

Singing the Nation Into Consciousness: Rudy Wiebe's *Playing Dead*

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In *Playing Dead*, Rudy Wiebe compassionately (and with some degree of exasperation) questions why Canadians persist in their ignorance of what he perceives is fundamental to Canadian identity—their nordicity:

I need wisdom. Wisdom to understand why Canadians have so little comprehension of our own *nordicity*, that we are a northern nation and that, until we grasp imaginatively and realize imaginatively in work, song, image and consciousness that North is both the true nature of our world and also our graspable destiny we will always go whoring after the mocking palm trees and beaches of the Carribean and Florida and Hawaii. (111)

Playing Dead is, in some ways, a corrective response to this lack of comprehension, a means of fostering the realization of Canadian identity and nationhood in word, song, image and consciousness. This concern with Canadian identity is not recent to Wiebe: the impetus behind *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1976) and *The Scorched Wood People* (1977), for example, was to “draw the ‘imaginative map of our land’” (Kertzer xxii). As he endeavours to forge a sense of nationhood in *Playing Dead*, Wiebe also strives to reconcile what he perceives are incompatible cultural differences, and in particular, the differences between Inuit and other Canadian communities (*Looking At Our Particular World* 15). In response to this need, Wiebe attempts to offer his text as a medium for the negotiation and overlap of these communities. He creates this medium in a number of ways, but primarily by “playing dead,” an Inuit hunting technique that acts as a metaphor for exercising reflection and momentary stillness to assess the situation at hand; by adopting elements from Inuit oral tradition and culture (such as the concepts of linear and areal spatial dimensions) from which one creates a collective or communal story; and, finally, by aligning the Inuit community with the rest of the Canadian community, situating this larger community in the Arctic, and then distancing it from English (colonial) culture. Wiebe's *Playing Dead*, in these ways, seems what Homi Bhabba would call a “mediating space” which permits the interplay of Inuit and other Canadian cultures, and to operate as an injunction to *all* Canadians to know themselves and their rich history.

In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabba observes that different and sometimes

incompatible cultures may communicate in this mediating space:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to . . . focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

It is in the emergence of interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of differences—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. (1-2)

Wiebe seems to have created *Playing Dead* as this “in-between” space, or the “terrain” in which cultural differences are articulated, to initiate the redefinition of Canadian identity. If *Playing Dead* can be perceived as a site for both the “collaboration” and “contestation” of this identity, then Wiebe’s text can also be seen as the space for creating a sense of “nationness” and community, even as this sense is being negotiated. Such negotiations, as Homi Bhabba would argue, should result in, if not political autonomy, then at least awareness of how centralist powers can marginalize other cultural identities:

Political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective. Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you “beyond” yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction to the political *conditions* of the present. (3)

Even as Wiebe explores the differences between Inuit and other white Canadian communities, he endeavours to align them by identifying (or creating) this nordicity which apparently all Canadian share. His text is both “vision and construction”: it seems to have been fashioned as a means of cultivating a sense of Canadian community and in response to current political conditions which negatively emphasize difference.

Wiebe’s, *Playing Dead*, suggests how he would initially like to create this sense of community. The concept of “playing dead” is first alluded to in an Inuit myth which explains “the origin of ice” (1). Upaum, an Inuk, is “knocked . . . down and dragged by a brown bear to its den, where Upaum “plays dead” to survive (3):

Upaum lay where she had dropped him, eyes closed, pretending to be dead . . . not even when the cubs rolled him around the floor and licked him hungrily until he itched all over did he so much as move an eyebrow. . . .

