

Finding Narratives: *George, Vancouver* and the Process of Discovery

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GEORGE BOWERING HAS OFTEN DESCRIBED his feelings of alienation on leaving the University of British Columbia, the *Tish* group, and starting life anew as a doctoral student at the University of Western Ontario in 1966. What he found was that being at a geographical remove from the West Coast did not abate his interest in the Vancouver scene, so he turned to discover the history of exploration that enabled it, and to explore some of his own history in that city. My own history of migration within Canada repeats Bowering's, more than twenty years later: I too moved from Western Canada to the graduate program at the University of Western Ontario, and developed an interest in exploring the West Coast from the vantage point of London, through Bowering's writings. Bowering's personal history in Ontario is well documented, interestingly, in his essay titled "Reaney's Region" (1982), which addresses the Souwesto region from which James Reaney's groundbreaking regionalist work is based. Bowering takes a perverse, but productive, delight in discovering the place of the West Coast while he is ensconced in Reaney's territory.¹ He returns to the revelations he found when transplanted to the Western in both the preface to his 1980 "historiographical metafiction" (Hutcheon 14) *Burning Water* and his 1970 long poem *George, Vancouver: a discovery poem*. Due to my interest in the convergence of one's place, one's life, and one's writing, in this paper I seek to analyze the trajectory of Bowering's biotextual impulse by closely examining that first long poem: *George, Vancouver: a discovery poem*.² While this trajectory culminates in his recent poetic memoir, *His Life: a poem* (2000), *George, Vancouver* demonstrates the public dimension that has always been part of Bowering's individual idiosyncratic efforts, finding its apotheosis in his recent tenure as parliamentary Poet Laureate (2003-2004). In his discovery poem, he reworks his life in con-

nection with a well-known historical figure, George Vancouver, and a well-known geographical location, simultaneously rediscovering both Vancouvers as they intersect with Bowering as both poet and persona. *George, Vancouver* signals Bowering's first attempt at establishing what I call "finding narratives" of a West Coast regionality³ by publicly emphasizing a more intimate geography than the national scene.

In *His Life*, Bowering writes, "exploration: an easy trope," indicating perhaps his disenchantment with one of *George, Vancouver*'s central concerns in a postcolonial era, where exploration has been an extensive topic of scrutiny, but there is a difference between the "easy trope" of exploration and the process of discovery of self through writing that Bowering's corpus engages. Exploration stops too soon. In terms of historical geography, exploration has been about finality, the end result, designating the mindset that searches for the Northwest Passage and aids imperialist and expansionist endeavours. By contrast, the process of discovery is about continuity and difference: there is no stated aim, nor end result, but an intense and sustained energy for seeing history, geography, and the self anew, represented by the sense of immediacy that Bowering's poetic strives for. In much of Bowering's poetry, the "I" takes centre stage, allowing for criticisms aimed at his egocentrism and arrogance,⁴ yet Bowering's irreverent poetic persona is a far cry from the "great man" of eighteenth-century exploration like George Vancouver. Rather, Bowering is in the process of discovering a continually shifting "I" that provides fertile ground for irreverence, poetry, and a destabilizing of authority. Thus, the "process of discovery" enables a way of theorizing the interconnections between poetics, culture, and empire in *George, Vancouver: a discovery poem* through the idiosyncratic individual, exploding any myth of a monologic identity and offering a "poetics of openness" (Barbour 32) in exchange for a fantasy of origins.

Locus, Region, Nation

Bowering's point in much of his commentary on Canadian literature and criticism is that his type of Canadian writing will not necessarily fit in with a *Central* Canadian canon that includes Archibald Lampman and Charles G.D. Roberts. In an interview with Ken Norris he states categorically that "your tradition is your autobiography. ... One isn't passively schlepped into a tradition" (25). Instead, he cites the neces-

sity of each reader creating a canon and tradition out of his or her own reading, as per Ezra Pound's modernist strictures.⁵ In his idiosyncratic, personal historical treatise *Bowering's B.C.: A Swashbuckling History* (1996), therefore, he jettisons the idea that there is only one way to read events, only one canon of knowledge, or only one tradition of interpretation.⁶ In a fascinating turn to a regionalist posture, he instead creates the distinction between "us" and "them," reversing the usual hierarchical relationship:

