France and present highly idealized, Romantic versions of life during that time. Interestingly, all three portray characters who strive for harmony in the anglophone and francophone communities.

plexity and the characteristically Canadian “perception of a mosaic has not generated corresponding theories of literary hybridity to replace the nationalist approach” (36).

The historical novel was, and continues to be, an important genre in Canada, as Martin Kuester remarks in his recent study of parody in contemporary English-Canadian historical novels:

Historical writing in Canada, even what we would nowadays normally refer to as non-fiction, was—as the Canadian historian Carl Berger has shown—generally regarded as an especially instructive brand of literature. Helen Tiffin has identified the use of history as an important aspect of all the postcolonial literatures, and she underlines its “unique role as literary genesis”.... As [Linda] Hutcheon and [Dennis] Duffy have pointed out, there has been “a rebirth of the historical novel in Canada” in recent years. (26)

Kuester goes on to note that “comprehensive and generally accepted theories of historical fiction are scarce” (26), although he does mention American David Cowart’s 1989 work, *History and the Contemporary Novel*, which posits an attitude that seems to go hand in hand with many American and European appreciations of this “postmodern age.” After noting the “increasing prominence of historical themes in current fiction,” Cowart writes: “Produced by writers sensitive to the lateness of the historical hour and capable of exploiting technical innovations in the novel, this new historical fiction seems to differ from that of calmer times. A sense of urgency—sometimes even an air of desperation—pervades the historical novel since mid-century, for its author probes the past to account for a present that grows increasingly chaotic” (1). Cowart’s reflections on the historical novel represent a typical Euro-American appreciation of the postmodern age as a period of social decline—a period of breakdown, chaos, apocalypse. This Euro-American attitude is described by Cornel West: “In the eyes of many, we live among the ruins of North Atlantic civilization.... As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the rich intellectual resources of the West are in disarray and a frightening future awaits us” (259). West’s “doom-laden version of the postmodernist breakthrough” (McHale, 22) corresponds to much work done on postmodernist fiction in Europe and the United States.

In postcolonial entities such as English-speaking Canada and Quebec, doom-laden appreciations of the postmodern age are frequently inapplicable.² While contemporary Canadian and Québécois novels do engage with history, even while foregrounding the lack of objectivity of any historical “telling,” their investigations of history and historiography are not carried out in an atmosphere of “decline,” “chaos,” or *fin de siècle* defeatism. Instead, they are

2. I argue this point in much greater detail in my article in *Études littéraires*’ special number on postmodernism: “Les Métarécits, le postmodernisme, et le mythe postcolonial au Québec: un point de vue de la marge.”

marked by a celebratory approach to diversity.³ Canada, a country that has known numerous layers of immigration and governments, has long conceived itself to be a country with multiple historical “truths.” Although some literary critics react unfavorably to fiction’s blurring of the boundaries between fiction and history, the contemporary postcolonial historiographic novel from French- or English-speaking Canada is at home with—indeed, enjoys—the insecurities and questionings of this “postmodern/postcolonial age.” Why might that be?

A partial answer to this question lies in the fact that in Canada, the novel’s links to history and culture have not been as decisively ruptured, due in large part to the particularities of Canadian pedagogical systems. As Ken Coates points out, many Canadians are wary of the strong presence of American culture and history in Canada, which is due in large part to the omnipresence of American television and the daily press. What is perhaps less well known is that education is a provincial concern in Canada, and that there is no one “History of Canada” course taught in all Canadian high schools.⁴ This decentralized approach to the teaching of history—that is to say, the lack of a pan-Canadian history course for older adolescents—is perhaps characteristic of the diversity that is Canada. Ken Osborne notes that in “at least half the provinces it is possible to graduate from high school without having studied Canadian history” (2). In those instances where history is taught, Osborne writes that it “has largely been absorbed into social studies, so that it exists in school curricula less as a systematic study of the past, and more as a source of ... illustrative topics designed to illuminate the present” (1). Due in part to what Coates calls the “influence of American cultural imperialism,” many Canadians’ knowledge of their interesting, overlapping and multifaceted history can be very poor indeed. So the novel, even the contemporary experimental novel, teaches Canadians aspects of their history even while it foregrounds the precariousness of the historiographic enterprise. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon has coined the term “historiographic metafiction” to describe these novels, which make up a considerable part of the contemporary Canadian canon.⁵

3. Although an overview of the field of criticism in North America does point to this difference in approach, there are some exceptions to the rule. For instance, Montreal-based Arthur Kroker has written extensively about postmodernism and North American society, and his work reflects the “decay and chaos” theory. See for instance *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*, co-authored with David Cook and published by New World Perspectives in Montreal in 1986.

