

# Defusing Genre through Generic Interplay: Armand Ruffo's Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney as a Long Poem

Maude Lapierre

Volume 37, Number 1, 2012

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl37\\_1art12](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl37_1art12)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

While critics of Armand Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* usually focus on the relationship between it and other biographical works on Belaney, there has also been some disagreement about the poem's genre. Genre plays a crucial role in this text; Ruffo simultaneously supplements and opposes historical definitions of the Canadian long poem. The interweaving of epic, documentary, metafictional, and lyric forms, along with the decision to incorporate indigenous voices in Belaney/Grey Owl's story, creates a contradictory subject and narrative, despite the fact that this long poem seems linear and chronological. By continuously shifting modes, Ruffo resists the historic desire to resolve Belaney/Grey Owl's identity and instead fragments the unified subject that biographies seek to create. Through generic interplay, Ruffo develops a non-coercive way to deploy the Canadian long poem while simultaneously correcting some of the erasures that have marked its critical history. In this reading, tensions between fact and fiction are foregrounded and left to generate the contradictory subject that is Ruffo's recreation of Grey Owl.

Cite this article

Lapierre, M. (2012). Defusing Genre through Generic Interplay:: Armand Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney as a Long Poem*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 37(1), 215–231.

# Defusing Genre through Generic Interplay: Armand Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* as a Long Poem

MAUDE LAPIERRE

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION IN 1996, critics of Armand Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* have not particularly engaged with its poetic form and genre. Rather, the main focus of the criticism has been on the relationship between this long poem and other biographical works on Belaney (Dawson 131; Braz, "White" 174; Hulan 41-48). In addition, identifying Ruffo's work as a long poem is complicated by the fact that there is little consensus among critics on the genre of Ruffo's text. For instance, both Carrie Dawson and Albert Braz initially identify *Grey Owl* as a long poem (Dawson 129; Braz "White" 172), but later move on to examine it as a biography. Dawson's article considers Ruffo's long poem in relation to several non-fictional biographies of Archie Belaney, which equates his text with such works and forecloses discussions of its poetic and fictional features. Likewise, Braz perceives *Grey Owl* as being "written in the form of a biography — it includes newspaper clippings and journal entries as well as archival photographs" ("White" 174). In contrast, Renée Hulan interprets Ruffo's text as "an intervention in Canadian historiography" (40), but like Dawson's, her article is concerned with situating Ruffo's *Grey Owl* within other biographical accounts. In short, critics tend to favour one specific genre over the multi-genre form of the long poem, and to privilege the factual over the fictional aspects of Ruffo's work.

The lack of consensus on *Grey Owl*'s generic nature goes beyond the tendency to foreground the non-fictional aspects of Ruffo's text, as some critics reject the form of the long poem as appropriate. While Dawson, Braz, and Hulan all analyze the poetics of *Grey Owl*, Jonathan Dewar's insistence that the text is an Indian autobiography<sup>1</sup> prevents its association with other long poems such as Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, even though Ruffo's form echoes that of these two texts ("Fringes" 260). Dewar's

initial comparison between Ruffo, Atwood, and Ondaatje might prompt him to align Ruffo's text with the genre of the long poem, but he concludes instead that Ruffo's text differs from those of Atwood and Ondaatje because the latter "purport to be creations by their 'authors'" (261), which entails that they are more fictionalized than *Grey Owl*.<sup>2</sup> Because Ruffo uses Belaney's writings "almost verbatim" throughout the text (Ruffo 213), Dewar contends that *Grey Owl* resembles a "bi-cultural composite authorship" (262), where Ruffo and Belaney act as co-authors of the text. However, the relationship between fact and fiction in Ruffo, Atwood, and Ondaatje's texts is more tenuous than critics tend to acknowledge. For example, Kamboureli mentions that critics of Ondaatje's *Collected Works* often emphasize the factual elements of long poems because the subject happens to be historical figures (186), much like critics of Ruffo's *Grey Owl* do when they foreground the historical aspects of this long poem at the expense of the fictional. While I agree with Dewar that Ruffo's text differs significantly from Atwood and Ondaatje's long poems, the text's introductory poem suggests that Ruffo does not treat Belaney as a subject for a biography, but as a character. In this poem, the pronoun *you* initially addresses a speaker/researcher attempting to represent Belaney, but then shifts to a *you* that addresses Belaney himself:

Your [the writer's] face transparent as a lens,  
and with the click of a pen  
you [Belaney] find yourself stepping from a train. (n. pag.)