Central Canadians say that the 401 highway between Montreal and Toronto runs west, whereas visiting British Columbians will know that it is running south.... This is the subjugation of geography (the non-human) to history (the human — read European). As far as those white people in Montreal and Toronto are concerned, the discovery and settlement of Canada was a matter of Europeans going westward. (21)

While this regionalist stance provides a totalizing narrative of its own, by refusing to read the idea of discovery as a finite predecessor to ownership and settlement, Bowering creates a space to turn to idiosyncratic individual histories that comprise the larger fiction of westward expansion as a civilizing mission. His own larger enterprise thus constitutes regionality, not regionalism.

Bowering's own journey eastward in 1966 cemented his inclination to separate B.C. as a different sort of Canada than the one "the text books come from." In "Reaney's Region," an article that ostensibly reads James Reaney's contribution to Canadian writing, Bowering meditates on his own status as outsider to a regionalist ethos and a southwestern Ontario poetic in his time at the University of Western Ontario (1966-67). His criticism separates "Reaney's Region" from "Bowering's B.C." on the grounds of poetics and literary regionalism. He writes that with *Tish* "[he] was involved with writers who strove mightily to make poetic sense and poetic sound out of the area, out of what we called 'the local'" (1) or Charles Olson's term, locus, an intimate awareness of place without an attempt to master it.⁷ Yet, despite this endeavour, Bowering found himself unable to understand "this peculiar thing called Regionalism" (1). Why does regionalism not equate with locus? Why does *Tish* not equate with Reaney's Souwesto poets and artists? Both groups represent important moments in Canada's literary history, but while the *Tish* poets were influenced by the New American

Poetry, Bowering names Northrop Frye as the master of Reaney's philosophy. In 1972 Bowering writes,

In school the little bit of Canadian history I was exposed to was the ringing of the names Cartier, Champlain, Dollard and Cabot.... A similar education was experienced by the other BC poets of my generation. For that reason we had to discover — and invent — our land for ourselves.... I read, among other things, Menzies' 18th-century journal and traveled on the waters myself in order to write my book on Captain Vancouver's visit to our coast. We had to cover the ground ourselves and bring any myths to life, not out of books but from the very soil and water and air. This is the reality for a western artist and is why his work is so much different from the Jungians and Frye-heads in the east. ("Confessions" 79)

Bowering asserts that he did not come out of a shared regional or national understanding of his geography or history, that he and his fellow *Tish* poets embraced Olson's poetics in part because it advocated what they needed to do anyway: come to their own understanding of a place that had not been domesticated into a national or understood tradition. The great myths that Frye perceived as integral to universal writing, even writing that pursued the universal through the regional, did not work for Bowering.⁸ Thus, Bowering defines Reaney's art as "a marriage of 'documentary and myth'" (6) and defines his own poetics in opposition to it, claiming that West Coast poets "did not have time for documentary nor space for myth" (7), because they could not draw on a communal understanding of place. Bowering rejects region for locus, a "proprioceptive" stance coming out of Charles Olson's writings that entails, in Fred Wah's useful paraphrase, "claiming the physical in writing ... as an antidote to preconception, and frequently, as a simple call for spontaneity" (*Faking It* 27). In providing his literary "antidote to preconception" through forty years of publishing poetry, Bowering has helped to form a Canadian poetic tradition that includes the West Coast and his anti-Frygean aesthetic. His work in discovering the individual, poet and explorer, in the exploration myths of George Vancouver and the Northwest Passage in *George, Vancouver: a discovery poem* is one of his first acts in destabilizing and provoking this new literary history.

Exploration and Discovery

When I was a student at UBC, I knew hardly anything about B.C. I was a history major who took a bus that crossed Discovery Street, and didn't have a clue.... I didn't know that Discovery Street was named for Captain Vancouver's ship, though there was a model of that ship at the downtown library. Vancouver streets are filled with names from B.C. history, but the people who ride the streets don't know who they are named for.... We never heard them in our history classes. (*Bowering's B.C.* 5, 41)