4. Each province determines what history will be learnt by its students. Thus in Quebec, in Secondary 4 (roughly equivalent to British Columbia’s Grade 11), students learn the “history of Quebec,” and it is in Secondary 5, the final year of high school, that they *may* choose to take a course on Canadian history. At the other extreme of the country, in British Columbia, there is no obligatory course on the history of British Columbia, but senior high-school students may take a course in Canadian history.

5. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages.... Historiographic metafiction incorporates ... three ... domains [fiction, history and theory]:

Joy Kogawa's groundbreaking text, *Obasan* (1981), constitutes a good example of an historiographic metafiction: it writes history even as its narrator questions the validity of the enterprise. This novel retells the Canadian government's mistreatment of Japanese Canadians on the West Coast of Canada during World War II and recounts the Japanese-Canadian narrator's particular reactions to that mistreatment and to other personal concerns. R.P. Bilan has noted that *Obasan* sheds light on what has been "one of the least known—and most frightening—aspects of Canadian history" (317). For many Canadians, Kogawa's text made known for the first time this particular episode of the recent historico-political past. Nonfictional works by Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (1976), Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese-Canadians During the Second World War* (1981), and Barry Broadfoot, *Years of Sorrow, Years of Shame: The Story of the Japanese-Canadians in World War II* (an oral documentary history published in 1977) offer retrospectives on this historical period, as does Anne Wheeler's 1995 film, *The War Between Us*. It was the novel, however, which struck deep and affected change. Most cultural commentators agree that *Obasan* was of major significance to those who wanted reparation of these injustices; it had a strong impact on the "redress movement," which eventually led the Canadian government to apologize formally and offer a financial settlement to the survivors of the wartime treatment. Contemporary fictions in English-speaking Canada and Quebec, then, continue to be intertwined with history and historiography, even as they underline the precariousness of all "knowledge" of the past—what Hayden White has called the "crisis of historicism" (*Metahistory*, 21).

Quebecers have, as a general rule, a more homogenous view of their history than do Canadians from other parts of the country. This is due to a shared vision of what constituted a "traditional Catholic society" until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s.⁶ In the nineteenth century the influential cleric, l'abbé Casgrain, determined the parameters of what would constitute French-Canadian literature. Taking for granted that literature is the reflection of the "nation," he prescribed a literature that would maintain the "pioneering spirit" of the Catholic French Canadian.⁷ With the Quiet Revolution in the

its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past.... [H]istoriographic metafiction ... always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them. It is not just metafictional, nor is it just another version of the historical novel or the non-fictional novel" (5).

6. See Denis Monière's *Ideologies in Quebec* and Jacques Grand'Maison's article on the subject for a discussion of this homogenous worldview. In interviews discussing one of his recent films about "the Plains of Abraham" and the cultural heritage in Quebec, *Le Sort de l'Amérique*, Jacques Godbout has noted that younger Quebecers do not have this worldview and, indeed, are unaware of their history.

7. Gaétan Brulotte's "L'Ethnocritique et la littérature québécoise" traces the rigid links among literature, religion and society in Quebec back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Both l'abbé Casgrain and l'abbé Camille Roy assumed that literature was the reflection of the nation, and both prescribed the *kind* of "pure" literature which would be acceptable to the French-Canadian nation: spiritual, pro-traditional values which advocated staying on the land—and, above all, religious in nature.

