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“A Half-Understood Massiveness”: Revisiting John Newlove’s “The Pride”

J.A. WEINGARTEN

JOHN NEWLOVE’S COMPOSITION of “The Pride” in July 1964 marked a major turning point in his literary career. In fact, that entire year was a period of profound growth for the twenty-six-year-old poet. Living in Vancouver, Newlove was immersed in a vibrant literary climate. Although he consciously distanced himself from the *TISH* group of the early 1960s (spearheaded by George Bowering, Frank Davey, David Dawson, Jamie Reid, and Fred Wah), he still published in their magazine and was good friends with some members, such as Bowering and Reid. Newlove’s partial connection to these writers and to *TISH* encouraged him to read “the same masters” as his contemporaries, namely Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams (Barbour 281-82). Independent of the *TISH* influence, however, Newlove found numerous historical and/or literary texts that exerted a lifelong influence over his writing. From Wallace Stevens’s poetry, for instance, he learned “to say precisely what [he] believe[d]” and from Robinson Jeffers’s poetry, “not to believe easily” (Diary, 27 June 1964). His diary entries from this period reveal a poet working tirelessly to pin down his philosophy of poetry and to find the aesthetic that might allow him to realize that poetics.

Yet Newlove felt unable to produce any new poetry during these months. On 26 April 1964, he wrote in his diary, “It is so long since I have had a good poem come to me that I am frightened. I am conscious of how little I know” (Diary, 26 April 1964). He sounds equally unnerved in an entry from 10 July that same year: “when will I write a new poem?” he scribbled. It was a question under which he scrawled another note, “Pawnees: earth-lodge villagers.” The next day, he describes “a longish poem . . . that presently begins: the image, the image, the image, the image” (Diary, 10 July 1964). These lines were the embryonic beginnings of “The Pride,” which opens with the “image” of “the pawnees / in their earth-lodge villages” (*Black Night Window* 105).¹ These lines did not merely begin a poem; they eventually played a major part in establishing Newlove’s reputation as a historically conscious

poet. There are no records to suggest he wrote about Canadian history before 10 July 1964, and the fact that he wrote some of his best-known historically conscious poems between 1964 and 1966 suggests that the composition of “The Pride” represented something of an epiphany for the poet. The past, he had realized, could be rendered compellingly in poetry.²

What inspired this important poem and Newlove’s epiphany, however, is difficult to identify. His impulse to write about history may have been rooted in his innate penchant for historical study. In a letter dated 3 November 1985, he wrote to an enquiring student, “You also ask what brought on ‘The Pride.’ Looking back, it seems quite simple to me. I had been reading masses of materials, anthropological and cultural history, about North American Indians; and I think that I was so stuffed with information and excitement about the things I was learning, that it had to sort itself into some sort of coherent-to-me-form and then burst out” (Letter to James English). Whatever inspired “The Pride,” Newlove experienced an atypical burst of creativity on 11 July 1964. The poem, Newlove once claimed, “came out at once”: he completed the first published draft of “The Pride” by 14 July 1964, a remarkable feat given that Newlove was an extremely slow writer (Newlove and Pearce 119).³ He sent the poem to *The Tamarack Review* in the summer of 1964; it was published the following year.⁴ The poem immediately caught the attention of critics and anthologists, and until the 1980s, it was considered by many to be a breakthrough poem in Canadian literature.⁵

Although “The Pride” fundamentally altered not just one writer’s career but also the shape of much Canadian writing (especially prairie writing), Newlove’s achievement is largely unappreciated today. Critical interpretations of his landmark poem tend to downplay or misconstrue its impact on Canadian literature by mistaking it for a romantic dismissal of First Nations history and culture. As a reassessment of “The Pride,” this article focuses on Newlove’s archive in an effort to overturn what has become an unfortunately common assumption in Canadian literary criticism: that this poem and its poet uncritically endorse Canada’s colonial past. Typically, Newlove’s detractors presume his ignorance of or antagonism toward an idea of “postcolonialism” that resembles Judith Leggatt’s definition of the term: “an ongoing attempt to find means of cross-cultural communication that escape the repressive hierarchies of colonial encounters” (111). If we think of postcolonialism as Leggatt

does, as a means of encouraging new discourses on Canada's colonial past, then Newlove's poem has been unfairly faulted as one that shows too little interest in the possibility of such dialogue.