The writing of *George, Vancouver* precedes the institutionalization of postcolonialism; “however, the poem anticipates postcolonialism’s concerns with mapping, cartography and the assertion of control that is the act, not process, of ‘discovery’ through the naming of places.” Bowering attempts, therefore, to make the act of discovery, obtaining “sight or knowledge” “for the first time,” an ongoing process in *George, Vancouver*. The book begins with an assertion of action in the infinitive: “To chart this land” is the proposed project. Bowering’s charting, however, sets up an assertion of poetic process against Vancouver’s charting, which is a scientific, geographic, and imperialist one. “Charting” the land in terms of language is the poet’s territory, which Bowering accesses through his eyes and experience,⁹ precisely by noting the impossibility of geometry reproducing the complexity, the nooks and crannies and endless peregrinations of the coast/line, especially for the narrow mind with its preconceptions, assumptions, and expectations. Bowering foregrounds the tension between the goal and the reality. Even as he acknowledges the historical Vancouver’s desire to explore, map, and pin down each detail, to discover in *The Discovery*, Bowering’s insertion of the personal, experimental, and aesthetic thwarts a linear narrative of a controlled and contained geography.¹⁰

As “a discovery poem,” as its subtitle calls it, *George, Vancouver* is Bowering’s first extended play with the terms “exploration” and “discovery,” and it is Bowering’s first long, or at least book-length, poem: 590 lines of poetry over thirty-five pages. In these lines, it spans two centuries from the Madness of King George the III to the idiosyncrasies of George Bowering. Often critics, including Bowering himself, seem to see *George, Vancouver* as a blueprint for the better-known *Burning Water* and not much more.¹¹ To me, however, it cements the differences between Bowering’s B.C. and Reaney’s Region. History and geography

here do not provide the comfort of a shared understanding but the space for a mobile subjectivity Bowering continually creates through his poetry that goes by the singular pronoun 'I,' which refers to multiple individuals.

In "Bowering's Lines" (1989), Fred Wah examines analogies between the coast line, the poetic line, the line on the map, and the narrative 'line' of Bowering's biography, connections he encapsulates in the phrase "line is lineage": "Here the map becomes the explorer's mind, the line of Menzie's [*sic*] mind, the king's minds. The coast is only a line, to reiterate the title of a conference on West Coast writing at Simon Fraser University several years ago.... But it is, finally, a measuring of the self that is at work in the poem" (104). Thus, the poem performs a work that the novel *Burning Water* cannot: the long poem measures the self through language, distinct from narrative. Bowering adheres to Olson's conception of "locus"; thus, his poetry must be measured by its balance between the poet as object and the objects that surround him, the self as aware of place, in situ, rather than bolstering a preconception of place with its attendant myths.

Frank Davey discusses the potential destabilizing power of poetic form in his paper on the long poem given at The Coast is Only a Line conference at Simon Fraser University, 25 July 1981, the same conference that Wah references. Davey argues that the long poem, in moving away from narrative, needs to form/find other iterative structures to make connections within the poem. He cites using "language itself," "the recurrent image," "inventiveness, linguistic and narrative adventure, game, jest, and play" as strategies used by writers of the long poem. He continues in this vein: "The very structures writers have used to replace sequential narrative — collage, symphonic form, geography, play, recurrent image — become, if successful, other kinds of narrative, sources of motion, energy, and surprise" (8). In *George, Vancouver*, geography, play, and the recurrent image provide the energy and motion within the long poem by connecting its disparate pieces, energizing the trope of exploration to engage the process of discovery in the reader. Among the recurring images of *George, Vancouver* I have chosen to focus on the weed book and the bridge, because these images offer strategies for finding narratives within Bowering's long lyric poem, but also because these narratives lead to further readings, proof of Bowering's 'poetic of openness.'

Reading the Weed

In *George, Vancouver*, Bowering makes extensive and complicated use of the first-person pronoun. The poem's voice moves from third person imperial tones, to an "I" that seems to be Vancouver, to another "I" that uses Bowering's own anecdotes, to the "I, George" of the final pages that can be usefully read as either or both of George Vancouver and George Bowering meditating on Vancouver. All of these I's help to destabilize the concepts of authoritative geography or history, and allow room for multiple "finding" narratives. The term "finding narratives" emphasizes the active process, and the exploratory nature of writing, that is a crucial part of my reading of Bowering's biotextual impulse. Nothing is assured, because that would halt the process of discovery, stabilizing "discovery" into a past act. At most the poem's voice offers "some surety," as *George, Vancouver's* first page states:

A drawing of an Indian weed
is some surety,
an illustration of a leaf
with only a thousand lines in it.

