

The Omnipresent Voice: Authorial Intrusion in Rudy Wiebe's "Games for Queen Victoria"

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Article abstract

Although Rudy Wiebe inserts himself directly into the narrative in his story "Where is the Voice Coming From?," he employs a different strategy in "Games for Queen Victoria." By "borrowing" the words of William F. Butler's *The Great Lone Land*, Wiebe employs an alternative, yet highly problematic narrative strategy. The way Wiebe quotes Butler is troubling both because Butler is unacknowledged -- a point raising issues about the ethics of literary quotation -- and also because these quotations are so extensive that Butler stands as virtually a coauthor. Wiebe's almost exclusive focus on Butler contributes to the very Eurocentric discourse it so vociferously decries. Wiebe's story underlines the ambiguous relationship between a writer and his characters, and the way this relationship is mediated through the narrator.

The Omnipresent Voice: Authorial Intrusion in Rudy Wiebe's "Games for Queen Victoria"

ALBERT BRAZ

Regarding the narrator . . . , what can he be if
not the most insignificant character in a story
which is not his own?

— José Saramago

IN HIS MUCH-ANTHOLOGIZED short story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Rudy Wiebe dramatizes the difficulty of writing about the historical past, particularly about marginalized figures. While attempting to reconstruct the fateful last days of Almighty Voice's life, a "story [that] ended long ago," the author seems overwhelmed by both the multiplicity of sources and their contradictory nature. As he states, even though the clash between the young Cree and the North-West Mounted Police in the 1890s is well known, it is "available only in bits and pieces" (78). Wiebe's solution to this conundrum is to reject the possibility of objective truth and insert himself directly into the narrative, to cease to be a mere "*spectator* of what *has* happened or what *may* happen" and "become *element* in what is happening at this very moment" (85). In the less acclaimed "Games for Queen Victoria," he employs a radically different strategy. Rather than striving to become one with his subject, an approach that in the first story purportedly enables him to decipher the "incredible voice" that rises from the land itself ("Where" 86), Wiebe simply "borrows" an earlier writer's words. Moreover, he uses those appropriated words not to become closer to their creator but to distance himself from his source text.

Wiebe is best known for his "*fictional recovering*" of the histories of ex-centric groups (Hutcheon 83), notably Canadian Mennonites and First Nations. "Games for Queen Victoria," in fact, is among a series of works he has devoted to Louis Riel, and it is in the context of those narratives

that it can be best understood. For Wiebe, the Métis politician and mystic is one of the seminal figures in Canadian culture. Because of his formal education, acquired during his (incomplete) training for the Catholic priesthood, Riel appears destined to be the great mediator between Natives and Newcomers to Canada. He is, Wiebe has Gabriel Dumont assert in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, the one Aboriginal leader who “talks white” (108). The Saskatchewan-born novelist is doubtful that the Métis could flourish in post-Confederation Canada, since “It is in the very bones of human existence that the literate agrarian always destroys the oral hunter” (“Louis Riel” 199). Yet Wiebe suggests that some sort of accommodation might have been possible, except for the bigotry of central Canadians. As his historian-protagonist James Dyck declares in *My Lovely Enemy*, the only reason Riel was hanged in 1885 was to give Prime Minister John A. “Macdonald his political coup in the East” (7). I am well aware of Mikhail Bakhtin’s warning about trying to establish the “image of the author” in a literary text, since “every image is a created, and not a creating, thing” (256). Nevertheless, for anyone familiar with Wiebe’s works on the two North-West conflicts — including the story under discussion here — it seems quite evident that Dyck’s sentiments are not just those of a character but also of what Bakhtin labels “the author-creator” (256).

First published in *Saturday Night* in 1976, “Games for Queen Victoria”¹ relates William F. Butler’s role as an intelligence officer or spy for Colonel Garnet Wolseley during the Red River Resistance of 1869-70. More specifically, it explores the political and cultural ramifications of a historical meeting between the British army officer and Riel in the Métis leader’s headquarters at Fort Garry — present-day Winnipeg. The story, which seems to have its genesis in a treatment that Wiebe wrote for a television documentary,² opens with the Irish-born soldier and adventurer finding himself at a personal and professional crossroads. No wars have broken out anywhere in the world for some time and, seeing no prospects ahead, the thirty-one-year-old lieutenant fears he is “being passed in the race of life” (42). But relief soon materializes from a most unexpected source: Canada. Through a brief report in *The Times* of London, he learns that the Canadian government has engaged Wolseley to head a military expedition to seize Fort Garry from Riel and the Métis. Since he is acquainted with the veteran British commander, Butler decides to sail to Canada and join the Red River campaign.