Indeed, although early reviewers of *Black Night Window* celebrated "The Pride," many scholars today either condemn or ignore the poem. These critics have overzealously jettisoned from the Canadian canon a poem that inspired an entire generation of poets, especially prairie-born poets, who wrote and continue to write about history. Negative assessments of "The Pride" are uniform in several ways. First, they typically focus primarily, if not solely, on the final stanza of Newlove's poem as an example of the poet's desire to "assimilate" First Nations culture: "and in this land we / are [the First Nations] people, come / back to life" (*BNW* 111). Second, they tend to be exceptionally brief analyses; they range from a single sentence to approximately a paragraph in length. Third, not one of these critics mentions Newlove's extensive knowledge of history or his source material, and they give inadequate attention to his treatment of history in other poems that are unequivocally critical of colonialism.

To be clear, I'm not questioning the value of the extensive (and often productively conflictual) discourses and methodologies that critically evaluate Canada's colonial history; the theory and criticism that articulated and provoked an acute consciousness of colonialism's cultural impact have shaken the foundations of the humanities for the better. At the same time, the import of various concepts of "postcolonial theory" into literary studies has occasionally resulted in the exclusion of writers who lend themselves less obviously to such methodologies. In Canada, most of these authors are modernists like Newlove who distanced themselves from theory-based postmodernist writing. When critics read such literature, the representation of colonialism is sometimes mistaken for complicity, and some texts are, as a result, read not at all or are read selectively in order to justify their exclusion from an increasingly politicized Canadian canon. Political scrutiny, of course, is vital to the humanities. Undertaking such scrutiny, however, without adequate attention to the historical, social, or literary context of a given work often results in caricatures or erroneous, if still well-intentioned, suppressions of significant writing. Such has been the fate of "The Pride," a poem that contributed to the many processes that sustained and continue to sustain usefully critical perspectives on colonialism.

Examples of assaults on the poem abound. Discussing “The Pride” in “Romantic Nationalism and the Image of Native People in Contemporary English-Canadian Literature” (1987), Margery Fee argues that Newlove offers reductive stereotypes of a “nomadic and ephemeral culture”; she disapproves of the poem as one that has its “origins in Romantic theory, which sees the poet as the mouthpiece of the inarticulate and illiterate people” (20-21). The plight of Native figures in such a poem, Fee concludes, appears to be “the result of [Native peoples’] carelessness rather than of dispossession by white people” (20). Her claims are far from unique: Diana Brydon similarly describes “The Pride” as a “classical colonial literary move[:] . . . the prior history of native peoples is assimilated into the white Canadian present so that the descendants of white settlers may be freed to claim Indians as their ancestors” (39); Frank Davey denigrates Newlove’s “resonances of European romantic primitivism” (53) and “Euro-Canadian appropriation of Indian culture” (55); E.F. Dyck believes Newlove’s poem “is flawed by naïveté (at best) or racism (at worst). It is Newlove’s personal ride . . . to a dubious affirmation of ‘this land is my land’” (79); Tony Hall expresses shock at Newlove’s concluding lines and their supposedly favourable outlook on assimilation (E19); Annis Pratt laments Newlove’s “exploit[ation] [of] Native American culture for his own poetic enhancement” (273); Patrick Sheeran condemns Newlove’s alleged attempt to ignore “the brute fact of conquest” in order to “legitimate possession [of the land]” and seeds the shockingly misleading suggestion that Newlove’s title gestures to the “pride” of white Canadians (287); and David Solway twice attacks the “artificial[ity]” of the closing lines of “The Pride” (“Flight from Canada” 25-26; see also “Interview” 32).