To say the ship floats
in this water,
the sun sinks behind the offshore islands
of the inland sea.

That is the possible.

The degree of "certainty" and the "feeling of safety; confidence" (*OED*) is modified and destabilized by the qualifier "some." This passage explores the eighteenth-century rational mind that uses empiricism in the face of a strange and foreign world. There seems to be an implicit faith here in what can be seen and transcribed by men. However, the possible is confronted, or at least unsettled, by what is impossible to this mindset: the possible authority of the "Indian weed" that denies surety.

When living in London, Ontario, Bowering rediscovered Vancouver and its environs through the journals of Archibald Menzies, botanist to Captain George Vancouver. Text generates text as Menzies's "weed book," Vancouver's epithet for Menzies's journals within both *George, Vancouver* and *Burning Water*, becomes one of the sources for Bowering's

first weed book, *George, Vancouver: a discovery poem*, published, significantly, by Toronto's Weed/Flower Press. This is a moment of discovery to which Bowering returns again and again in interviews and discussions of his literature. Two decades after leaving London, he would recall,

When I went to London, Ontario, ... There didn't seem to be any 'place' there ..., all that was there was *names*. That is to say, you couldn't get lost in the woods because there weren't any woods. There were wood lots, and the wood lots had somebody's name attached to them, and had had for two hundred years. So what I said was, 'what am I going to write?' (qtd. in Miki 25)

Feeling dislocated among too many named places, Bowering discovered new territory and old terrain in the library. It is Menzies's writing that returned to him the place out of which his own writing began, "the kind [of place] you can get lost in and find your way in" (Bowering qtd. in Wah 105), antithetical to the kind of settled place Bowering found in London, Ontario that he relates to James Reaney, Northrop Frye, and a Central Canadian tradition.

Weeds, or at least plants, are the basis for Menzies's botanical writing; historically, his authority came from his instructions from Sir Joseph Banks and the Secretary of State. The word "weeds" designates plants that do not serve a gardener's purpose, that are in the way of "progress," unauthorized; thus, a "weed book" serves as an alternative authority to the authorized version of Vancouver's voyage. Bowering makes much of the contest between botanist and explorer in *Burning Water*,¹² having the battle of wills and authority over writing set the stage for Menzies's eventual (fully fictional) murder of Vancouver in the name of science and in revenge for his ruined botanical specimens, termed "weeds" by Bowering's George Vancouver. What Bowering's Vancouver sees as weeds, however, are valuable treasures to the botanist, whose faith lies in the surety of science.

Unlike his historical personae's journals, Bowering's weed book does not put forth a rival authority, but contains multiple concomitant versions through the displaced utterance of found poetry (2, 21), quoting directly from Menzies' and Vancouver's journals. Bowering's long poem is more interested in process, acknowledging the act of writing — "I keep losing sight of the subject, / Captain Vancouver seems lost in the poem" (15) — rather than only the end result. Vancouver's authority,

however, rests in his pursuit of cartography, which ideally weeds out the North American continent to find the Northwest Passage:

In the king's mind
ships sailed full of guns & furs.

In the mind, no icebergs —
the mind has mountains
& waters, & ships to sail them. (9)

The Passage is “a cold dream” that rejects the scientific realities the West Coast has to offer for its fantasy road to riches, glory, and conquest:

They say
the Strait of Anian
leads to Scotland snow.

A cold
dream,
here the rains
nourish maiden's bellies
such as Huklyt never felt,

& flowers, here
where no weed grows,
what we will call

epigaea repens
for fancy,
lately called science

Epigaea repens, which can be translated “discovering/ upon the earth” (my translation), is an apt fancy and emblem for such an expedition as Vancouver's and Menzies's. It also demonstrates that Bowering shares neither Vancouver's monolithic goal nor Menzies's faith in science. For Bowering believes in the “open field”¹³: “no weed grows” here because Bowering does not limit his field of fancy or authority, designating what belongs and what doesn't by category. *Epigaea repens* is also the Latin name for the trailing arbutus, better known as the Mayflower, that other ship of discovery, founding flower/vehicle of North America's south and east, a ship that, in American culture, embodies a kind of fantasy of origins, a founding, not a finding, if you will.¹⁴ Ultimately, Bowering's weed book is a finding narrative that rejects the categorizing of plants, discoveries, or words as weeds; it is his irreverent take on origins, using

his version of the “mayflower” to turn a potential story of origins on its ear, that opens the possibilities of discovery in poetry and history. While finding narratives do not lend themselves to fomenting nationalist fervour, Bowering’s weed books publicly endorse the value of idiosyncrasy in destabilizing both tales of discovery and originary fantasies.