By the time Butler arrives in Toronto the expeditionary force is ready to depart, and all the positions have been filled. However, thanks to his

military reputation and to his persistence, he is able to persuade Wolseley to hire him as a scout. Butler's mission entails that he travel from Toronto to Red River through the United States to gather information about "the American flank" of the march, to determine "what regarding annexation is being hatched in Minnesota, whether rabid Fenians are gossiping support for Riel in Dakota" (46).³ But as he sails on a steamer down the Red River toward Fort Garry, he is informed that Riel is aware of his presence on board and resolves to avert capture. After being told by a Canadian returning to the Settlement that when the vessel reaches the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers "it must momentarily touch the north bank," Butler jumps ashore (50). Then, under the cover of darkness, he hurriedly makes his way to the security of the British-controlled Lower Fort Garry some distance downstream. Butler's action is an affront to Riel, who responds by having "all citizens available arrested on the spot, including the [ship's] captain, and my supposed Winnipeg accomplice" (53). Despite feeling deeply humiliated by the incident, the Métis leader before long dispatches one of his men with an invitation to the clandestine visitor to meet with him at Fort Garry. Butler agrees but with several conditions, most importantly that Riel raise the Union Jack over his headquarters.

The meeting between Riel and Butler is not an auspicious one. Once at Fort Garry, the British officer attempts to gain the psychological upper hand by undiplomatically making his host wait as he plays billiards, one of the imperial games alluded to in the story's title. To further exacerbate the situation, Butler barely camouflages his scorn for the moccasin-clad politician who, he believes, could have controlled the Prairies:

Terror, destruction, absolute conquest was possible for this man; by securing a source of ammunition and supply from any American or British entrepreneur, perhaps with some maverick British officers to teach his superb hunters basic cavalry strategy, this half-caste could wash the western half of North America clean of all whites with their own blood and rule an empire larger than Europe. He could be a veritable New World Genghis Khan — he could be...

But Riel sat and talked: like a priest. Of peace; of preventing bloodshed; of resigning immediately when the proper Government authority arrived. He had a glorious face, voice, his very tones were electric and I could feel like ice drawn down my back how that voice would send soldiers screaming defiance into the flaming mouths of cannons — but he had no emperor's spirit, he had no emperor's eye

to achieve an indescribably glorious prize. Half the New World, and he could only mewl over the bits of blood it would cost.... (59)⁴

Even more than Riel's pacifism, Butler loathes the Métis leader's hybridity, the biological and cultural crossbreeding evident not only in his complexion but also in his diction, manner, and garments. As the career soldier concludes, "A leather-clad Indian on the prairie grass has presence, has dignity, but to suppose that this half-caste could ever play the part of the greatest man on earth since Alexander, dressed in the garb of a priest and the footwear of a savage, was simply absurd. Absurd" (59-60).

Wiebe's characterization of Butler as an imperialist and racist is somewhat surprising, considering the Irishman's generally positive image in Canadian culture. Following the Red River episode, Butler was commissioned by the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba to investigate "the conditions" under which both Natives and Newcomers were living in the vast area from Winnipeg to the Rocky Mountains. This was an assignment that culminated in his writing an influential report, especially critical of the illicit trade in whisky with the First Nations, which reportedly "led to the formation" of the Mounted Police (McCourt, *Remember* 59, 80). Out of his adventures in the North-West Butler also produced a celebrated literary work about the Prairies, his 1882 travelogue *The Great Lone Land*.⁵ Edward McCourt, for instance, describes Butler's "pen-portrait of Riel" in that book as "one of the best" and the work as a whole as "a classic in the literature of travel" ("Introduction" x; *Remember* 84). Dick Harrison is equally effusive, calling Butler "the first eloquent prairie traveller," a stylist whose lyrical phrases and metaphors, such as "the prairie-sea," continue to resonate in much of modern Prairie literature (5-6). Robert Thacker, similarly, pronounces Butler's work the "single, best-known volume on the Canadian North West" in the late nineteenth century (51). George Melnyk is more critical. After contrasting Butler's views of the First Nations in his book and in his official government report, he charges that the Irishman was not above appealing to "what he thought his audience wanted — be it the Lieutenant-Governor or London society" (50). Yet even Melnyk admits that Butler is an important writer who succeeds in capturing "the spirit of the territory just prior to the arrival of the railway" (48).