Readers familiar with this criticism will surely find it tough to imagine how “The Pride” “shock[ed] a whole generation of readers” into feeling a “new pride of place” (Lane 60). Yet the sentiment is common among poets whose careers began in the 1960s. As a poem that drew attention to the cultural complexity and richness of the prairies, “The Pride” inspired Newlove’s contemporaries. Its popularity has rested mainly on the judgments of such writers, who were eager to articulate their own pride of place: Douglas Barbour, Dennis Cooley, Gary Geddes, Patrick Lane, and many others.⁶

For these and other postwar writers, “The Pride” proved that a poetic treatment of the prairies and its history could be both aesthetic-

ally and thematically sophisticated without devaluing the cultures or historical conditions of this region. Part of this task necessitated taking a new approach to what had become, by the 1960s, an outdated prairie motif: Newlove consciously refused to replicate the common image in modern realist fiction (and, later, in modern poetry) of a barren prairie “wasteland” (a motif obviously tied to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*) and depicted the prairies instead as a fertile space for the creative imagination to apprehend. He achieves this depiction by emulating Eliot’s modernist multivocality, by layering voices from the past and present; in so doing, Newlove’s poem brings together and juxtaposes a provocative array of perspectives on prairie history. Eliot’s own intrusive voice offers one example of multivocality in “The Pride,” but Newlove also draws on others. Two of the central voices here are G.E. Hyde — a twentieth-century historian whose writings were largely unsympathetic to the cultures negatively affected by colonialism — and David Thompson — an eighteenth-century explorer whom Newlove portrays as a more sympathetic observer of such cultures. The clash of these perspectives in Newlove’s poem indicates a history that is complex and divided, a history redolent of the Eliotic fragments that so effectively sustained Anglo-American modernist poetry. Sorting through this history, Newlove’s speaker comes to regard the prairie past as a “half-understood massiveness” that is worthy of further investigations and in need of more diverse historical and literary perspectives.

These were the elements of Newlove’s poem that secured its popularity amongst his contemporaries. His cautious exploration of history in “The Pride” epitomized, as Patrick Lane argues, some writers’ need to “revise” conventional Canadian histories (59). Even if “The Pride” seemed unsatisfying to later critics, it did in its time identify the primary historical interests of the burgeoning prairie literary community of the postwar era. My attention here to Newlove’s archive evidences his efforts to promote new discourses on prairie literature; my decision to focus on his use of literary and historical allusions — namely to Eliot, Hyde, and Thompson — brings these efforts to the fore. At the same time, this focus helps readers identify the intricate historical vision of the prairies and innovative modernist aesthetic that together define “The Pride,” a poem that shows and encourages a critical attentiveness to the history that took place on the prairies both before and after European contact.

The modernism and historical sense of “The Pride” is partly rooted in Newlove’s thoughtful engagement with T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. His allusion to Eliot illuminates both the multivocality of Newlove’s poem (as Eliot’s voice infiltrates the text) and his speaker’s productive anxiety as he imagines the fragmented history of the prairies. Thinking on the history of prairie cultures and events, the persona finds the past too difficult to contain or control:

III
 But what image, bewildered
 son of all men
 under the hot sun,
 do you worship,
 what completeness
 do you hope to have
 from these tales,
 a half-understood massiveness, mirage,
 in men’s minds — what
 is your purpose;
 with what force
 will you proceed
 along a line
 neither straight nor short,
 whose future
 you cannot know
 or result foretell,
 whose meaning is still
 obscured as the incidents
 occur and accumulate? (*BNW* 107-08)

The speaker’s diction and tone in Newlove’s poem obviously derive from *The Waste Land*:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches
 Grow? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief; (19-23)

The significance of this allusion goes beyond an evident echo: Newlove interprets the modernists’ struggle to shore up fragments in the context of prairie cultures. Whereas Eliot’s speaker grapples with (chiefly)

fragments of literary history, Newlove's persona contends with a fragmented regional history. As they grapple with their respective histories, both poets pose multiple rhetorical questions, tethered to a single question mark — though Newlove's syntax is far more labyrinthine than Eliot's. As a result, the reader and the speaker's experience — to borrow Newlove's term — an intimidating “accumulation” of questions and histories. In “The Pride,” this accumulation threatens the coherence of the past in the persona's mind; certainly Newlove's dash, which paradoxically interrupts and continues his speaker's catalogue of questions, points to the persona's distracted state of anxiety, his overwhelming confrontation with so much history. To be sure, Eliot's vision of a “heap of broken images” complements Newlove's own effort to portray the anxiety of the poet who tries to make such an elaborate, fragmented past fully intelligible.