It is the extraneous and unexpected that do not add up to the completed chart, or passage, or poem — that unfinalizable “surplus of humanness,” to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s phrase, that cannot be contained — that has an outlet in Bowering’s poetry, and that moves the poem beyond the “easy trope” of nautical exploration to further finding, not founding, narratives:

On water-skis to Passage Island
 she followed me, sunlight
 cast up from the sea,
 rippling across her bare legs.

Spanish Banks, where we’d circled
 out from the river, became a low bluff
 of outline, the soft city gone quiet.

I shut off the engine & went ashore,
 looking for the rumoured snakes
 on the island’s one acre. (13)

Bowering’s 1960s anecdote here asserts that the authority of explorer, monarch, and empire have had their day, and that the “I” of the poet and his process of discovery has an equally important life in the writing to be charted. The “rumoured snakes” manifest a type of averted “finding narrative” in that all the speaker finds are used condoms, again defeating any anticipated discovery of origins with the wry image of the prophylactics: the documented, found sewage that defeats the potential mythology of the snake. Bowering’s biotextual impulse repulses any attempt at using anecdote as a bridge to a master, founding narrative.

Bridging the Gap

Bridges, however, are a reality of the Vancouver cityscape and its emergence in the midst of various rivers, channels, and inlets. More importantly, the *Tish* poets felt that their attention to the bridges gave them access to the city’s language. In a conversation between Bowering and

Frank Davey, both comment on the prevalence of the bridge in *Tish* publications:

GB: ... I recall that all the *Tish* poets were writing about bridges; why were the bridges so important to all the *Tish* poets?

FD: I think we did decide that this was a characteristic of the city. ... The problem in constructing Vancouver was in fact bridging these gaps in the irregular space of the city. Much of the energy of the city must have gone into that kind of reaching out, that kind of bridging — even now of course they talk about bridging over to Vancouver Island.

GB: So we had the whole idea of doing something with Vancouver such as Williams did with Paterson; and as Williams used the mountain metaphorically we were using bridges.

FD: Yes, and I think we weren't just writing *about* bridges, but that most of us were aware that the bridge had to be an emotionally true metaphor — that we had to *feel* the impulse of the bridge, not just talk about bridges.

GB: We weren't building a bridge to Toronto.

FD: No [laughing]. (*Three* 120)

According to Davey the bridge has both a concrete reality and a metaphorical life, again following from Olson's strictures on locus: the *Tish* poets needed to be aware of "the impulse of the bridge" for it to figure in their work. Thus, the recurrence of the bridge image is another continuation of Bowering's work with the *Tish* collective, and thus I argue that *George, Vancouver* can be seen as a bridge itself between that work and his later long, biotextual efforts such as *Autobiology* (1972) and *His Life*. Formally, Bowering reaches beyond the lyric through the connective tissues of the reiterated image to the long poem and the biotext, marking *George, Vancouver* as foundational to Bowering's larger writing process.

In one of his many pronouncements on writing and its processes in *Errata*, Bowering comments on the relationship between "himself" and his writing and so defines the biotext as a form that privileges literary form as "the very place where the writer of the poem or the fiction found himself.... Readers of [Ondaatje's] *Running in the Family* know right away that they are not getting history, not getting autobiography. Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him" (34). Bowering privileges literary form as instrumental to the growth of a writer and the writer's process. The "extension" of the writer is neither normative nor "natural"; rather, it is a conscious effort of will to use

form to defeat preconception and passive reading. This experimental reaching beyond tradition in turn affects the artist, his abilities, his ‘self’ and life. Bowering on various occasions has described his own process of creating a “baffle,” a rigid set of boundaries that gives a writing form and that limits, in Bowering’s understanding, the tyrannical efforts of the writer to control the story or poem, the form, and the possibilities. Contrary as it may seem, in Bowering’s process the baffle extends the writer, perhaps in the same perverse way that the constraint of being physically distant from Vancouver allowed Bowering to extend his sense of that place in poetry. Bowering pushes the boundaries of form in the direction of the documentary poem as well in *George, Vancouver*: the documentary poem not as written by Dorothy Livesay, with her concern for the historical record, but with an idiosyncratic twist. Bowering’s poem is both based on documents from the library and simultaneously documents aspects of his life and writing.