1960s, “French Canadians” became “Québécois/es,” but experimental novels from Quebec continued to transmit a single vision of the history of the “nation,” as Micheline Cambron argues in *Une Société, un récit* (1989). Only very recently has the uniformity of this historical discourse been questioned, and Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* offers an early example of the type of contemporary novel in Quebec that engages history while challenging it.⁸

Jacques Poulin is a soft-spoken, self-deprecating novelist from Quebec City, who wrote for many years before receiving the recognition to which he is entitled, given the impressive quality of his work.⁹ *Volkswagen Blues* is his sixth novel and the first that is situated outside the boundaries of Quebec. In deceptively simple prose, this postmodern novel investigates many concerns of contemporary fiction, as its two main characters travel from Gaspé to San Francisco, following the Oregon Trail and encountering literary and historical figures and texts along the way.¹⁰ At the beginning of their journey, in the museum in Gaspé, the Québécois writer and the Métisse mechanic examine two “equally impressive” maps that portray, respectively, North America as it was inhabited by Amerindian tribes and North America as “the vast territory that belonged to France in the mid-eighteenth century, a territory that extended from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico and west as far as the Rocky Mountains” (16). These maps, of course, thematize the novel’s subsequent investigations of Amerindian oral history, of the founding historical legends of Québécois society with their glorification of the free-spirited and independent *coureur de bois*, of the American dream as espoused by the pioneers who took to the Oregon Trail, of the puzzling encounters with the historical and present-day violence of American society, and of the difficulty of living together in a society—or in a Volkswagen van—when different versions of the past interact with each other.

The novel’s extended discussion about the historical *coureur de bois* Etienne Brulé affords a locus for a necessarily brief examination of these issues. Brulé served under Samuel de Champlain (the French explorer who founded Quebec City) and contributed to the initial European explorations of

8. Selected authors who have published historiographic metafiction in the post-1980 Referendum period would include, among many other possible choices, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, Jacques Godbout, Jovette Marchessault, Régine Robin.

9. See Nicole Beaulieu’s “L’Ecrivain dans l’ombre” for a candid presentation of Poulin’s life.

10. In her discussion of postmodernism in Jacques Poulin’s work, Pamela V. Sing notes the inapplicability of typical practices of postmodernism to Poulin’s writings. Thus, she rules out those postmodern theories which speak of excremental culture (i.e. Kroker and Cook) as well as those which dwell on “la philosophie de panique” (the philosophy of panic) or post-industrial decadence (Fredric Jameson, Bruce Barber, etc.). She turns instead to Alan Wilde’s work on American novels published since 1969 and uses his theory of “mid-fiction” to illustrate Poulin’s acceptance of postmodern disjunctions. For Wilde, modernists are aware of the disjunctions of the world, but they seek to master these disjunctions in an effort to reject total cosmic chaos. Postmodernists, however, accept the world as multiple and contingent. Wilde works on irony, and I find it highly ironic that Sing’s bibliography contains no references at all to the large body of work on postmodernism from English-speaking Canada, almost all of which would have aided her analysis of Poulin as a postmodern writer.

what came to be called “New France.” He lived with various Amerindian tribes, learned their languages, shared their lifestyles, and is credited in history books as having been instrumental in establishing and maintaining the strong alliances between the French and the two Amerindian groups now known as the Hurons and the Algonkians. In 1633 he was killed by the Hurons for unknown reasons. Although he was criticized by the French during his lifetime for adopting Amerindian ways, Brulé gradually became a folk hero of Quebec social history and that is how he is portrayed in Poulin’s novel. The narrator goes to great lengths to maintain “in his heart of hearts” (58) the heroic qualities of the “discoverers and explorers of the New World” (22)— all French and thus his cultural ancestors, so to speak. But this viewpoint is undercut by the epigraph to the English-language version of Poulin’s postmodern text which reads “We are no longer the heroes of history.” Furthermore, the narrator’s travelling companion, La Grande Sauterelle, who is of mixed French-Canadian and Amerindian ancestry, repeatedly undercuts the history of Etienne Brulé and other “heroes of New France” by retelling events of the past from the Amerindian point of view. A typically postmodern concern with the impossibility of discovering one truth of the past through a perusal of printed texts is foregrounded by the many intertextual references to history books and to oral legends in this novel. However, *Volkswagen Blues* does not promote the Amerindian version of what really happened as indicative of “true” history either.