Newlove writes about this same anxiety in an unpublished poem, appropriately titled “History,” which he described (in a handwritten note on the draft itself) as “not a poem. yet” (n. pag.). The piece parallels the unease the speaker in “The Pride” experiences:

The accumulation makes fools of us: too hard
to fight time filled with facts,
or even to listen to it.
The only fact available for use
is found in the Now, and that is not graspable. (n. pag.)

The speaker's focus on the “accumulation” of facts, like the above lines from “The Pride,” underscores Newlove's distrust of narrative closure in historical writing. One accumulates stories, perspectives, and information as one sifts through the past. Narrative is historians' “fight” to control this mass of knowledge. As historians shape narratives, however, they inevitably misrepresent and even fail to “listen” to the past. Newlove's lines echo one of the fundamental claims of historiographic theory: that, as Michel de Certeau puts it, “historians begin from present determinations” (11). For Newlove, the “present determinations” of history make the past ungraspable and overconfident manipulations of history seem “foolish.”

These sentiments are likewise manifest in “The Pride,” a poem that illuminates the difficulty of organizing voices from the past. Newlove's allusion to Eliot is one example of this difficulty, because readers must

contend with the vast, fragmented collection of voices associated with Eliot's poem. For example, there is a sinuous set of images associated with the line quoted above, "son of all men." It rings of both Eliot's "Son of man" and Ezekiel 2:1: "He said to me, 'Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.'" By invoking Eliot, Newlove creates a modernist layering of voices, the elaborateness of which undermines any claim that his poem is the expression of a romantic lyric: many voices and texts converge, even at the level of a single line. This layering extends to other sections and is a way of thinking about the many historical voices or images that enter Newlove's poem: the prairie past is, like Eliot's own wasteland of allusions, a "half-understood massiveness." Newlove's speaker appears simultaneously intimidated and inspired by the "handful / of fragments" that constitute prairie history (*BNW* 111). As we shall see, Newlove's other sections do more to identify these fragments in a specific way, but I have begun my discussion with section III in order to identify the general vision of prairie history that Newlove espouses: it is (like Eliot's own poem) multivocal, too massive to be easily comprehended or represented, and anxiety-inducing for the poet who tries to organize it.

The speaker's appreciation of this sublime history contrasts with a general stereotype in Canadian literature and criticism of the prairies as a barren space. In other words, Newlove may have found Eliot's modernist multivocality and fragmentation useful for describing the accumulating history of the prairies, but he disburdens himself of the arid "wasteland" imagery that other writers like Anne Marriott and Sinclair Ross used to describe the physical (and often, by extension, metaphysical) condition of the region. Newlove thus distinguishes himself from earlier writers who drew on *The Waste Land* to describe the spiritual and physical conditions of prairie life (especially during the 1930s). Both D.M.R. Bentley and Anne Geddes Bailey, for instance, remark on Marriott's literalization of the "wasteland" image: Bentley describes the "barren field" of the prairies that inspired the poet to "apply techniques learned from the high Modernists" (71), and Bailey analyzes Marriott's rendering of an "infertile environment" (56) that is "dry, dusty and barren" (58). Likewise, Ross posited that Eliot's "wasteland" represented "an appropriately grim and lonely landscape to 'take [a personal sense of isolation] out on'" (*Collecting Stamps* 138); certainly his comment readily applies to *As For Me and My House* (1941), in which

a literal drought parallels the artistic and sexual drought that Philip and Mrs. Bentley experience. For Newlove, however, the idea of an Eliotic heap of historical images, fragments, and voices proved more appealing than the prairie-as-barren-wasteland image.⁷