So, then, in *George, Vancouver* the “Twenty-nine bridges to cross” in Vancouver also represent a mindset, the psychological space of a bridging between self and writing, between previous and present writing, and between Vancouver and London, Ontario. One of the first “contemporary” parts to the poem begins,

Twenty-nine bridges to cross,
one to leap from
thru the soft air
of the inland sea. (10)

The passage tells of a young suicide in the city’s downtown core, but later in the poem (though “historically” prior), the air becomes the only bridge or passage across the continent in the flight of fancy “Vancouver” the navigator broods upon periodically, imagining himself as “the flying Dutchman” (12). The *OED* lists among its definitions for “passage,” “a part of a discourse or writing in which the author passes or turns aside for a time to some other subject; a digression,” but also “a crossing; a ford, ferry, or bridge”; and “a way, road, path, route, channel; a mountain pass; an entrance or exit.” Bowering’s “digression” into fancy enables a historical, mythic, albeit farcical, revisioning. Thus, in the poem’s penultimate page, the soft air offers a dream of success:

If we could invite the fog
of the Japanese current

& sail the map in their minds,
 we may be in Hudson's Bay
 tomorrow. (38)

Air and thought become the sea on which Vancouver wishes to sail, the only possible bridge across a continent,¹⁵ for the only way to succeed in finding the bridge, the passage, the Strait of Anian that his British masters abjure him to find is by "inviting the fog" of willed ignorance embodied in a monarch's distant power and to close down "the open field of possibilities" that Bowering's poetic and British Columbia's geography demands. We see the historical Vancouver's documented goal and authority as the fancy that Vancouver as geography denies.

Throughout the poem, Bowering characterizes the continent as a "barrier" to any sort of bridging: "the pressure of all that / continent, trackless, without waterway, / blunt barrier to commerce" (14). The language of Vancouver's day both represented and refracted in this new context allows for a moment of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, which suggests that "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" ("Discourse" 293). Here, George III's imperialist desire gives one context, George Vancouver's cartographic purpose another, and George Bowering's replacement and citation of this language within his displaced poem of the West Coast a third. I would add that the "barrier" is not only one to commerce but the barrier that Bowering erected between Bowering's B.C. and Reaney's Region. In the West Coast, he finds space for the idiosyncratic and individual that he feels "regionalism," presumably leading to nationalism and imperialism, will not permit. In *George, Vancouver* he writes,

To step from the sea
 ashore
 is to make one move
 eastward.

No sea passage
 across this land
 should be
 or is. (6)

To move eastward is to move out of place and into names, history, and, in a sense, proto-nationalism, if not imperialism, out of any sense of the

local that Bowering and *Tish* privileged. Nevertheless, “His Majesty’s dominions / want the Strait of Anian” (29), and historical exploration came with that purpose: to discover, not to process. Vancouver’s place in the landscape, on the coastline, however, dictates the impossibility of this project: he cannot provide such a Passage: “Clear vision. / Cook’s River is no river” (17). The historical Vancouver’s renaming — Cook’s River becomes Cook’s Inlet on the map as well as the poem’s page — clarifies and recategorizes the waterway as one with a definitive end, and therefore one that refuses to weed out the continent to maintain the king’s fancy.

The only bridge is George’s voice, be it the poet’s, the king’s, or the explorer’s. The voice, however, unlike the vision of Cook’s river, is unstable. It is unmarked by the possessive patronymic that functions as the waterway’s name. Readers must tentatively establish the “I” in question for themselves:

I keep losing sight of the subject,
Captain Vancouver seems lost in the poem.

.....

Trusting himself to the Inland Sea,
 forgetting stories of the Strait of Anian,
 setting foot among actual salmonberries.