Instead, the novel focuses on a subtle and understated rendering of the interpersonal relationship between the two main characters. Their stories, instead of adopting the usual confrontational approach, rub up against each other and illustrate the two characters’ courageous exploration of the unease they feel as they each struggle to accept the Other as other. Quebec critic Pierre L’Hérault proposes that both characters are isolated by their necessarily irreconcilable versions of the historical past (represented by the two very different maps of America on display at the museum in Gaspé) but available to each other in the present (represented by the road maps of America which they consult during their shared road trip). The fact that they are outside Quebec for most of their trip allows for a more distanced, and therefore more objective, examination of cultural interactions within Quebec. Their explorations of alternate versions of history—Amerindian, French-Canadian, American—as they travel along the Oregon Trail, widens their investigations and allows them to examine the difficulties and challenges of cohabitation in the constantly shifting world of “l’Amérique.” Along the way, the two encounter people who speak French, and the literary figures mentioned in the text have some connection with French North America, such as Nobel laureate Saul Bellow, born in Lachine, Quebec, or Jack Kerouac, born of French-

Canadian parents and author of *On the Road* (1955). While Kerouac's beat generation novel celebrates youth, travel and the glories of America, *Volkswagen Blues*, as is indicated by its very title, examines the difficulties of living as French people in North America and of living with the loss of "the American Dream," given the violence and the hopelessness its characters encounter in their travels. By juxtaposing alternate versions of the past and illustrating the characters' struggle to arrive at compatibility in the present, this novel proposes a difficult but possible cohabitation as North Americans. While recent debates about "cultural appropriation" tend to project and sustain a Self/Other paradigm,¹¹ *Volkswagen Blues*'s original and courageous explorations of its characters' imperfect struggles with heterogeneity point to the possibility of living in a new way in North America.¹²

Daphne Marlatt is also interested in a new way of living; her well-known novel, *Ana Historic*, explores the absence of women in history and in decision-making in the world. This historiographic metafiction also juxtaposes the past with the present in an amazing feat of fragmented writing which constantly subverts the authority of history. The narrator of the novel is a middle-aged woman, Annie, who works as a research assistant for her husband, once her history professor. Shaken by the recent death of her mother, with whom she has always had a difficult relationship, she begins to experiment with writing, gradually inventing a fictional name and a fictional life for a "woman with no history"—a schoolteacher who is briefly mentioned in the historical records of the archives of the city of Vancouver. In a blend of autobiography and fiction, poetry and prose, lyric and documentary writing,¹³ this text explores what it was and is to be brought up female. While sympathetic toward men (like the narrator's father) who are imprisoned in socially conditioned roles such as that of the 1950s "breadwinner," Marlatt's novel speaks mainly of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of women coming to a confident "Self-hood" when they are absent from both the records of the past and the decision-making processes of the present.¹⁴ *Ana Historic* investigates how women are excluded from history, in part because their autobiographical writings, if they are considered at all by scholars of the past, are treated as

11. Edward Said has wondered if "the notion of a distinct culture ... always get[s] involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')" (*Orientalism*, 325).

12. Georges Sioui has long suggested that the Amerindian way of life has much to offer to our search for harmonious cohabitation. See his *Pour une Autohistoire amérindienne*.

13. These terms are borrowed from Linda Hutcheon's review of the novel in *Brick*, "telling accounts."

14. For instance, in its discussion of Annie's mother, the novel investigates the hopelessness of being a housewife in the 1950s, detailing the revolting medical treatment imposed upon those suffering from depression. The plight of North American housewives was of course taken up by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In its discussion of Annie's upbringing, Marlatt's novel lays bare the social conditioning of young girls, noting how females quickly lose the initial freedom of movement of the body to a rigid world where the power of the male gaze is everything.

“documents” but not as “history,” because they are not “factual.” This entire novel, with the early days of Vancouver as its backdrop, is an “extended meditation on power and the meaning of gender and difference” (Hutcheon, “telling accounts,” 19).