In "Games for Queen Victoria," Wiebe unequivocally rejects Butler's politics. Curiously, his repudiation does not extend to the latter's words. Without ever acknowledging it, Wiebe constructs much of his story out of the European writer's text. The extent to which he relies on Butler is

apparent when one compares the way the two authors describe the same incident, such as Butler's meeting with Cree Chief Henry Price:

Poor noble man of the great North-West, I have found you at last, here on the far shores of stormy Winnipeg. I have long heard of you, and the smoke of your teepee does blur the evening air to blue. (Wiebe 54)

Poor red man of the great North-west, I am at last in your land! Long as I have been hearing of you and your wild doings, it is only here that I have reached you on the confines of the far-stretching Winnipeg. It is no easy task to find you now, for one has to travel far into the lone spaces of the Continent before the smoke of your wigwam or of your tepie blurs the evening air. (Butler 125)

Or, later, Riel's encounter with Butler:

Had I been your enemy, you would have known before now. You would not visit me and, though I felt humiliated, I came here. I want peace. (Wiebe 60)

Had I been your enemy you would have known it before. I heard you would not visit me, and, although I felt humiliated, I came to see you to show you my pacific inclinations. (Butler 136)

Wiebe tends to make modifications to Butler's text, often condensing it. Yet it is difficult not to notice that, in both structure and language, a considerable portion of "Games for Queen Victoria" originates elsewhere. Indeed, while W.J. Keith maintains that Wiebe's central task in writing his story was "to carve out of Butler's reminiscences the section that has proved historically the most important and intriguing" (107), at times there seems to be little beyond carving.

Perhaps even more significant than Wiebe's unacknowledged borrowings from Butler are the transformations he effects on them, sometimes subtle alterations that nonetheless reveal how a writer can deploy his or her characters to articulate the author's own views. The relationship between a fiction writer and his/her narrator is obviously a critical one. Writing specifically of longer narratives, Mario Vargas Llosa states that "the narrator is the most important character in a novel" (47). As the Peruvian author elaborates, whether the narrator is a major character in a work, or an invisible one, he is a crucial figure because of how he gives that work coherence" (47). José Saramago agrees with Vargas Llosa but stresses that narrators are not autonomous entities but abstractions. The 1998 Nobel

laureate contends that even when a narrator is used “to express a plurality of points of view or verdicts” his or her thoughts and actions are ultimately determined by “the Author” (“Narrador” 191). The primary object of Saramago’s critique is to counter the thesis, promulgated by Roland Barthes and other poststructuralists, that the author is either dead or a mere discursive strategy. As the Portuguese novelist declares, “the resignation or the indifference” with which today’s writers appear to accept the primacy in the narrative process of “an academically-blessed Narrator” over themselves, constitutes a more general “*abdication* of responsibility” by those writers (192). Saramago’s intervention also underscores that literary figures, including narrators, are created by a “concrete” individual (or individuals, in the case of collective works). To echo the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, narrators are not free agents but personages in someone else’s “story,” since there is always an authorial hand behind them (“Entre” 191).⁶ Or, as Bakhtin notes, “Behind the narrator’s story we read a second story, the author’s story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, and also tells us about the narrator himself” (314).