The king’s voice has dominion,
it stretches from sea to sea.

His majesty also commanded
 exploration of the coast.
 He left that much open. (15)

In “setting foot among actual salmonberries,” George cannot acquiesce to the myth of the Strait when he sees the real world around him that belies such fantasy. While “The king’s voice has dominion, / it stretches from sea to sea” (15) on the bridges of his boats, which are both site of the captain’s orders and the king’s authority, that voice cannot find the passage it seeks to help substantiate the dominion it envisions. In this poem’s passages there is no authority but the poet’s, and it allows for multiple readings or the process of discovery would come to an end.

Bowering’s corpus asserts that the discovery of self is a process without either limit or achievable goal: “On entering this inlet, I, George, / sail beneath a suspended bridge / invisible in the fog” (14). Who is this

“I”? Who is this “George”? The moment, the subject, the geography, all are suspended in this moment of discovery where the “I” is speaker, poet, and historical subject all in one object extended and mobilized through form. Even the place is unfixed, “invisible” if not absent, in the fog: the awareness of the proximity of land and sea — the bridge marking the link between points on the coast — makes place present, but Bowering rejects the patronymic, the choice of Western explorers and namers everywhere for establishing imperial connection to place. In doing so, he refuses to stabilize the identity of “George,” and so rejects the naming he found in London, Ontario, along with the limitations of regionalism and narrative — where, we remember, he said, “there wasn’t any ‘place’, all that was there was *names*” (qtd. in Miki 24) — for the immediacy of sounding, sighting, touching, writing, and *rewriting* place and self through poetry. Here, the “process of discovery” will allow no one, authorized version of evidence on which to base a case or a claim, only weed books: in his continuing work with form and self, in his demand for process, he continues to reject the value of pragmatism that so often drives political and public demands for accountable culture or, historically, the Northwest Passage. As a poet, Bowering has garnered public attention without catering to popular tastes. His idiosyncratic contributions to Canada’s literature and history challenge traditional poetics, aesthetics, and nationalism, allowing his readers to see beyond the map or imperialist narrative to the coast/line beyond.

NOTES

¹ Even more recently, he has revisited both this territory and this argument in “Off Their Map” published in *Left Hook: a Sideways Look at Canadian Writing* (2005), Bowering’s most recent collected essays.

² George Bowering first coined the term “biotext” in relation to Michael Ondaatje’s work, including *Running in the Family*, a text that Julie Rak has recently cited as one of Canada’s most critically addressed auto/biographies (2005). Bowering writes, “I never wanted to write an autobiography. I think that certain works I have done with what looks like my life story should be called biotext. The problem with the historians, or let us say the way they chose to work, is this: they did not study what people are, but what they did. They were more interested in time than in place. So literary historians did not much address what books are, but rather who wrote them and how they fit into the time of their societies. Hence the deprivileging of literary form — the very place where the writer of the poem or the fiction found himself. Michael Ondaatje, in ‘Rock Bottom,’ created biotext, or it got created for him. Readers of *Running in the Family* know right away that they are not

getting history, not getting autobiography. Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him" (*Errata* 34). While Joanne Saul's recent work positions the biotext as an extension of the long poem, I disagree with her assertion that "the notion of 'biotext' cannot be thought of in isolation, but within the wide range of theorizing about autobiography, biography, and life writing" (269). Even when auto/biography is thought of as a "discourse" and not a "genre," as Rak following Marlene Kadar suggests (16), the fiction/poem/form remains underprivileged, contradicting Bowering's focus on *form* in his formulation.

Likewise, Gabriele Helms and Susanna Egan cite the word as a "new generic term ... in contemporary writing" akin to "Aritha van Herk's 'crypto-friction' in *In Visible Ink* (1991), Daphne Marlatt's 'fictionalysis,'" etc. They go on to note that "the new generic labels signal difference and a reconceptualization of life-writing conventions, often focusing explicitly on the curious relationship between living a life and telling or writing one" (237). Both van Herk and Marlatt stress the fictional aspect in their terminology. By contrast, auto/biography, that theorized and postmodern stance on life-writing, assumes a connection to Phillipe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact," whereas Bowering makes no such promises of truth to his readers.