The writer/researcher can here be seen as *becoming* Belaney "with the click of a pen," which suggests that the text is a fictional recreation of both Belaney's life as he potentially experienced it and the manner in which others perceived him. As Hulan argues, this opening poem signals the text's passage into fictionality, where "the poet . . . re-appropriates the Native voice and culture appropriated by Belaney" (49). Because this introductory poem suggests that the text is a work that mixes fact and fiction, *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* should be interpreted as an indigenous response to a controversial historical figure, rather than as a reliable biographical account. Its fictional rendition of historical material also legitimates an analysis of the text as a long poem that contributes to, yet contests, the genealogy of this genre, from its earliest to its contemporary incarnations.

In light of this debate regarding *Grey Owl's* generic nature, I wish to resituate the discussion on this text away from questions of identity and imposture in order to tease out the possibilities that its multi-genre form creates in its retelling of Grey Owl's story. Previous critics have argued that Ruffo's text is sympathetic to Belaney (Hulan 52),<sup>3</sup> inasmuch as it suggests the possibility of transformation (Dawson 130), of acculturation into (Braz, "White 183) and connection with indigenous culture (Dewar, "Fringes" 271). Those arguments underscore that "Grey Owl" is Belaney's "true" identity. While these readings provide valuable insights into the nature of identity and the continued controversies that accompany discussions on the appropriation of First Nations cultures, they are contingent on interpretations of Ruffo's portrayal of Belaney/Grey Owl as a stable subject, regardless of the tensions generated by the text's poetic form. In contrast, a generic study of Ruffo's long poem demonstrates that *Grey Owl* destabilizes the nature of identity through an intervention in the genre of the Canadian long poem, as it supplements, yet is oppositional to, the manner in which this genre has been historically defined. Due to this genre's fraught critical history, which includes the erasure of historically marginalized voices and negative representations of indigenous peoples, Ruffo's text does not simply deploy the form of the long poem, but mobilizes its generic interplay in order to defuse the long poem's coercive potential. It is also the interactions of genres within the long poem that enable Ruffo to destabilize the seemingly stable subject of Belaney/Grey Owl, and contest the narratives attributed to him. More specifically, the interweaving of epic, documentary, metafictional, and lyric forms, along with Ruffo's decision to incorporate indigenous voices in Belaney/Grey Owl's story within this generically unstable form, creates a contradictory subject and narrative, despite the fact that this long poem seems linear and chronological. My study of this long poem, then, seeks to emphasize that Ruffo does not resolve the debate surrounding Grey Owl's imposture, but rather contributes to it through an indigenous perspective that allows him to question a historically problematic genre and an equally problematic figure.

Aligning *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* with the genre of the contemporary Canadian long poem is complex, not only because this genre has long been the subject of some debate<sup>4</sup> but also because its critical history contains erasures that complicate its affiliation with indigenous writing. For example, both Barbara Godard and Eli Mandel

comment on the fact that the “Long-Liners Conference” (Toronto, 1984) did not ask its contributors to examine women poets and their engagement with the form (Godard 324; Mandel 22). In other words, the criticism on the long poem has been marked by the exclusion of historically ignored voices. Mandel also evokes the long poem’s fraught critical history by pointing out the tension between those who identify it as a postmodern form and those who ground it in modernism (17). This debate can be extended to include the relation between the contemporary long poem and the early Canadian long poems of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since those early long poems were concerned with nation building, settlement, and migration (Munton 94), they borrowed heavily from the epic mode (Saul 261), a configuration that glamorizes progress and the pioneering spirit at the expense of indigenous peoples and other racialized communities.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Dorothy Livesay’s theorization of the documentary long poem proves challenging in an indigenous context since she perceives a continuity between an early long poem such as Crawford’s *Malcom’s Katie* and her own work (269, 271). For Livesay, Crawford’s portrayal of nature as “Native Indian” (271) proves that her characters are in harmony with their environment (274). However, when Max, who cuts trees personalized as Native peoples in order to establish his settlement, declares that “Mine axe and I- we do immortal tasks / We build nations” (Crawford 5 ll.55-56), the poem evokes the material reality of early settlement: the physical displacement of indigenous peoples. Like the epic mode, the documentary genre proves unsettling in an indigenous context. The historical connection between early and contemporary long poems then problematizes Ruffo’s engagement with a similar form, since its early manifestations wish to displace First Nations, and are also replete with negative stereotypical representations of indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup>

These historical connections have, however, been questioned. In a response to Livesay’s essay, Frank Davey suggests that women should always be suspicious of the documentary form, since it is rooted in a “presumptively authoritative and patriarchal tradition” (136). The sense of distrust Davey recommends resonates in an indigenous context, where indigenous voices have been and continue to be marginalized by dominant discourses of history and literary criticism. For instance, Livesay had not anticipated the complications the documentary genre would generate; that is, that its imperial biases could taint its “factual”

basis. For instance, her belief that D.C. Scott's work in the department of Indian Affairs enabled him to gain "factual" knowledge of First Nations cultures (Livesay 277) is misguided at best. Considering that Ruffo responded to Scott's poetry in a way that highlighted the former's racist attitudes,<sup>7</sup> his *Grey Owl* can be interpreted as having a conflicted relationship with the genre of the long poem.