When all was quiet the man said to himself, “Upaum, now is the time to open

your eyes and do something.” (3-4)

In this case, playing dead is fundamental to outwitting the predator and, ultimately, to self-preservation: Upaam takes action only when the entire situation has been assessed and when he determines he is able to “do something.” The other instance when Wiebe alludes to this technique is in the last essay, “In Your Own Head,” and relates to Inuit hunting techniques. Wiebe observes:

I should practice a little, playing dead. Caribou, ptarmigan, ground squirrels, foxes would be easy; muskox perhaps more problematic . . . once [the muskox] are found they behave more or less like herds of cows: stand motionless and always face you and so there is plenty of time to stand back and consider which has the best set of horns. However, if you for some inadvertent or unwitting reason disturb their circled stance—I can see the small headline in southern newspapers: “Canadian novelist trampled to death by confused muskox on open tundra.” (112)

Such an ostensibly passive stance, in this case, is actually aggressive in that it is used by the predator to capture an unsuspecting prey. In these two scenarios when playing dead is adopted, both the necessity of deceiving the predator or prey by such stillness (in the first case, one’s simulated death is passed off as authentic, and in the second case, one is seemingly not even present) and the use of that stillness to assess the situation are fundamental to survival.

Wiebe incorporated this techniques of simulated passivity into the narrative. When he approaches William Nerysoo to make further inquiries about Albert Johnson, Nerysoo refuses to divulge any information. Wiebe plays dead: he talks about “the caribou of the Porcupine River herd moving north beyond the Richardson Mountains” until Nerysoo relaxes and suddenly says, “maybe I’ll tell you one thing” (65). Wiebe’s technique is so successful that “after an afternoon [Nerysoo] has told me his whole story” (65). Kristjana Gunnars has shrewdly observed that “perhaps [playing dead] is a way of becoming passive and allowing influences from outside to work their way in. It is a kind of negative capability in life rather than just in writing” (322). As Gunnars suggests, Wiebe’s technique is not one employed merely for the sake of “writing” or collecting stories, although his ostensible passivity and feigned disinterest ultimately encourage Nerysoo to relax and, once relaxed, to share information. If the principle were applied more largely, one could argue that playing dead is a means of encouraging and easing Canadian communities into exchanging cultural experiences.

Wiebe also argues for the need to balance momentary stillness (as represented by playing dead) with movement, the active pursuit of “compre-

hension," in his explication of the Inuit linguistic concepts of areal and linear space. An "areal thing," something "roughly equal in size," changes its status and becomes "linear when it moves" (49). Also, "any area without easily observable limits . . . is automatically classified as long and narrow, that is, as linear also" (49). One who "plays dead" is areal. Wiebe thus argues that to be aware of one's nordicity, one must momentarily become areal in dimension: "I desire true NORTH, not PASSAGE to anywhere. If I must I will accept areal over linear, accept it of myself" (114). He is thus able to decipher some meaning from the raven's stillness, rather than the river's movement: "The only motion or sound is that of the river, and I do not understand that. The motionless silence of the raven tells me that the secret will have to be transformed into mystery before I can understand; know" (45). Appropriately, the title of the first "contemplation"—as Wiebe himself describes it—is "Exercising Reflection," a passage from Hood's journal in which he observes that "Canadians never [exercise] reflection unless they are hungry" (Wiebe 23). Wiebe's appropriation and recontextualization of the phrase alters its significance, so that the *spiritual* hunger of Canadians is emphasized and so that Wiebe's text becomes a space in which both he and his reader can "exercise reflection" about Canadian identity. The series of "contemplations" may be areal in dimension, but Wiebe conflates both areal and linear dimensions when he suggests that these contemplations also involve cognitive movement.