Biotext has recently been taken up by Fred Wah in his exploration of hyphenated subjectivity in both *Faking It* and "Is a Door a Word?" in conjunction with Roy Miki's use of the term to discuss the impact of race and immigration on Canadian writing in *Broken Entries*, but race does not seem to have entered overtly into Bowering's original formulation.

³Traditionally, from E.K. Brown onward, regionalism has been positioned as a less fortunate sibling to a national or cosmopolitan literature, and thus somewhat dismissed by a nationalist critical establishment. Considerations of literary regionalism by Francesco Loriggio, Herb Wyile, and Frank Davey have become more theoretically sophisticated. I am especially indebted to Davey's "Toward the Ends of Regionalism" for the distinction he makes between regionalism — a more conservative practice — and regionality — a concept that can usefully address texts like Bowering's that destabilize conservative notions of region. The way I use this term in conjunction with Bowering's interactions with both UBC and *Tish* is to distinguish a shifting ground of region that is constructed as much by institutions as landscape.

⁴Jason Wiens's "George Bowering's Post-Tish Poetics" takes on the most sustained defense of Bowering's poetics against the charge of egocentrism.

⁵Bowering's tradition includes Percy Shelley, Charles Olson, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Frank Davey, to name a few. The constant presence of H.D.'s lyrics, unannounced and unfootnoted, in *His Life: a poem* requires its own analysis.

⁶He also provides an alternative B.C. canon in this work by means of an annotated bibliography (395-400).

⁷In Frank Davey's "Black Days on Black Mountain" (1965), Davey distinguishes the importance of locus as follows: "[Place] becomes important to a writer like Olson because, if a man exists in an 'object-object' relationship with external nature, and if he admits the integrity and right to particularity of all members of external nature, then the only way in which this man can approach and know nature is by participating in an established 'field' of objects, by acquainting himself with one place intimately. For the place must master the man, not man master the place" (126).

⁸Cf. Frye's "Preface" to *The Bush Garden* (i-x).

⁹In the Preface to *Burning Water*, Bowering writes, "that book [*George, Vancouver*] had a lot of myself mixed up in it, though it had to be objective if it was to be any good. It was only because I had put my own eyes into the poem and its story that those rocks and shoals were actual enough to make exploration worthwhile" (n.pag.).

¹⁰ While my attention to master narratives can be broadly traced back to Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Trent Keogh in "The international politics of existentialism: From Sartre, to Olson, to Bowering" (1996) traces Bowering's postmodern influences to a wide dissemination of "the international phenomenological philosophy known as existentialism" (37). My own understanding of postmodern subjectivity and its continuing partial, shifting construction is indebted to many sources, including Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Judith Butler.

¹¹ It has been plagued by brief, casual, and sometimes faulty readings. Of three contemporary reviews, Doug Fetherling offers it less than a paragraph, merely mentioning that the "the analogy is obvious" (83) and pondering the efficacy of its found poetry. Mike Doyle sounds the most common note by concluding his discussion with the statement "while it has obvious sources, *George, Vancouver*, as a Bowering work, is a small piece of an interesting larger picture" (108), and Scott Lawrance, missing the comma in the title, misses the point entirely.

¹² As the Preface to the published version of Menzies's journal indicates, the relationship between Vancouver and Menzies "became strained when the Captain demanded Menzies' journals and the latter refused to give them up until Sir Joseph Banks and the Admiralty had granted permission, which was in accordance with instruction issued to him before entering upon this voyage" (x).

¹³ Again the term is Charles Olson's from "Projective Verse": "From the moment he ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION — puts himself in the open — he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined" (527).

¹⁴ Bowering's finding narrative is Bowering's fancy, not Menzies's, as the flower plays no part in Menzies's journal. Menzies's instruction was to itemize every flower, shrub, and plant in an empirical approach whose goal was to map the actual, not the fantastical finding of the impossible Passage, and his work supports the poem's rejection of weed as designation.

¹⁵ This voyage becomes the fantastical Chapter 30 in *Burning Water*, which begins with Vancouver's thought that "it was as if a spirit's hand were laid upon his shoulder, and as if he were looking back on a successful passage to Hudson's Bay rather than ahead to an open field of possibilities" (132), because the fictional Vancouver had imagined this journey on the pages of a discovery poem, guided by the "spirit's hand" of the poet.

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