Wiebe’s authorial hand is evident throughout “Games for Queen Victoria,” not least in the ways in which the author decontextualizes, and therefore dehistoricizes, some of his characters. His depiction of Butler’s relationship with Riel is a case in point. It is true that the British officer seems personally threatened by the idea of biocultural *métissage*, what he terms the absurdity of a “dusky” child of the Plains pretending to be a world leader while sporting a formal jacket and buffalo-hide moccasins (56, 59-60). However, the historical Butler’s views of Riel appear to be shaped not just by his ethnocentrism but also by the Métis leader’s own actions. Early in his book Butler looks quite favourably on Riel, praising “the ability, the energy, [and] the determination” he exhibited during the first days of his “little insurrection” (38). He is even more sympathetic toward the Métis people, stating that since everything pointed to their “disappearance under the new order of things” it is not surprising that “the little community” would strive to do all it could to avert “this threatened improvement off the face of the earth” (39, 41). Butler only changes his views of Riel when he begins to hear about the latter’s increasingly “dictatorial debauchery” (46), as illustrated by his sanctioning of the execution of Tom Scott and of the apparent disposal of the troublesome Orangeman’s body through the ice of the Red River.⁷ In fact, it is Butler’s fear of arbitrary arrest by Riel and his supporters that leads him to bypass Fort Garry. Wiebe, though, systematically minimizes his protagonist’s reserva-

tions about the Métis leader. Despite his copious borrowings from Butler, he does not dwell on the latter's allegations that the self-declared David of the New World "commenced to violently sequesterate, annex, and requisition not only divers of his prisoners, but also a considerable share of the goods stored" in local warehouses (46). Wiebe also does not repeat the historical Butler's indictment of Riel for his bewildering part in the Scott affair: "The murderer and the law both take life — it is only the murderer who hides under the midnight shadows the body of his victim" (47).

Another way in which Wiebe manipulates Butler to fit the author's interests instead of the character's, and thus fails to respect "the logic of the character's personality" (Saramago, "Art" 62), is by changing considerably the soldier's role in a given situation, even reversing it. One of the most powerful aspects of *The Great Lone Land* is the manner in which Butler conveys the rawness of his encounter with the North-West, the fact that he has been hired to monitor what is for him really *terra incognita*. His lack of knowledge of the landscape is discernible from the outset but becomes particularly conspicuous as he approaches the Settlement. As mentioned earlier, soon after the steamer on which he is sailing crosses the international border, Butler is told that Riel has been notified of his presence on board, "as I would learn to my cost upon arrival at Fort Garry." Convinced that there is "mischief ahead," he strives to concoct "some plan by which to baffle those who sought my detention." But there seems to be remarkably little he can do on his own, since he is "a stranger in a strange land, knowing not a feature in the locality, and with only an imperfect map for my guidance" (115).

Wiebe's Butler, on the other hand, faces no such obstacles. At the beginning of "Games for Queen Victoria" it is implied that the protagonist is a professional soldier who has traversed the globe on behalf of the British Empire and that his presence in Canada is accidental. Yet the peripatetic Irishman who has spent almost no time in the country, at times exhibits an astonishing range of knowledge about some of its more obscure geographic features. For instance, the historical Butler persuades Wolseley to allow him to join the military expedition with generalities about the commander needing "to know what they are doing in Minnesota and along the flank of your march" (Butler 27). Wiebe's Butler, in contrast, sounds very much like a seasoned voyageur, telling Wolseley that, once the expedition reaches northern Ontario, it can either take the new road being built to Fort Garry or "the much slower but militarily more judicious canoe route, via the turbulent Winnipeg River" (48, 45).

If anything, Wiebe's imprint is even more noticeable in his delineation of the relationship between Butler and the Canadian he meets aboard the steamer. According to most accounts, Butler's travelling companion was William Drever (or Dreever), a Winnipeg resident and a "descendant of one of the earliest Red River settlers" (Turner 61; Begg 391; Traill 195, 199-200).⁸ The historical Butler himself writes that the individual in question was "a gentleman whose English proclivities had marked him during the late disturbances at Red River as a dangerous opponent to M. Riel, and who consequently had forfeited no small portion of his liberty and his chattels" (116).⁹ More germanely, he credits his new "friend" with convincing him to jump ship at the forks of the Red and the Assiniboine. As Butler states, once he learns that he might be arrested by Riel and his "minions" upon landing, he decides to make a run for the open prairie the moment the steamer touched dock, trusting to his "Colt and sixteen-shooter for the rest." But, after Drever shares with him his knowledge of the area, he realizes that the first course is too risky. Such is his gratitude to the man he calls his "friend" that one of the conditions Butler imposes before agreeing to meet with Riel is that "Mr. Dreever [be] set at liberty" (117, 130).