In the face of these contested definitions and of the long poem's critical history, establishing it as a non-coercive form, especially in relation to a text dedicated to re-incorporating indigenous voices within a story of invader-settler indigenization, proves challenging. The difficulties that lie in attempts to define this form even prompted Eli Mandel to declare, during the Long-Liners Conference, that the long poem could not exist as a form, as the postmodern manifestations of this genre resist definition (19-21). While Kamboureli agrees that the contemporary long poem resists definition, she points to this genre's "contradictory impulses" (4) as what constitutes its generic specificity. For her, the multiple genres from which the contemporary long poem is composed, such as the epic, the lyric, and the documentary (xiii), constitute the long poem's determining characteristic. She contends that the form does not privilege one genre over another, but rather "accommodates and appropriates" (50) different genres, the interplay between them generating its "distinct poetic form" (45). Kamboureli's definition is not without its problems since she dismisses the possibility that one genre might exercise hegemony over the others (90), despite Mandel's assertion that genres always interact within a set hierarchy (12). In contrast, I would argue that it is precisely this tension between different genres that allows Ruffo to subvert his subject through the generic interplay of his long poem. Since historical definitions of this genre are at times hostile to indigenous modes of self-representation, an analysis of Ruffo's work as a long poem entails paying attention to the strategies through which his text defuses historically coercive forms and corrects erasures through generic interplay. Ruffo's long poem appropriates the form of the Canadian long poem in order to indigenize it, inasmuch as this text challenges the effects different genres normally create. The interaction between different genres that this text develops can thus be viewed as revisiting indigenous voices' unequal relations of power with history and genre.

When Ruffo's *Grey Owl* invokes the epic mode, it does so in order

to complicate it through an indigenous perspective. While Saul argues that the epic allows for the construction of the “united spirit of a culture” (262), Kambourelis examines the epic as dealing with the need for, and the creation of, a national history (23). According to her, there is a marked desire within Canadian criticism to affiliate the epic with migration and settlement (23), as well as with the fact that both Canada and the long poem are epic in size (23). The epic impulse is usually affiliated with early Canadian long poems, where the desire for national unity leads the poet to homogenize the heterogeneity of the Canadian landscape and its contested history. This emphasis on nation building is present in Ruffo’s long poem, since it is concerned, to a certain degree, with the fur trade, one of Canada’s foundational ventures.<sup>8</sup> The epic is invoked through Ruffo’s “romantic” approach to Belaney (Dawson 130), where North America is mythologized through an association with dreams (Ruffo 2, 4), the imagination (6, 12), and freedom (4, 15). However, it is Belaney’s character, rather than Ruffo’s text itself, that seeks to be aligned with the epic mode. Belaney draws a contrast between England and Canada, where the former is the realm of “stuffiness” (10) and “proper” behaviour (8), while one has to be “tough” to “handle the action” (21) in Canada. Readers can detect that Ruffo does not endorse this romantic impulse in a poem self-consciously titled “Romantic,” in which Belaney details his point of view:

I say if they want romance  
   give it to them.  
 If they expect beads and braids  
   give it to them. (110)

As a character, Belaney only begins to resist epic glorification once unsustainable trapping devastates the landscape, which leads Ruffo to represent the dark side of progress and settlement: “the war in Europe was over. The war here had just begun” (32).

If Belaney, as represented in the poem, soon abandons his glorification of fur trapping in order to practise conservation, his subsequent transformation into Grey Owl betrays epic impulses, which are, however, often contradicted. This epic perspective is made apparent once his success as a conservationist leads him to meet the King. In this passage, Belaney wonders what his aunts’ reaction would be if he “told them that a week ago their Archie / gave a Command Performance at Buckingham

Palace" (180), and emphasizes his pride as a social climber when he asserts: "what do you think of that! / I'll say. Can't go any higher" (181). While Kamboureli warns that the quests portrayed in long poems should not be conflated with epic quests (57), the way in which Belaney moves from being a middle-class Englishman to being a famous conservationist who meets royalty can certainly be affiliated with the motif of an epic quest, especially since the sections of Ruffo's long poem are titled "Beginning," "Transformation," "Journey," and "No Retreat." The organization of the poem thus suggests a certain mythologizing of Grey Owl's life story. Despite such moments, Belaney's metamorphosis into Grey Owl often defuses epic glorification. For instance, after meeting Belaney, Mackenzie King declares that:

The very idea of the Brits fawning over him like awed children is most interesting, if not amusing, especially when I detect a certain naivety in him I can but describe as child-like. The way he tries to sell his film project, speaking with such fervour of his people's traditions, as though there is really a place for them in modern Canada. (Ruffo 134)