Although he argues for the need to become areal in dimension, even if for brief moments, he also endeavours to be linear in dimension, which is represented by water and results in "being found." He asserts that on "the so-called empty barrens of the Arctic it is actually impossible for a living person to stay lost; or by the same token, it is impossible to hide" (50). Although Wiebe argues that it is essential to be areal in dimension to become conscious of one's surroundings, and to evaluate and acquire knowledge about one's situation, he also observes that it is equally essential to be linear in dimension to explore and to unearth Canadian history and identity, and ultimately to gain self-awareness; thus, Wiebe vacillates between the two realms, insisting that as he becomes motionless and is "steadily rendered more and more word-less," he also experiences movement as manifested by the "words [which] . . . gather, linear as any river growing out of the sea" (113-114). Water, for Wiebe, comes to represent the linear dimension, discovery and that which is fundamental to human existence:

Songs, stories are beyond value; they are the memory and wisdom of a people, the particular individual rivers of the sea of life which constitutes us all. And when you hide that, when you insist the river of your life is as opaque as the Mackenzie or Peel, you are defying the ancient assertion of that sea: you still do have a story . . . but if you persist so absolutely with silence, motionless silence

even unto death, then we will respect your refusal of your own story. We will leave you alone. Though we will continue to tell what little we do know because that is the only way human life continues. (68)

Denying story, then, is a way of denying community, and remaining areal in dimension is associated with death. For this reason, Albert Johnson's "refusal of story" is perceived as "strange, disturbing, puzzling" by the Inuit, who are an "oral, communal people" (67). Albert Johnson not only refused story, but he also refused name: his denial of self-identity and story are not only a refusal of community, but, ultimately, of life itself. Songs and stories, as represented by water, are communal in nature *and* creative: they constitute the identity and consciousness of a people. Wiebe thus observes that if "you look into the moving, dark, strange Mackenzie River . . . you will see nothing but yourself" (61). It is water which represents self-identity, provides the mirror for oneself, even "though [one may] not appear the same as [one] always imagine[s] [oneself]" (61).

For Wiebe, the linear dimension, as it is also represented by song, is about creativity and life. This association has Inuit derivations. The epigraph for the second essay, "On Being Motionless," suggests the power of language and song, even when it is used for activities which are part of a daily routine:

Singing was just an ordinary hunting method. The Inuit used to make up lots of songs—all kinds of different songs to make it easier to hunt the animals. They sang to get the animals used to the hunters. Those early people were very clever. We now have guns; in the old days people just used their voices. (Peter Pitseolak, *People From Our Side*, 1975)

The excerpt from Pitseolak's text suggest the dynamic force of both language and song, even when integrated into daily life. As if to reinforce this notion, Wiebe also refers to Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* and argues that what he writes about "could still apply to the Inuit though they are no longer nomads" (98). As Chatwin discovers in his conversation with another character, Arkady, "a song . . . was both map and direction-finder. Providing you knew the song, you could always find your way across country" (13). The fluidity of song, and its importance to the creation of nationhood as it is depicted in *The Songlines* is also pivotal in *Playing Dead*:

In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score. There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung

Aboriginal could not believe the country until they could see it and sing it—just as, in the Dreamtime, the country had not existed until the Ancestors sang it.

"So the land," I said, "must first exist as a concept in the mind? Then it must

be sung? Only then can it be said to exist?"

"True."

"In other words, 'to exist,' is 'to be perceived'?"

"Yes." (14)

Wiebe seems to adopt the notion that, first, the country must be perceived (one must be areal in dimension, or exercise reflection), and then it must be sung (one must be linear in dimension), for it to exist. In other, Wiebe is attempting to sing the nationhood into consciousness.

The parallels between the allusion to and explication of Chatwin's *The Songlines* and Inuit notions of language and culture have some merit. According to Raymond Gagné in "Spatial Concepts in the Eskimo Language," the land exists in the Inuit mind. It is perceived as a kind of map and is shaped as such by language: "It is obviously vital to Eskimos whose very lives depend on success in locating game and on travel over vast, uninhabited, and untracked reaches to develop cognitive maps adequate for these purposes. Their language is the underpinning for these cognitive maps" (38). Language and song are what Wiebe rely on to shape the "land" as part of the national consciousness for his reader. When he tells stories from the Arctic, he is not only aware of the "cognitive map" as a function of the story which he is developing, but also that he is creating a communal map; thus, he observes that a story is "rarely one's own; if you tell yours, others will be involved. What story-teller has not been made aware of that?" (75):

No native of the Arctic seems to live as a solitary; everyone lives in a community. . . . stories here are a construct of actions and spoken works by means of which humanity remembers.