Wiebe's portrayal of Drever, who is never identified by name, is markedly different from Butler's. The British officer's companion is no longer a permanent resident of Red River, much less a descendant of one of the Settlement's founders, but a newcomer who has been in the community for a mere "two years." He also has not "forfeited" either his freedom or his material possessions to Riel because of differing political views. Rather, the "Canadian," as Wiebe calls him, is one of those Ontarians who seem constitutionally incapable of dealing with the Métis as human beings (47). As he says when he first encounters Butler, Riel's people are "coyote French" who spend most of their time on horseback, especially during "them big buffalo hunts. They don't even get off except to eat and sleep. Maybe not to sleep — they're just animals" (47-48). The Canadian is not just a xenophobe and a colonial, who is blissfully unaware that the European visitor he is trying so hard to impress is openly laughing at him; he is also helpless. Instead of being instrumental in plotting Butler's escape, the obtuse Canadian with the "silly hiss" slows him down (50).

One could argue that Wiebe's alterations of the Butler text are merely cosmetic, minor changes made in an audacious attempt to capture the racist reality faced by Riel and the Métis when they resist the transfer of their homeland from the Hudson's Bay Company to Canada. But when

one examines “Games for Queen Victoria,” particularly in light of the author’s wider work on the Métis, it becomes apparent that these revisions are neither superficial nor innocent. As in *The Scorched-Wood People*, his novel about Riel’s role in the two North-West conflicts, Wiebe appears determined to do everything possible to lionize the “giant” who “could have ruled the world” and to vilify his foes, who brand him insane because their societies cannot “hold a man with a vision like Riel” (*Scorched-Wood* 36, 351). The end result of his decontextualization of people like Butler and Drever, is that their opposition to Riel becomes psychologically and politically unmotivated. It is not induced by disparate sociopolitical interests, or even possibly by the two men’s moral revulsion toward the Métis leader’s behaviour, but simply by white racism. Considering Wiebe’s depiction of Butler’s views of Riel, one would never suspect that, while being a product of his time, the British officer could also write that “the whole white world is leagued in bitter strife against the Indian. The American and Canadian are only names that hide beneath them the greed of united Europe” (240-42). Or, even more forcefully, “From southernmost Texas to most northern Montana there is but one universal remedy for Indian difficulty — kill him” (241).

To be fair to Wiebe, he recently appears to have modified his views of Butler.¹⁰ In 1989, thirteen years after the appearance of “Games for Queen Victoria,” he published another story about the author of *The Great Lone Land*. Entitled “A Night in Fort Pitt or (if You Prefer) the Only Perfect Communists in the World,” the later work too derives from Butler’s book but only incidentally. Set in the last months of 1870 on the North Saskatchewan River, the story revolves around the serendipitous encounter between Butler and a young Cree woman, the “Impossibly beautiful” Mary Sinclair (235). When Butler is caught in a blizzard, he elects to ignore the advice of his “Indian guide and Métis companion” and press on alone in an attempt to reach Fort Pitt. However, when the famished and half-frozen traveller finally arrives at the garrison, he not only finds shelter but also a “face he instantly loved,” “the most beautiful girl on the prairies” (231, 235, 244).¹¹

“A Night in Fort Pitt” is set against a real political backdrop. Butler is on “assignment” for the territorial government and a smallpox epidemic is causing havoc in the region, leaving in its trail “a brutal litany of disease and starvation and death” (240, 238). Yet, like “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” the story is less concerned with a historical incident than with the writing of a narrative about the historical past. It highlights the fluidity of reality, providing several different versions of the meeting between