Such a passage not only demonstrates that Belaney's transformation is not sufficiently convincing from a Canadian point of view, but also that Belaney does not have the political power he believes he can muster. Simultaneously, Mackenzie King is speaking from an "epic" position, one through which "modern Canada" must be created through the displacement of indigenous peoples. By presenting Mackenzie King's voice in such an honest manner, Ruffo exposes what lies behind myths of nation formation, especially since King would endorse Grey Owl's project were it "politically astute" (134) to do so. Since repetition or recitation serves the purpose of reassessment in a literary text (Jones 15), this passage should prompt readers to examine Mackenzie King and the epic narrative of progress and modernization he espouses critically.

The epic mythologizing of Grey Owl as the reformed trapper turned conservationist is also questioned once Annie Espaniel, the Ojibway woman who accepted Belaney in her family, mentions that she once found "blasting caps underneath Archie's bed . . . Imagine, Grey Owl blowing up beaver houses" (163). Annie's intervention is here crucial, since she exposes the erasures created by epic impulses. Because it is information that should have appeared much earlier in the text's



otherwise chronological progression, the delay hints that there may be instances of unreliable narration in Grey Owl's story of transformation: moments in his past need to be omitted to allow him to operate as an epic figure. The reinsertion of her voice in Grey Owl's story also demonstrates the ways in which First Nations writers can appropriate the hegemonic genre that is the epic in order to subvert it. In fact, the very presence of First Nations voices within a long poem that invokes the epic mode undermines this genre because it contests the discourse of progress and modernity that, as manipulated by Mackenzie King, is associated with their displacement.

Ruffo also incorporates archival research in his long poem, which affiliates his text with the documentary genre. While Livesay argues that the documentary mode is dedicated to notions of factual truth (281), Davey proposes that this "objectivity" masks a certain point of view (128). Similarly, Ruffo's text employs the documentary mode in a post-modern way, aligning *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* with long poems such as Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. For instance, Ruffo's long poem comprises Belaney's writing, along with eyewitness accounts, newspaper clippings, and archival photographs in order to present multiple and alternative points of view on his central figure. Unlike Atwood and Ondaatje, Ruffo does not always modify the documents he integrates within the long poem.<sup>9</sup> If this stylistic choice appears to make *Grey Owl* more factual than the other long poems it resembles, the use of the documentary mode actually challenges the possibility to read his text as a biography. As Godard argues, the documentary long poem "moves to drown out the singular represented subject in a chorus of voices" (315). Likewise, Ruffo's inclusion of multiple voices cannot create the unified subject a biography requires, particularly as those voices contradict each other. For instance, one voice argues that Belaney is "content" (Ruffo 81), but Ruffo often presents Belaney as tormented (68-69). Indigenous voices also view him as "part of the family" (36) and as a "brother" (128), while non-Native voices seek to prove that he is a fraud (83, 84, 157-58). In this case, the multiple voices do more than simply present contradictory points of view on Grey Owl. They also present competing definitions of what constitutes an "authentic" subject, since Belaney's identity is judged according to separate sets of standards depending on whether the speaker is of European or indigenous background.

The inclusion of First Nations voices simultaneously complicates this long poem's alignment with the documentary mode, since they are seldom included in biographical or archival texts dealing with Belaney (Braz "White" 179; Hulan 42; Dewar "Fringes" 258). Their presence in Ruffo's text prompts Braz to assert that Ruffo has a self-interested agenda in *Grey Owl*, since Ruffo gives indigenous voices "a centrality they do not have elsewhere" ("White" 179). In contrast, Ruffo's reinsertion of indigenous voices underscores their exclusion from previous documentary ventures. Put differently, earlier biographies of Grey Owl are not as factual as Braz argues, since they have always been created with a specific narrative in mind (Hulan 42, 46-47). For example, Hulan refers to three writers whose works betray a certain agenda in their approach to Belaney's life: Atwood's "The Grey Owl Syndrome," Gertrude Bernard's *Devil in Deerskin*, and Lovat Dickson's two book-length investigations into Belaney's past. All want to defend his message yet emphasize the shock of his deception. In the end, the three authors manage to excuse Belaney's imposture, which indicates that non-fiction is inevitably biased. Hulan even suggests that the absence of indigenous perspectives from most accounts constitutes an ideological erasure that aims to legitimize Grey Owl's attempt at indigenization (42-43). Ruffo's inclusion of indigenous voices then subverts the documentary mode, inasmuch as it demonstrates the extent to which this form should not be trusted as the unbiased means of representation Livesay theorized it to be. Since biographies, like the documentary form, have specific agendas, Ruffo's multivocal poem distinguishes itself from this tradition. The text does not present its own argument on how Grey Owl should be understood, but rather uses the contradictory opinions of these multiple voices to leave Grey Owl's "true" identity and "true" motivations a mystery.