The fictional Mrs. Richards invented by the narrator lives during the beginnings of the city of Vancouver, when “history was being made” by the “conquering of the forest” and the “laying of the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railway].” Using a highly effective collage technique, Marlatt juxtaposes excerpts from various historical documents, including early newspapers and history texts, such as M. Allerdale Grainger’s *Woodsmen of the West* with 1950s “how-to-make-your-man-happy” books for women. Playing with the fact/fiction debate and deliberately and skillfully transgressing the boundary between the two, Marlatt quotes from histories of the past and interrupts them parenthetically to ask that fundamental question: where are the city mothers?

i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city mothers?) the city fathers busy building a town out of so many shacks labelled the Western Terminus of the Transcontinental, Gateway to the East—all these capital letters to convince themselves of its, of their, significance. (28)

Marlatt’s deliberate subversion of English syntax and sentence structure, along with her study of etymology and linguistics, all illustrate her struggle to come to Woman-hood through writing. In the above passage, the narrator’s use of the lower-case “i” to illustrate the lack of Self is but one of the obvious techniques which foreground the absence of women in history and in “the world.” So, too, are her appraisals of the cumulative negative effects of a historiography that eliminates the presence of women. Thus, quoting her husband’s attempt to persuade her to continue working as his research assistant, she decries her former participation in the historiographical enterprise:

history is built on a groundwork of fact, Richard states. Richard is a good historian, known for the diligent research behind his books. one missing piece can change the shape of the whole picture—you see how important your part in it is? but i’m no longer doing my part looking for missing pieces.... history married her [Mrs. Richards] to Bill Springer and wrote her off.... entered as Mrs., she enters his house as his wife. she has no first name, she has no place, no place on the street, not if she’s a ‘good woman.’ her writing stops. (134)

Annie’s attempts at writing the past in the present are strongly linked to her struggle to exist in her own right. Like her mother and Mrs. Richards before her, she correctly anticipates that her struggle to create, to write, to get out of the dominant patriarchal frame that determines both the history of Vancouver and the history of her life will be very poorly received by the world of logic and reason, here represented by her history professor husband:

but what are you doing? i can imagine Richard saying, looking up from the pages with that

expression with which he must confront his students over their papers: this doesn't go anywhere, you're just circling around the same idea—and all these bits and pieces thrown in—that's not how to use quotations.

irritated because i can't explain myself. just scribbling, i'll say. echoing your words, Ina—another quotation, except i quote myself (and what if our heads are full of other people's words?

...

but this is nothing, i imagine him saying. meaning unreadable. because this nothing is a place he doesn't recognize, cut loose from history and its relentless progress toward some end. this is undefined territory, unaccountable. and so on edge. (81)

The strong metafictional component of this work underlines one of Marlatt's main concerns: how to write in a way that "allows her to push the narrative, past loss, past irony, past the gaps and wounds in our collective histories, toward a vision of a new wholeness" (Brand, 38). This vision is inspired by Marlatt's desire to restore to women the language of the feminine body and the ability to communicate with each other through its use. It is difficult, however, to write "differently"—and her many metafictional techniques show us the struggle she experiences as she strives to name that which has not been named (except in derogatory terms): the experience of women. This wish to be at home in her body, in history, and in the present is strongly conveyed to the reader in the last line of the passage which describes Mrs. Richards' reaction of "longing" when she witnesses the birth of the first white male child born at Hastings Sawmill:

to be there from the first. indigene. ingenuus (born in), native, natural, free(born)—at home from the beginning.

*

she longed for it. (127)

Theorist Diana Fuss argues that while "historians like Hayden White have busily been trying to get out of history, feminist literary critics have been just as energetically trying to get into it" (95). Marlatt's text is a testimonial to women's struggle to make room in history for their stories—because to make room for their history is to make room for themselves. Canadian writer Di Brand notes that this novel does not end with "closure, fulfillment, nor with silence and loss, but with the powerful act of renaming, remembering, reimagining the (hi)story, with an invitation, also, to read ourselves 'into the page ahead,' into a newly visioned past/future" (40; citing the final words of *Ana Historic*). This novel, while making the reader acutely aware of the absence of women in the history of the city, of the region, of the country, nonetheless teaches that very history even as it decries its incompleteness. Like *Volkswagen Blues*, *Ana Historic* argues for inclusion, for harmony, for a history that would describe the lives and work of women along with recording the lives of longshoremens, lumberjacks, and builders. Lacking such a history, the narrator creates one. In the process, she, too, lays bare the ideological construction of what is generally deemed to be history and makes us aware of the incompleteness of all history.