And this oral storytelling, so refined and perfected by millennia of practice, is the very affirmation of their non-aloneness: the storyteller and the poet/singer presuppose a community of listeners, otherwise nothing can be told. . . . Now the most minimal and therefore most powerful word, spoken or written, about any human being is *name*, and anyone who can hide that goes beyond secret into enigma, that is, into intentional and impenetrable obscurity. There is then no story to tell and the original people of the Canadian Arctic living in tiny communities on the immense polar landscape find such a refusal of story especially strange. . . . (Wiebe 66-67)

Community, story, and song are all interrelated. In "Songs of the Canadian Eskimo," Wiebe discusses some of the primary features of the Inuit oral tradition, which involves both songs and narratives. In particular, he observes that communal narratives are, in some ways, exclusive: "Eskimo groups are very small; members know everything that happens to everyone included, so the Eskimo poet may with one key word recall a striking occurrence for his group, and an outside listener, though he knows Eskimo perfectly, will

not understand the overtones that echo to give it depth" (58). By focussing, in *Playing Dead*, on stories which are relevant to both the Inuit and southern Canadian communities—the story of Albert Johnson, as a prime example—Wiebe seems to be trying to develop a community, to create the “memory and wisdom” of all Canadians, or a kind of understanding which will not necessarily be shared by “outside” listeners.

Appropriately, Wiebe’s “essays” (what he refers to alternatively as “essays” in the preface and, in his subtitle, as “A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic”) were presented orally—as a kind of communal narrative—at the University of Toronto. Wayne Grady thus argues in *Books in Canada* that “since the three chapters of *Playing Dead* were first delivered as lectures at the University of Toronto in 1987, they are a kind of oral literature themselves” (23). In such a manner, Wiebe seems to appropriate from the Inuit oral tradition to create a Canadian communal narrative. Arguably, the text could never operate as an equivalent to Inuit oral tradition, by virtue of its ontological status as written text. A further difficulty in considering his work as a borrowing from Inuit oral literature is that it is comprised of essays, a very European form of writing, which, Robin McGrath argues, the Inuit later adopted (93). She observes that evidence of “articles and essays on contemporary life” substantiate the notion that “the fate of primitive literature is to change from a medium for marvelling to a medium from thinking” (93). Wiebe’s text can be immediately identified as a “medium for thinking” because, as the subtitle in the published work suggests, it is a “contemplation.” Yet Wiebe’s essays (appropriately derived from the French, meaning “to try”) are certainly attempts, if not completely successful ones, at borrowing from Inuit and white Canadian cultures to make them acquainted with and to reconcile one another. His essays, therefore, serve as a means of stirring up the sediments of knowledge and memory. The reader is thus familiarized with Canadian Arctic history and relevant historical figures—Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and Albert Johnson, to name a few—a history that has been often overlooked, or which has been perceived as non-existent (see W. H. Morton’s “The ‘North’ in Canadian Historiography”).

That history is contrasted with the English expeditions that were ultimately doomed to fail because of their inability to adapt. Adaptability, as a facet of the linear dimension, and as Wiebe examines it in stories, is integral to *Playing Dead*, just as it is important to occasionally and momentarily become areal in dimension. His reference, then, to Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines* and the resilience of nomadic cultures is quite pivotal: “Chatwin speaks of his fascination for nomads, for his ‘quest to know the secret of their irreverent and timeless vitality. ‘Why is it,’ he asks, ‘that nomad peoples have this amazing capacity to continue under the most adverse circumstances, while

the empires come crashing down?" (98). As Wiebe argues in his text, empires come crashing down because they cannot accommodate themselves to the constant flux of life: they are areal in dimension. For this reason, the Inuit, as described by Wiebe, have survived: their adaptability and flexibility have predisposed them to live in harsh climates. Wiebe also observes, however, how the Inuit have been infected by the southern Canadian cultural imposition of the areal dimension, and their "linearity" as manifested in their more traditional nomadic lifestyle has been altered dramatically by contemporary life:

For though this community is fixed, electrified, dominated by those regulars of southern communities: airline schedules, church, store hours, school, the remnants of its hunting year remain visible everywhere. . . . All the rituals, the traditional annual rounds are there in vestige still images in the methodical movement of the old man in his boat on the pale green sea water. . . . I can see a little of what that ancient hunter round of landscape and season has become today. (99-100)

Despite such an imposition, traces of the linear dimension as represented by the "old man in the boat" contrast with the areal dimension. Seasonal movement, to which the Inuit responded and continue to respond, is also a means of resisting the stagnating forces which impose stillness and death.

Such stillness and death is associated with the Europeans, and specifically with the English, who are unable to accommodate themselves to the climate of northern Canada. Wiebe thus attempts to create and shape a sense of national consciousness by aligning cultural communities within Canada and pitting this larger community against the inflexibility of the Europeans, and specifically the English. He pointedly and repeatedly observes how most European adventures "end in a fiasco of one kind or another, either of conception or of delivery: encountering nordicity. . . has proven to be an experience beyond the intellectual grasp of Europe" (Grady 22). Wiebe asserts, for example, that "the English were so stubborn about obvious weather and Inuit technology, they could not possibly appreciate the subtleties of Inuit spatial perception as revealed in their language" (19). This ignorance of such subtleties does not apply to Canadians who were used as voyageurs on European expeditions and who were, according to Wiebe, exploited and patronized: he lists the names of those voyageurs who "know they have been too long on the sea and [that] the annual caribou migration has left them behind," and who die "on a quest whose purpose none of them could fathom, [a quest which] . . . made possible the journey and all the honours Franklin and Richardson and Back were to receive" (31-32). In the Franklin expedition of 1821, for example, Wiebe cites parts of Robert Hood's journal in which Hood snidely remarks upon the "lazy winter lives of the traders"; yet, according

to Wiebe, Hood is unable to perceive that "local human beings . . . might also have a great deal to teach him" (21). Interestingly, Wiebe does not elaborate upon who these "local" persons may be, Inuit or white. This kind of blurring occurs later when he refers to "the Canadian people of the Arctic [who] now live in settled communities": likely he means the Inuit, but interestingly they are referred to in a term which is more national in scope (97).

If Wiebe cites such facts to stir up Canadian history and encourage the exercising of reflection, he is also doing so to cultivate a sense of national pride. He argues that although "four of the five Englishmen. . . survived," their survival "cannot be because they were physically stronger than the Canadians" (33):

This pattern of deaths must have come about because the Canadians laboured more, carrying heavier loads. It would seem that the English officers survive on the Arctic tundra because (a) they leave behind their dying (though they sincerely promise to return with help if they can find it), (b) they eat human flesh (though inadvertently, and horrified at the very thought), and (c) they kill the strongest man in the party because they are afraid he will kill and probably eat them. (34)

Wiebe's resentment of the abuse which some Canadians must have suffered is clear, even as he, somewhat ironically, defends English explorers. That indignation is startlingly apparent when he observes how the English of the Franklin himself, he observes:

There they appear little more than the typical wilfully blind or at best only partially seeing men who will force themselves upon a landscape, will try to bulldoze their way through whatever confronts them and who, when this deliberate blindness kills their companions and, eventually, themselves, will become heroes to be forever memorialized. (43)

Their inability to adapt to the land and climate of the Arctic North is what distinguishes them from Canadians who understand the importance of relocating in accordance with seasonal movement. The English obsession with mapping results in residing "too long on the coast, mapping its complexities" and, consequently, those on the expedition fall "behind the fall migration of the caribou" (24-25). Survival, apparently, is not as important as their own sense of decorum and propriety: they "pack their heavy mess kits, fine china and sterling silverware, since no British officer would be caught dead eating from a tin" (Grady 22). Wiebe compares the English with the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson who understood that adaptation to the climate was essential to survival:

Stefansson made the assumption that the Inuit had lived in the Arctic for mil-

lennia, they were human beings just like any white and so if one wanted to live in and explore the Arctic, one must live basically like them.