*Grey Owl* also contains several metafictional markers that signal the constructed nature of this apparently linear narrative. This metafictional component is linked to the documentary genre, since they both employ and stress the importance of documents in the formation of the narrative. However, the former differs in that it presents the researcher as a "clearly defined and situated narrating voice" (Hutcheon 64-65), a strategy that fictionalizes facts by insisting that they have been mediated. Ruffo opens *Grey Owl* with a metafictional reference to a writer/researcher who has "unearthed" (n. pag.) archival material on Belaney.

While Dewar argues that this researcher does not resurface past those two unnumbered pages (“Copper” 74), Hulan perceives metafictional intent when the speaker urges readers to “See this portrait of Archibald Stanfeld Belaney” (Ruffo 6) a few pages later (Hulan 49). What neither Hulan nor Dewar mention is that the speaking voice intrudes in many other instances throughout the long poem. In the scene Hulan mentions, the readers are not only urged to look at the picture but are also told that Belaney would

(Never . . . suspect  
that one day  
you [the writer/researcher and the readers] will catch him  
like this.) (Ruffo 6)

Likewise, the speaker interrupts the otherwise chronological long poem by referencing the future, where Archie will have “four or five wives” (7) and where Gertie will be the only one of them to leave him (48-49). These examples signal that Belaney’s story is narrated by someone who already knows all of its details. The speaker also points out what *cannot* be learned from archival resources, since he speculates on how Archie met his first wife, only to conclude this section by mentioning “what we do know” (20) about their encounter. This passage highlights not only the speaker’s knowledge of Belaney’s life, but also that this knowledge was gathered collectively. By mentioning what “we do know” (20), the speaker points to the role played by other researchers in the creation of this “collective” knowledge about Belaney. The writer/researcher is also clearly situated as a contemporary voice in the section entitled “The Thing About Photographs”:

Hard to believe these photographs  
Actually drew breath  
Blew smoke rings  
Or kisses. (153)

The researcher subsequently projects this feeling onto Belaney, who also “cannot believe it” (153). The metafictional components in *Grey Owl* thus serve to separate this long poem from the biographical elements it contains, even as those biographical moments are stressed. This metafictional voice aligns this long poem with a postmodern tradition, one that, as Mandel argues, “resists definition” (19). In other words, the

presence of the speaker/researcher entails that the text cannot be defined simply as a biography, since it betrays that the archival documents have been *reworked* through an outsider perspective.

The photographs featured in Ruffo's text are part of this long poem's documentary impulse, but they also contribute to the generic interplay of the long poem when examined in isolation from, and in relation to, the rest of the long poem. The pictures constitute an alternative text that must be read as a literary form, one through which the long poem's "factual" basis is challenged rather than reinforced. Linda Hutcheon argues that photography is often employed in Canadian fiction as a "metaphor for creation" (46), one she finds unsettling because it suggests that writing is "an act of petrifying into stasis the dynamics of experience" (46). In Ruffo's text, the photographs do act as a metaphor for creation — in this case, Belaney's creation of his Grey Owl persona — but they do not function as a form of stasis since they document a transformation. The first picture shows a young Archie as a model of the British middle class while the subsequent photographs demonstrate how he comes to inscribe his idea of indigeneity upon his body once he modifies his hair, facial expressions, dress, and posture.<sup>10</sup> When examined on their own and in sequence, the pictures come to symbolize Belaney's metamorphosis, thereby stressing the malleability of the subject instead of insisting on a unified and static representation of the self. Indeed, the photographs make it impossible to argue that Belaney's transformation into Grey Owl is "genuine" (Braz "White" 183; Hulan 44) since they expose its artificiality. They perform a deconstructive function precisely because they show how Belaney constructed Grey Owl.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the photographs propose a different perspective on the "mystery of Archie Belaney." Because they document how artificial Belaney's transformation is, the photographs ask the same question Belaney asks himself. While those around him wonder "who" he really is (Ruffo 84), for Belaney, "it is not a question of who, / . . . but rather How. / How do I get away with it" (84). The photographs reveal that the audience does not want "truth," but to see its assumptions confirmed: that the "face in their minds" (84), the imaginary Indian that Grey Owl represents, is real. Photographs can also suggest distance and death (Hutcheon 46), a position shared by the writer/researcher. Both Belaney and the writer/researcher know that the moment a photograph claims to capture cannot be encapsulated in a static image:

everybody looks  
 the moment  
 as if that's all there is  
 or was  
 but there's more. (Ruffo 153)

If Hutcheon argues that, when confronted with the stasis and “death” that photographs represent, reading can act as a form of “resurrection” (46), Ruffo’s speaker has difficulty believing that pictures once “drew breath” (Ruffo 153). This entails that Ruffo’s text does not aim to recreate the sense of outrage which followed the discovery of Belaney’s imposture (Hulan 41); rather, the pictures dispersed throughout the long poem seek to determine *how* this transformation was achieved, and *how* it can be represented in a literary form. The pictures, then, contribute to this long poem’s generic interplay because they insist that the text is a recreation, that is, a fictional representation, of Grey Owl, rather than an “objective” biography.