A fundamental acceptance of the fact that there are different and sometimes contradictory stories of the past leads to a third way of “doing history” in contemporary Canadian texts in both French and English. Rudy Wiebe, the well-known author of numerous historiographic metafiction about Western Canada, has insisted on the need for “story” in order to make history real, and many writers, including Wayson Choy, have heeded his call.¹⁵ Choy, who now lives in Toronto, grew up in Vancouver’s Chinatown and his 1995 novel, *The Jade Peony*, provides an excellent example of history as story.¹⁶ Published when he was 56 years old, *The Jade Peony* is Choy’s first novel; it grew out of a creative writing class given by award-winning author, Carol Shields.¹⁷ *The Jade Peony* makes subtle use of irony, humor, and a curious blend of innocence and knowing in the stories of its child-narrators; as Gayla Reid writes, it is “very much a book of the moment, opening cultural doors we want opened” (4).

As is the case with *Obasan*, Choy’s novel has multiple narrators: three interrelated children who present loosely chronological stories. Set in Vancouver’s Chinatown during the 1930s and 40s, the novel tells of life as it was for those living in the area: immigrant families with “paper stories” that hide complicated family relationships from immigration officials; lonely, poor old men who worked on the railroad and who die alone in rooming houses; young girls who want to look like Shirley Temple; illicit cross-cultural love affairs.¹⁸

The Jade Peony, like *Obasan*, exposes political injustices while exploring the possibilities of harmonious cohabitation.¹⁹ As Julie Mason argues, “Choy would have been justified in writing a novel of terrible hardships—the poverty of the Depression years, the horrors of the railway work camps, the prejudice and constant fear of deportation, and the tumult of the Second World War wash over [the lives of the children] and the novel. But, instead, Choy has used his eye for delicate detail and his ear for dialogue to create luminous images of two cultures coming together” (38). One of Kogawa’s narrators states that all “our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as

15. See the discussion between Wiebe and Eli Mandel in “Where the Voice Comes From.”

16. *The Jade Peony* won the Ontario Government’s Trillium Award for 1995 (shared with Margaret Atwood) and the 1996 City of Vancouver Book Award and was the first runner-up for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award.

17. Shields won the Governor General’s Award in Canada as well as the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the United States for *The Stone Diaries* (1993).

18. Like other novels which foreground the immigrant experience, *The Jade Peony* also deals in secrets, and, interestingly, its publication revealed a secret to its author. In the course of a radio interview, Choy learnt of his own family secret: like one of the main characters in his novel, he himself had been adopted.

19. The Canadian multicultural novel frequently highlights racial tensions and injustices while promoting cross-cultural humor and multicultural tolerance. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Humor is often dependent on the teller, the recipient and the “butt” of the joke—and novels such as Dany Laferrière’s *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985), which plays on the supposed attraction Canadian women have for Haitian men, was both celebrated for its comic aspects and castigated for its vulgarity.

much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (25). Although his work is less overtly metafictional than *Obasan*, Choy makes history live by revealing to his readers the secrets and ordinary stories of Chinatown.

"Jook-Liang, Only Daughter" narrates the first of three sections in *The Jade Peony*. She lives in an imaginary world peopled by a jumble of stories from Old China told by her grandmother, stories absorbed from Euro-American films she has seen, and stories told by the many visitors to her family's home. She has no difficulty moving from the reality of Chinatown's ugly old men to the imaginative world of China's mythical Monkey King, and then to the Tarzan and Cheetah films at the local Vancouver cinema, which simply imprint the Euro-American myth upon her Chinese version of the story. Jook-Liang leads the readers to accept the many and varied versions of "story," and the blurred boundaries among local stories, legend, history, and myth. This goes against arguments by American historiographer Louis O. Mink, who warns that "myth serves as both fiction and history [only] for those who have not learned to discriminate," and suggests that we not "forget what we have learned" (149). It is possible, however, that, in going beyond the need to set up definitive boundaries between fiction, history and myth, novels such as *The Jade Peony* are in fact offering their readers a new cognitive tool: an acceptance of the indeterminacy of the past, transmitted through the conflation of genres in (his)stories of this past.