And so he did. Instead of hauling in tons of expensive supplies and killing his hired men carrying it everywhere (the more men you have, the more supplies you must pack: the whole process is self-defeating), he hired two Inuit men and two women: the men to hunt and drive the dog teams. (105)

His ability to adopt Inuit ways, to accommodate himself to Arctic environment, is contrasted with Europeans who were concerned with "stillness" as manifested in their obsession with mapping. Still, Wiebe challenges Stefansson's manner of abandoning his "nordicity" when he insists on keeping his life secret: "he learned to speak Inuktitut fluently and he tried to think like an Inuk and he lived like one; his greatness as an arctic scientist and explorer was rooted in exactly such behaviour. Nevertheless, he remained "white" enough to try and maintain all his life a (the most typical?) white arctic secret" about his relationship with an Inuk woman, Fanny (107). Wiebe evidently calls for a lifestyle which resides in the Arctic North and which opposes the "electrifying," "fixing," and "secretive" tendencies of the south.

Even as Wiebe endeavours to appropriate from and align the Inuit community with other Canadian communities, he recognizes the momentousness of his task because of past injustices towards the Inuit. Yet, whenever Wiebe mentions such injustices, he is also quick to suggest they are imposed, not by Canadians themselves, but by the English:

Willard Wentzel, the Northwest Company clerk in charge at Fort Providence, accuses Dr. Richardson of murder, but no investigation is ever made beyond Richardson's report. Yet a hundred years later when two Inuit hunters kill two priests on the lower Coppermine River because they are afraid the priests with their rifles would kill them, those two Inuit men are taken through three years of Canadian judicial systems and courts to be declared guilty of murder. A special law for whites persists in the North. (34)

The question arises here: who is "white" for Wiebe? In *Playing Dead*, it is the English who are consistently reproached for such abuses; yet it is a *Canadian judicial system* that imposed the three-year legal process on these two Inuit men. Wiebe seems to dismiss facts which incriminate Canadians, or which would detract from his nationalist project. He mentions later, for example, that the Inuit who were removed from the Arctic by Frobisher and who were introduced to Elizabethan England die swift deaths because "they were already dead when they were torn from their land" (89). The situation is described in highly vitriolic language:

[Callicho and Ignorth] greeted each other so solemnly while being stared at by every sailor on board the *monstrous* English ship. What did the baby sense of

this *violent dislocation*? . . . Our impossibility of understanding their speech ensures their unending silence . . . their secrets died with them and are as lost as their bones buried without proper ceremony by *deadly aggressive people* with incomprehensible and to them meaningless customs in a strange land to which they were with such *violence* brought. Nearly four centuries had to pass before we at last can read of an Inuit view of an encounter with English sailors. (89, italics added)

Wiebe's indignation for the mistreatment the Inuit received at the hands of the English suggests his political stance within the text. His resentment positions him on the side of the Inuit—a stance he chooses to adopt, not one necessarily encouraged by the Inuit themselves—and excludes him, and more generally Canadians, from being perceived as guilty parties in such behaviour. Thus, he is able to describe himself sitting with "some twenty Loucheux people of the Old Crow community . . . slowly [comparing] bits of information" because he is, in a larger sense, "one of them" (54).