Butler and Sinclair. Butler fears that the wondrous face he sees when he reaches the fort could be a mirage, a delusion brought about by the bitter cold and isolation. As he muses, "Such materializations are possible out of the driving blackness of a prairie blizzard, lantern-light and such sudden woman's beauty as perfect as it is unbelievable?" (235). Still, he becomes convinced not only that Sinclair serves him a sumptuous dinner of "buffalo steak and potatoes" but even dreams that she lifts her "heavy cotton nightgown over her head" and joins him in bed (239, 242). Sinclair, in turn, years later claims that "the tall and very good looking" stranger she met when she was young asked her to marry him and "live with him in the Old Country." But she, as "a child of the Saskatchewan," could not imagine living in another country and "sent him away" (243). In addition, the narrator says that there are other possible variations on what transpired that wintry night. Among the more notable of them is perhaps one that Butler and Sinclair "dream together" about the return of the buffalo herds, the coming of the Mounted Police, and Big Bear's heroic efforts to protect the Cree from smallpox, "this invisible, this incomprehensible evil that rotted them" (245, 247).

In relation to "Games for Queen Victoria," what is most striking about "A Night in Fort Pitt" is Wiebe's representation of Butler. As Wiebe has his narrator tell us, the visitor loves Mary Sinclair

as only the truest Victorian male who believed all his life that Jesus Christ and Napoleon Bonaparte were the greatest men in all of human history could love, a latter-day romantic when romanticism was still acceptable in a male if he was also practical and above all heroic, dear god, was a man who championed the innocent and detested the brutalities of war all his life while becoming one of Victoria's most honoured and decorated soldiers, a member of Field Marshall Wolseley's brilliant Officers' Ring that fought for the Empire on four continents, and who dreamed for forty years of "*the Great Lone Land*" as he called the Canadian prairie and never saw again and idealized every Indian person he lived near for those few months in 1870 and 1871 when they were either dying of smallpox or more or less starving despite their unselfish greedless tradition of sharing everything.... (236)

Or, as the narrator adds, loosely quoting *The Great Lone Land*, Butler considers the prairie First Nations "the only perfect communists in the world, who, if they would only be as the Africans or the Asiatics it would be all right for them; if they would be our slaves they might live." But

since they stubbornly insist on being “free — we will kill them” (236; Butler 242-43).

The depiction of Butler in “A Night at Fort Pitt” clearly reflects a degree of ambivalence toward the British officer on the part of Wiebe. Butler of course remains a European gentleman, certain of the pre-eminence of his ways. As the narrator describes the response of Butler’s Aboriginal companions when the visitor chooses to continue on alone to Fort Pitt despite the storm, “they watched him ride west alone, the prairie so open, he could inevitably be found if lost, as impatient and as superior with all necessary knowledge as every white man they had ever met” (231). Yet the “Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath” (235) is not devoid of humanity or empathy toward the region’s first inhabitants. Butler’s kindness is manifest not only in his blunt analysis of the relations between Natives and Newcomers in the North-West but also in his compassion for the Aboriginal people struck by the smallpox epidemic. As we are told he reacts when he learns that Mary Sinclair’s father, the Hudson’s Bay Company factor at Fort Pitt, has used shots of blood from a *Saulteaux* to vaccinate everyone under his watch, except for the local Cree: “Butler could barely restrain himself. Use them, use them, any way you can, use their very blood” (239).

Wiebe’s conflicting attitudes toward Butler actually are already foreshadowed in “Games for Queen Victoria,” beginning with the work’s structure. The story’s conclusion, in particular, suggests that the author wishes the reader to identify with Riel, the righteous intellectual who rejects “the arbitrary arrangement” imposed on his people by the Canadian government and the Hudson’s Bay Company (43). The peace-loving Métis leader is definitely presented in a more sympathetic manner than the martial Butler, a professional soldier for whom the North-West is just another of Britain’s far-flung and exotic possessions in which to pursue “the noble spirit of military adventure” (42). Paradoxically, “Games for Queen Victoria” is centred not on the mixed-raced mystic with the “remarkable face” and “glaring black eyes” but on the haughty European officer who snubs him because he presumably lacks an “emperor’s spirit” (57, 59). That is, in the end, the story is not so much about the Métis leader as about Butler, the man the historical Riel brands one of his people’s bitterest “ennemis” (Riel, I: 357).