From a documentary perspective, photographs should act as historical evidence that adds biographical force to a narrative, but they cannot be an objective mode of representation because they imply an already mediated perception (Jones 73). In that way, the photographs in Ruffo’s text demonstrate the “truth” about Grey Owl from his own point of view, since those pictures always betray how he views Europe and how his version of indigeneity functions. For instance, the photographs chosen to represent Britain reinforce Belaney’s idea that this country is marked by “stuffiness” (Ruffo 10) and “unrelenting discipline” (8). Once his transformation is underway, the photographs point to a contrast between what Belaney is arguing for, the protection of the “Indian / way of life” (71), and the manner in which he actually lives. While the photographs of First Nations in Ruffo’s text show them within their community or their family (18, 33), Belaney is mainly photographed alone. His solitude emphasizes the way in which he constructed himself as the only authority on conservation and First Nations issues. The contrast between the two sets of pictures also points out that Belaney enacted his own version of indigeneity, based on the “stereotypes he had learned as a boy” (Chapin 95), rather than on the actual First Nations communities with which he interacted. Further, Ruffo undermines the notion that photographs are historically accurate when he places

one of Belaney and of two others drumming next to a series of poems that describe Belaney's orchestration of an "Indian War Dance" (Ruffo 37-39). The photograph appears to objectively reinforce the events of the War Dance. Yet, it is dated 1920 (215) while the text stipulates that the Dance took place in 1923. Its status as proof is thereby undermined, and readers are invited to question the reliability of the so-called factual components of the text. The presence of photographs thus adds to the generic interplay of the long poem, since they not only prevent the long poem from being solely identified as a documentary long poem but also act as a literary strategy through which Belaney and the "mystery" of how he created himself can be investigated.

Ruffo's *Grey Owl* also invokes the lyric mode to personalize the historical material on which it draws, a strategy that destabilizes the subject further as it generates a completely different subject from that generated by the epic and documentary modes. For Godard, the documentary "turns its back on lyric discourse" because it relies on multiple voices (315). In Ruffo's long poem, the lyric successfully defuses the historical drive of the epic and documentary modes it also contains. It is true that the *I* employed in Ruffo's text is not always a lyric *I*, since the multiple testimonies the long poem collects do not necessarily entail that someone's interiority will be revealed. But the text does invoke the lyric in order to express Belaney's doubts and anxieties, and to contradict claims that his text is solely biographical. For instance, one section explores the relation between Belaney's two faces, where "one face is truthful" while "the other lies" (Ruffo 90). Another section focuses on Belaney's doubts as he begins to assume an indigenous voice: "who are you speaking as? Who are you / speaking for?" (69). Such passages contradict popular discourses on Belaney/Grey Owl, which assert that Grey Owl "did not want to have two identities, only one: the Indian one" (Atwood 48). The lyric voice deployed in Ruffo's *Grey Owl* rather presents a figure torn between the two selves he ventriloquizes, as Belaney is aware that his English background cannot be suppressed, hence his constant fear of exposure (Ruffo 83, 98-99, 104, 120). It also constructs Belaney's imposture as a lie (90), rather than as an attempt at connection with First Nations (Dewar, "Fringes" 271) or as a "genuine" transformation (Braz, "White 183; Hulan 44). *Grey Owl* also humanizes Belaney through its exploration of his mixed feelings toward his

parents, specifically his resentment toward his mother (182) and his longing for his father:

Yes I'm in America  
 Just like you  
 Looking for the one face  
 I needed but never knew. (11)

Such passages not only employ the lyric *I* as a stand-in for Belaney but also signal that this long poem has been fictionalized. Belaney is presented as more sympathetic in those instances, made to express “compassion and pain” toward the “children [he] never see[s]” (199) in a way that resists both the epic quest and the documentary’s factual basis. The lyric also fractures the possibility for the documentary form to act as a “frame on which to hang a theme” (Livesay 269), since the lyric mode as employed here prevents the development of a unifying theme. Indeed, aspects of the epic and documentary forms which generate a seemingly factual and cohesive subject are undermined through this lyric voice that expresses Belaney’s doubts, anxieties, and fears, rather than a glamorized version of this reformed trapper and famed public speaker. Ruffo’s deployment of the lyric, then, allows him to represent what cannot be historicized or documented, such as Belaney’s inner turmoil and his personal relationships. In other words, it presents the aspects of his life that would have to be displaced were he to be represented through an epic or documentary perspective.