The second section of the novel is narrated by Jung-Sum, Second Brother, an adopted son whose experiences in the family and in Chinatown are marked by the tension between old and new customs. This section refers to "historical" events only peripherally, and concentrates instead on mythologizing all of Chinatown as one extended family. Jung-Sum's understanding of "community" in Chinatown is illustrated by detailed stories of his interactions with its various inhabitants, and further complicated by his awareness of the British/Canadian/American components of life in Vancouver. For instance, he is given a pet turtle by an itinerant Chinese-Canadian sailor, and, "between English and Chinese schools" (76), he and a classmate discuss the pet's name. Gentle irony underlines the discussion, in which Bobby Steinberg from the English School dismisses the Chinese "Lao Kwei" (Old Turtle), and then proposes the American "Hopalong, like the cowboy." Jung-Sum reacts strongly: "'That's United States,' I protested. 'This is a *Canada* turtle'." Challenged to name the pet, Jung-Sum chooses "*George ... King George*" (77), opting for a British appellation that only underscores the cross-cultural confusion in the Vancouver of the 1930s and 1940s. Jung-Sum's stories insist on the strong sense of community in Chinatown, where harmony among all elements prevails, in spite of the difficulties in dealing with "new ways." This part of the novel also promotes another type of understanding

through its gentle but firm introduction of homosexuality in tales of Jung-Sum's experiences of boxing and male camaraderie.

The third and longest section of the novel is narrated by Sek-Lung, Third Brother, a sickly child who attends public school with other children whose second language is English. It is in this section that historical events, such as the effects of the Chinese Exclusions Act and the Second World War, come to the fore—gently, evocatively, poignantly. Thus, the danger of betraying the family and causing the deportation of relatives comes to us through six-year-old Sek-Lung's despair regarding his inability to grasp the complexities of "family rankings and Chinese kinship" (131). Stories of role-reversal abound: parents need their children's knowledge of the written word to learn more about events at home and abroad, such as the Japanese invasion of China and its repercussions in Vancouver. From a child's puzzled perspective, Sek-Lung tells of accompanying his Chinese-Canadian babysitter to secret meetings with her Japanese-Canadian boyfriend, until the latter is deported to the interior of British Columbia. Although Sek-Lung does not understand all that he observes, the conflicts produced by war and reproduced in various Vancouver communities come clearly through his narrative. So, too, do those moments—characterized by Bemrose as "idealistic yet convincing"—of multicultural harmony (64). There is an adult's voice not far behind those of the child-narrators, and this voice presents oral history and storytelling as meaningful history. Discussing his upbringing, which resembles that of his child-narrators, Choy says: "oral history was the way we discovered meaning. All of us who grew up in Chinatown absorbed those mythologies without thinking" (Bemrose, 64). Storytelling around kitchen tables not only sustained the Chinese through their difficulties, as Bemrose argues, but the storytelling in *The Jade Peony* offers readers a new view of histories of the Depression, the Second World War, and growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown.

Multifaceted, overlapping, and even contradictory versions of the past form an integral part of Canadians' knowledge of history. Canadians have always lived with historical ambiguity and hesitancy, with troublesome and uncertain heroes, and with an acceptance of necessarily fragmented versions of history that allows for successful manoeuvring in what is for others the "chaos" of the postmodern age.²⁰ With a cheerful postmodern scepticism about the "truth" of history and a celebratory acceptance of postcolonial frag-

20. An example of this acceptance of historical ambiguity may be found in cultural portrayals of two major figures with the potential to become "historical legends" (in the American sense of the term): Louis-Joseph Papineau, famous orator and leader of the 1837-38 Rebellions in Upper Canada (in what is now Quebec) and Louis Riel, Member of Parliament and Leader of the North West Uprisings (in what is now Manitoba and Saskatchewan) of the late nineteenth century. Both these historical figures may be—and have been—perceived as heroes and as traitors, as leaders and as failures. Ambivalence in history forms an integral part of Canadian historical "realit(ies)," as I argue in my book, *New World Myth* (1998).

mentation, the literatures of English-speaking Canada and Quebec celebrate these ambiguities in stories, plays, films, poems, documentaries—and in fictions such as *Volkswagen Blues*, *Ana Historic*, and *The Jade Peony*.

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