Wiebe’s ambivalence toward Butler becomes even more noticeable in his delineation of the protagonist’s involvement with the anonymous Canadian he meets on the way to Fort Garry. As noted above, the Canadian is an irredeemable bigot who openly refers to the Métis people

as semi-barbarians and to their leader as a “‘bastard’... not to be trusted ‘near his own mother’” (49). Next to such a retrograde, Butler cannot help but appear civilized. The feeling that Butler is innately decent is further accentuated when Wiebe has the traveller declare that he is “impressed with the early leadership of M. Riel” and that he can well understand the Métis opposition to the intruding Canadians, since the “least Englishman would have done no less” (43). Moreover, Butler is not just a pragmatic and relatively tolerant individual; he is also versatile. As portrayed by Wiebe, he is nothing short of a European superman, a newly-arrived visitor who is more knowledgeable of the Red River landscape than his helplessly inept “local confidant” (49).

The rather unequal relationship that Wiebe constructs for Butler and the Canadian is not without complications, however. First, Butler is so patently superior to his acquaintance — and perhaps to Riel — that, if he is representative of his people, one cannot help but deduce that the British Empire deserved to rule Canada in perpetuity. Second, and more significantly, no such denigration of the Canadian occurs in *The Great Lone Land*. Quite the contrary, the historical Butler goes to great lengths to express his gratitude to the New World friend who “supplied me with that knowledge of the ground which I required” (117). This discrepancy between the two texts inevitably compels one to ask why a modern Canadian writer would deliberately besmirch a Canadian historical figure to the point of ending up celebrating an imperial professional soldier? The most logical explanation, in view of Wiebe’s other work on Riel and the Métis, is that the author wishes to prove that the only reason there was ever an armed clash at Red River, and later at Batoche, was because of the chauvinist and imperialist Ontarians. As he writes elsewhere, the culprits in the North-West conflicts are those Upper Canadians, who are “so *upper*” that they “somewhere got the notion that Red River must be their proper colony” (*Scorched-Wood* 26). Such an ideological agenda would account for Wiebe’s authorial intrusions, especially his transformation of Butler’s companion from a local merchant into an Ontario carpetbagger and his attribution to the character of an overt racism and obtuseness that he does not possess in the model work.

The presence of Wiebe’s authorial hand in the text, his failure to give his characters what Bakhtin calls a “sphere of influence” (320), would also explain the inconsistencies in the portrayal of Butler himself. Early in “Games for Queen Victoria,” Wiebe has the Irishman state that “the great lone land” belongs to the Métis “through the aboriginal rights of their mothers” (43). But in an apparent effort to dissociate Riel and his

people from central Canadians, the author also has his protagonist assert that “the wild Métis, unreclaimed as the prairie and the bison they hunted with savage joy,” have little sense of loyalty to governments with which they have little contact. In his words, “Doubtless they had heard of England, in a shadowy way, but Canada?” The last part of Butler’s statement is perplexing, since he has just observed that Riel, and presumably his people, was “quite French and Indian” (43). French here would seem to refer to Quebec; that is, Lower Canada or, more correctly, *le Canada*. The historical Riel is certainly aware of his ethnocultural and biological connection to the old Canada. As he writes in his ode “Le peuple Métis-Canadien-français,”

Métis et Canadiens ensemble
 Français, si nos trois éléments
 S’amalgament bien, il me semble
 Que nous serons un jour plus grands. (IV: 324)

Again, the only reason Wiebe appears to have an otherwise well-informed Butler claim that the Métis have not even heard of Canada, their paternal homeland, is that such a belief coincides neatly with the author’s desire to conflate Ontario and Quebec as “strangers all” to the “Prairie” Métis (*Scorched-Wood* 44).