A generic analysis of Ruffo’s *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*, then, demonstrates that the text is not as factual as it initially appears, just as it is not as sympathetic to Belaney as it might seem. Genre plays a crucial role in Ruffo’s text, as it is through generic interplay that Ruffo develops a non-coercive way to deploy the contemporary Canadian long poem, and thus correct the erasures of marginalized voices that have marked its critical history. The subversion of historical documentation that this long poem contains, notably the fact that historical evidence and the previous exclusion of indigenous voices are proven to have been manipulated to certain ends, demonstrates that Ruffo shares a sense of distrust toward the uncritical application of a documentary perspective. This non-coercive development of the contemporary long poem also enables Ruffo to detail what cannot be historicized, notably the personal aspects of Grey Owl’s story and his inner turmoil. These

generic tensions simultaneously generate a contradictory subject, one whose identity cannot be viewed as cohesive since the shift between the epic, documentary, metafictional, and lyric modes fragment the unified subject that biographies seek to create. Rather, Ruffo's long poem does not resolve the issue of identity or imposture, which, as Braz mentions, tends to dominate critical discussions of Grey Owl ("Modern" 53). Instead, the final page of the text suggests that Ruffo does not wish to suppress either side of Belaney/Grey Owl's identity, since this final section declares that while he was born "Archibald Stanfeld Belaney" (Ruffo 209), he died "Grey Owl, Wa-sha-quon-asin" (209). While this might suggest that Ruffo privileges the chosen identity, this section denies Belaney's invented Scottish/Apache ancestry by stressing his English background. The poem is also titled "Between Birth and Death Waussayuah — Bindumiwin [a vision whose meaning is complete]" (209), which suggests a certain sense of acceptance toward Belaney's metamorphosis and assumed identity. However, this acceptance can only be perceived as Ruffo's final word if readers choose to forget all of the instances where indigenous voices had mocked Belaney's poor dancing abilities (37, 128, 145), where Jane Espaniel derisively comments that his stories "[sound] like a lot of north wind blowing" (156), and where one of his sons calls him "Archie Baloney" (82). Analyzing the text as linear and sympathetic (Dawson 130; Braz, "White" 183; Hulan 52) thus entails dismissing the input of certain voices, as would an interpretation of the text as ironic. A generic study of Ruffo's *Grey Owl* as a long poem allows for a reading in which those tensions — between facts and fiction, between sympathy and irony — are foregrounded and left to generate the contradictory subject that is Ruffo's recreation of Grey Owl.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Krupat defines the Indian autobiography as a collaborative text in which a Euro-American author deploys the voice of an indigenous person (262). However, Dewar's re-interpretation of the genre differs from Krupat's, since the latter *insists* that an Indian autobiography requires "contact" between the subject and the writer in order to be interpreted as such (263).

<sup>2</sup> However, Ruffo does stress that the text combines facts and fiction: "this work . . . is a culmination of all that *I* have heard, read, and *imagined* about the man and his times" (Ruffo 213; emphasis added). This statement points to the role of fiction in the text as well



as to Ruffo's role in putting the text together. It is true that he does not set up his text as one created, or narrated, by Grey Owl, but that difference should not automatically discredit the role of fiction in his long poem.

<sup>3</sup> Although, for Hulan, Ruffo's sympathy does not amount to an "apologetic" stance toward Grey Owl (52).

<sup>4</sup> While part of this debate is concerned with the effects of the length of the long poem, as well as how long a long poem must be, such discussions will not be the subject of this analysis since my article addresses the long poem as a genre rather than as a set of aesthetic criteria.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*, where progress and movement are treated through the epic mode in order to identify the construction of the Canadian-Pacific railway as a significant moment of nation building. Pratt's poem also demonstrates that certain dissenting voices, such as Riel's and the indentured workers', must be dismissed or erased in order to create "the united spirit of a culture" (Saul 262) that the epic requires.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Thomas Cary's *Abrams Plains*, in which Inuits are described as "dwarfish Esquimaux, with small pig's eyes" (l.164). Similarly, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Rising Village* portrays First Nations as "wandering savages," who display, "by turns, the fury of their sway" (lines 45-46). For Ruffo, stereotypes are always negative because they have been constructed "for the purpose of subjugation, whether it be physical, psychological, or spiritual" ("WNL" 112).

<sup>7</sup> Ruffo addresses a poem to D.C. Scott ("Poem for D.C. Scott") in *Opening in the Sky*, where he mocks him for wanting to make First Nations immortal in his poetry while actively working to their demise. In this poem, Scott "asks many questions but / doesn't want to listen" (lines 28-29), which contradicts the accuracy of his role as "documenter."