For that reason, his persona insists that “the plains are bare, / not barren” (*BNW* 108): the image of an underexplored, and thus “bare,” history replaces that of the “barren” (that is, culturally sterile) desert. Newlove’s distinction was an important and timely pivot in prairie poetry: after 1965, the prairies would become a region of intense poetic activity, and young poets were looking for models that could legitimize new projects attentive to such locales. Hence, as Newlove proposed new frames of reference for Eliot’s aesthetics and motifs in relation to the prairies, he also validated the prairie experience as a topic worthy of poetic exploration. To put it another way, he invited readers to imagine the prairies as — to return to his terminology — a “half-understood massiveness,” a space rich with heaped fragments of culture and history and in need of representation, instead of as a wasteland hostile to the imagination.

In the service of this invitation, Newlove includes historical content in “The Pride” that evidences both the fruitfulness of studying the past and the inadequate representation of that past in existing historical studies. “The Pride,” thus, represents Newlove’s early attempt to identify the array of First Nations stories and other histories that, in his time, remained largely unexplored or, at best, insufficiently treated. Indeed, W.H. New’s claim that Newlove’s poem is “whole” and “unfragmented” is misleading (155) because Newlove’s speaker is able only to conjure up fragments or remnants of a past that survives in the present: he names “the haida and tsimshian tribes,” the “thunderbird hilunga,” “nootka tootooch,” “kwunusela” who was named “by the kwakiutl,” “d’sonoqua,” and other mythical or historical figures and peoples (*BNW* 106). The section concludes, “they are all ready / to be found, / the legends / and the people, or / all their ghosts and memories, / whatever is strong enough to be remembered” (107). Newlove’s catalogue of names is particularly interesting because it shatters the misleadingly coherent image of “the Indian” that persisted (and, in fact, still persists) in North American culture. What Newlove’s speaker amasses is, instead of a coherent vision of the “indian” or Canadian history, a “handful / of fragments”: he hopes that the stories of First Nations peoples, their

culture left “half-understood” and a “mirage, / in men’s minds,” might now be “found” (107).

Not all of Newlove’s historical fragments are so briefly articulated; his persona grapples for an extended period with G.E. Hyde’s *Red Cloud’s Folk: A History of the Oglala Sioux Indians* (1937), a historical text that documents the westward movement of the Sioux during the nineteenth century. Because Newlove appended notes about Hyde’s text to his diary entry from 10 July 1964, it appears that he was reading *Red Cloud’s Folk* the day he began to write “The Pride.” Hyde’s presence in the text is unmistakable. For instance, the image of “the crazy dogs, men / tethered with leather dog-thongs to a stake, fighting until dead” (BNW 105) comes directly from Hyde: “it would appear that the Sioux warriors who were killed about 1801 were Crazy Dogs who staked themselves out with dog-ropes and remained where they were until killed” (32n8). But his allusions to Hyde are far from reverent; they are condemnatory renderings of historians writing in the colonialist grain.

In other words, representation is not necessarily complicity in Newlove’s poem; he is quite critical of Hyde’s work. Consider, for example, the following lines from Hyde’s text, on which Newlove draws in “The Pride”:

[J. B.] Truteau found the [Teton Sioux] coming on friendly visits to the Arikaras and even warning that tribe that some other Sioux bands were planning to attack their villages. We may therefore picture the little Teton camps about the year 1760 coming in on foot, with their little tipi poles tied in bundles to the sides of their big dogs . . . But these Tetons, being the wild, fickle folk that they were also raided the villages . . . (18)

Hyde’s colonialist sympathies are obvious: his condescending “picture” of the “little” camps and the peoples’ “little” tools is as objectionable as his animalistic description of the “wild, fickle” Teton Sioux. Compare Hyde’s passage with Newlove’s opening lines, which I’ve drawn from two versions of the poem:

<p>The image: the pawnees in their earth-lodge villages, the image of teton sioux, wild</p>	<p>I The image/ the pawnees in their earth-lodge villages, the clear image of teton sioux, wild</p>
---	---