If Wiebe creates this kind of binary between Canadians and the English to develop the Canadian identity, he is also quick to point out the difficulties in the task he has set before himself. Part of the challenge resides in the fact that he must first strive to "find the north in [his] own head," advice given to him by Aritha van Herk. He questions how one must find it and confesses he "[does] not know" (113):

But I am moving, and what I encounter here in the North, where I have of necessity come to look, are secrets; enigmas; mysteries. . . . Walking alone in this enormous landscape where I am all eyes and no sight, it is not only surrounding me but the image of it from the air is playing doubled, trebled through every sense of my awareness. (113)

Much of these "contemplations," Wiebe readily concedes, will be in one's head, and as he learns from *Songlines*, he can only open himself up to seeing or perceiving and conveying what he perceives, even when acknowledges that he is "all eyes and no sight." Critics have found this stance appealing: John Moss argues that the work thus inspired because of the "humility of its vision," and Kristjana Gunnars finds such confessions of pretentiousness "very attractive" (156; 321). She writes: "There is no arrogance, no predisposition to knowledge or wisdom, no flaunting of learning, no sense of superiority. Just a man watching and listening" (321).

Wiebe's endeavours to watch, to listen and to communicate his experience are, he believes, pivotal to his role as writer. In interviews, Wiebe has expressed the belief that his role as writer involves telling stories to cultivate a sense of Canadian unity, even as he recognizes that the process is self-defeating:

I think that "national dream," as expressed by the building of the railway, the

settlement of the west, etc., is only possible when all or most of the peoples of a country catch the same vision. For example, if *all* Canadians began to feel and plan a certain way about the Arctic, such a dream might be possible. What 1990 has proven is that many Canadians do not share such a concept of "nation building" and I do not believe they could centre it around our common prehistoric and present aboriginal past/present. Nevertheless, I believe it is essential for *me* to tell such stories—to somehow, in a small way, show that what we are now has some connection to past which was here before any of us whites, and which continues to this day, though we are most ignorant of it. . . . (*Looking At Our Particular World* 15)

He is conscious of the difficulty of articulating a vision for all of Canada, particularly as Canadian may not share the same impulse to build a nation. Wiebe's impulse, however, is to continue to sing this vision of one nation into existence, a notion which is underscored by his use of Orpingalik's explanation of the importance of song to Rasmussen: "Songs are thoughts sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech is no longer enough. . . . When the words we want shoot up of themselves—then we get a new song" (119). Edmund Carpenter in "Eskimo Poetry: Word Magic" has observed that "in Eskimo the word to make poetry is the word to breathe; both are derivatives of *amerca*, the soul, that which is eternal, the breath of life" (101). Wiebe apparently strives to create or "breathe" life into the nation through his text, but acknowledges that these attempts to get that new song will be tenuous: "I am trying to understand and accept that, and to prepare myself. To walk into the true north of my own head between the stones and the ocean. If I do, I will get a new song. If I do, I will sing it for you" (119).

Wiebe's use of the conditional, however, suggests that he is never certain that he will be able to "get a new song," or that he will be able to communicate that song. He may argue for Canadian political and cultural autonomy, he may attempt to offer his text as this mediating space and to point towards the Arctic North as the source of national identity, but he realizes that he cannot present an unbiased text. In effect, he cannot "pretend to objective disinterestedness" because he becomes part of the story as he writes it (*Where is the Voice Coming From* 37). It is his vision of our national identity, however, which has so much appeal. Like Big Bear, whose vision fuelled his attempts to keep his community together in the face of great turmoil and who refuses to compromise his sense of dignity, Wiebe holds fast to his notions of Canada as a nation. His ultimate challenge to Canadians in the last few pages of the text is embodied in Orpingalik's poem, "My Breath":

I will sing a song,
A song that is strong . . .

Do you know yourself?
So little you know of yourself!
While dawn gives place to dawn,
And spring is upon the village. (116-118)

The answer to that question—how well do you know yourself?—is worth the contemplation of all Canadians.

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