<sup>8</sup> Harold A. Innis argues that Canada's foundation is related to the trade routes the fur trade required (qtd. in Emberley 3). Julia Emberley adds to Innis's argument in *The Cultural Politics of Fur* though an analysis of the Hudson's Bay Company's 325th anniversary leaflet, which created a direct link between the fur trade, nationhood, and "the signing of the Canadian charter in Ottawa, 1970" (70).

<sup>9</sup> Ruffo mentions that some documents from his archival research have been incorporated "almost verbatim" in the long poem but have been "reshaped to fit the form of the book" (213).

<sup>10</sup> The cover photograph, however, serves to demonstrate the successful inscription of such markers since it "appears remarkably 'Indian'" (Dewar, "Fringes" 267).

<sup>11</sup> This deconstructive impulse can be seen in other strategies Ruffo deploys, notably his decision to begin the text with Belaney's childhood (Braz, "White" 174) and his decision to refer to Grey Owl as "Archie" or "Belaney" even once he has adopted his new persona (Dawson 131). Ruffo indeed ensures that his readers are always aware of who Grey Owl is. These stylistic choices ironize the first-person testimonies Ruffo incorporates into the long poem, as readers witness the ease with which Belaney fools his audience into believing that he speaks from an "authentic" perspective.

## WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. "The Grey Owl Syndrome." *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995. 35-61. Print.
- . *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1970. Print.
- Bentley, D.M.R., ed. *Early Long Poems on Canada*. London: Canadian Poetry P, 1993. Print.

- Braz, Albert. "The Modern Hiawatha: Grey Owl's Construction of His Aboriginal Self." *Autobiography in Canada: Critical Directions*. Ed. Julie Rak. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005. 53-68. Print.
- . "The White Indian: Armand Garnet Ruffo's *Grey Owl* and the Spectre of Authenticity." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36.4 (2002): 171-87. Print.
- Cary, Thomas. "Abram's Plains." Bentley, ed. 9-30. Print.
- Chapin, David. "Gender and Indian Masquerade in the Life of Grey Owl." *American Indian Quarterly* 24.1 (2000): 91-109. Print.
- Crawford, Isabella Valency. "Malcom's Katie." Bentley, ed. 507-50. Print.
- Davey, Frank. "Recontextualization in the Long Poem." *Reading Canadian Reading*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1988. Print.
- Dawson, Carrie. "Never Cry Fraud: Remembering Grey Owl, Rethinking Imposture." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 65 (1998): 120-40. Print.
- Dewar, Jonathan R. "Fringes, Imposture, and Connection: Armand Garnet Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*." *Creating Community: A Roundtable Discussion on Canadian Aboriginal Literatures*. Brandon: Bearpaw, 2001. 256-73. Print.
- . "From Copper Woman to Grey Owl to the Alternative Warrior: Exploring Voice and the Need to Connect." (*Ad*)*ressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures*. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus, 2001. 57-77. Print.
- Emberley, Julia V. *The Cultural Politics of Fur*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997. Print.
- Godard, Barbara. "Epi(pro)logue: In Pursuit of the Long Poem." *Open Letter* 6.2-3 (1985): 301-33. Print.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. "The Rising Village." Bentley, ed. 195-215. Print.
- Hulan, Renée. "Hearing the Voices in Armand Garnet Ruffo's *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*." *Canadian Studies* 61 (2006): 39-57. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- Jones, Manina. *That Art of Difference: Documentary-Collage and English-Canadian Writing*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993. Print.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991. Print.
- Krupat, Arnold. "The Indian Autobiography: Origins, Types, and Function." *Smoothering the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983. Print.
- Livesay, Dorothy. "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre." *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*. Ed. Eli Mandel. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971. 267-81. Print.
- Mandel, Eli. "The Death of the Long Poem." *Open Letter* 6.2-3 (1985): 11-23. Print.
- Munton, Ann. "The Long Poem as Poetic Diary." *Open Letter* 6.2-3 (1985): 93-106. Print.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. New York: Penguin, 1970. Print.
- Pratt, E.J. "Towards the Last Spike." *Complete Poems*. Ed. Sandra Djwa and R.G. Moyles. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1989. 201-50. Print.
- Ruffo, Armand Garnet. *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*. Regina: Coteau, 1996. Print.
- . *Opening in the Sky*. Penticton: Theytus, 1994. Print.
- . "Why Native Literature?" *Native North America: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*. Toronto: ECW, 1999. 109-21. Print.
- Saul, Joanne. "Displacement and Self-Representation: Theorizing Canadian Biotexts." *Biography* 24 (2001): 259-72. Print.