In conclusion, Wiebe’s “Games for Queen Victoria” raises a host of issues. To begin with, there is the matter of the ethics of literary quotation, especially when the reliance on another writer is not only unacknowledged but also so extensive as to make him virtually a coauthor. To be cynical about it, if one were to be asked where the voice comes from in “Games for Queen Victoria,” one would have to reply: largely from William F. Butler’s *The Great Lone Land*. Wiebe’s story is also marred by a major aesthetic flaw. While the text purports to be an attempt at redeeming Riel’s role during the Red River Resistance, it focusses almost exclusively on Butler. It is not just narrated by the British officer, but devotes only a handful of the concluding paragraphs to Riel. In short, it is a contribution to the very Eurocentric discourse it so vociferously decries. Finally, Wiebe’s story underlines the ambiguous relationship between a writer and his characters, particularly the figure through whom the work is mediated, the narrator. Vargas Llosa contends that a writer “can give any kind of power to the narrator, but always within a coherent system.” Along with time, he explains, it is the narrator that gives “fiction its sovereignty, its independence from the real world.” Thus, in order not to alienate the reader, “the narrator must be faithful to the laws that create the [text’s] system of narration”

(47). This is precisely what Wiebe is unable, or unwilling, to do. Indeed, so blatant is Wiebe's manipulation of his narrator and other characters that, in spite of considerable borrowing from Butler, ultimately there is only one voice in "Games for Queen Victoria": the author's.

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NOTES

¹ "Games for Queen Victoria" appeared originally in *Saturday Night* Mar. 1976: 61-67. It was later reprinted in Wiebe's collection *The Angel of Tar Sands and Other Stories*, the edition to which I refer.

² One of the film treatment's "Essential Scenes" reads: "British Captain [sic] Wm. Butler shoots billiards while Riel has to wait to ask him about Sir John A.'s intentions" ("Riel" 161).

³ According to Wolsley, "The important news I received . . . from Lieutenant William Butler was that Riel was in a perplexed state of mind, not knowing how far he could trust his intriguing Bishop [Alexandre Taché]" (204).

⁴ Both sets of ellipses in this quotation are Wiebe's.

⁵ Butler wrote other works about the Prairies, including a sequel to *The Great Lone Land* entitled *The Wild North Land: The Story of a Winter Journey, with Dogs, across Northern North America* (1873). For an overview of some of his other texts, see Thacker 52-55, 125-26.

⁶ The translations from Saramago are mine. "Narrador inexistente" is a revised version of "Entre o narrador onisciente e o monologo interior: Deveremos voltar ao autor?" ("Between the Omniscient Narrator and the Interior Monologue: Should We Return to the Author?"), a paper Saramago presented at a meeting of the International Comparative Literature Association in Edmonton in the mid-1990s. I would like to express my gratitude to Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Éditions Slatkine for providing me with a pre-publication copy of the essay.

⁷ The treatment of Scott by Riel and his provisional government remains controversial to this day not only because they executed the Orangeman for rather obscure reasons but also because they refused to return his body. Sam Steele, for example, writes that when Wolsley's forces arrived at Fort Garry and opened Scott's coffin, "the box was empty." He adds that the soldiers believed that the coffin had been "buried in the fort to deceive people as to the true disposal of the remains of the murdered man," which probably had been "weighed down with chains and forced through a hole in the ice of the Red River" (35). For an excellent synthesis of the subject, see Bumsted, especially the essays "Thomas Scott's Body" (3-10) and "Why Shoot Thomas Scott? A Study in Historical Evidence" (197-209).

⁸ In a note to his edition of Alexander Begg's Red River journal, W.L. Morton writes, "William Drever, Jr., 1844-?, son of William Drever, Sr.; like his father, a Red River merchant" (Begg 192). Although Butler refers to his companion as Dreever, I follow the more common spelling, Drever.

⁹ Butler's testimony is corroborated by Walter Traill, Catherine Parr Traill's youngest son. An officer with the Hudson's Bay Company, who himself became a "prisoner-guest" of Riel at Fort Garry, Traill states that his friend Drever is "a man whose movements are marked by the enemy because of his efforts during the past year to aid the settlers and the help he gave Riel's prisoners to escape" (198, 195).

¹⁰ In his 1983 novel *My Lovely Enemy*, Wiebe writes that Butler has an "elegant" prose style, certainly in comparison with that of George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company and (ostensible) author of *Narrative of a Journey round the World during the Years 1841 and 1842* (39).

¹¹ The historical Butler describes the young woman he meets at Fort Pitt as "the brightest eyed little lassie, half Cree, half Scotch, in the North-west" (250).

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