For the most part, Hyde's tone implies that he believes colonial contact helped the Arikaras: it permitted trade and thus these peoples' obtainment of horses and "metal weapons" to defeat their enemies. He celebrates the improved strength of the Arikaras, who use "long, heavy" weapons to destroy their weaker, "small[er]" enemy. Hyde's romantic reading of the Arikaras demonstrates his disregard of the negative effect of colonialism; he appears indifferent, for example, to the consequences of smallpox. This reading of Hyde complements Newlove's in the first section of "The Pride":

image, arikaras
with spanish sabre-blades
mounted on the long
heavy buffalo lances,
riding the sioux
down, the horsemen
scouring the level plains
in war or hunt
until smallpox got them,
4,000 warriors
(*Tamarack* 37; 1965)

image: arikaras
with traded spanish sabre blades
mounted on the long
heavy buffalo lances,
riding the sioux
down, the centaurs, the horsemen
scouring the level plains
in war or hunt
until smallpox got them,
4,000 warriors
(*BNW* 105; 1968)

In 1980, Susan Wood correctly hypothesized that Newlove drew on a source text by an author inattentive to the fact that "the lives of these post-contact tribes are being disturbed, even destroyed, by the white presence" (233). Even Newlove's earlier version of "The Pride," through its terse lineation and emphasis on death tolls, weightily stresses the post-contact trauma brought on by "spanish" weapons and "smallpox." In his revised version, he further underlines the negative colonial influence with additions such as "*traded* spanish sabre blades" (emphasis added). The anti-colonial sentiments are, if less explicit, as genuine here as in Newlove's later poem, "Ride Off Any Horizon" (1964): "at times to be born / is enough, to be / in the way is too much — // some colonel otter, some / major-general middleton will / get you, you — // indian" (*BNW* 36-37). Like "Ride Off Any Horizon," "The Pride" is about an ethnocentrism and historical myopia that the persona of the poem observes in colonial discourses.

To put it another way, Newlove's speaker is troubled by the fragments that others like Hyde have carelessly crafted into historical narratives. "The indians," the persona insists, "are not composed of / the

romantic stories / about them" (*BNW* 111). The historian's (that is, Hyde's) image is a distorted vision of the past, one tainted by *his* romanticism, racism, and Euro- or Anglocentrism. Picking up on this suggestion, Wood recognizes that Newlove's "images . . . are incomplete. Not only are they fragments without context, but they are drawn from potentially *unreliable sources*: the white 'chronicler'" (233; emphasis added). Readers are expected to attribute this section and its resonances of "primitivism" (to borrow Frank Davey's term) to Hyde and historians like him, not to Newlove himself. The poet opposes antiquated or misguided romantic histories; he values the accumulation of conflictual fragments of history, rather than the subjective organizing of fragments into overly confident narratives. Newlove's allusions to Hyde in "The Pride" showcase his skepticism because, contrary to what Jan Bartley argues, Newlove expresses epistemological doubt rather than his faith in "factual" historical narratives (21). He sees that histories such as Hyde's *Red Cloud's Folk* are detrimental to more progressive histories of the prairies.

There are, however, histories toward which Newlove seems more inclined. Section V of "The Pride" starkly contrasts the voice of David Thompson with that of Hyde. Newlove invokes the explorer Thompson's description of Saukamappee, an "old Man of at least 75 or 80 years of age" (289): "In 1787, the old cree saukamappee, / aged 75 or thereabout, speaking then / of things that had happened when he was 16, / just a man, told david thompson, / of the raids the shoshonis . . ." (*BNW* 108).⁸ The fact that Thompson mediates Saukamappee's story makes his distortion of it inevitable and, in context, intentionally clear to the reader. But even still, Thompson's text brings Newlove closer to Saukamappee's own voice than the disengaged histories written by figures like Hyde; surely Thompson's openness to First Nations' testimonies would have made his account more appealing to Newlove.

More importantly, Thompson's journals may have actually inspired the title of "The Pride." Patrick Lane suggests that William Carlos Williams's articulation of "a local pride" in *Paterson* (2) explains Newlove's title (Lane 60);⁹ Williams's phrase may have had some impact on Newlove, but the concept of "pride" first appears in Section V, which focuses more on a specific peoples' cultural pride than on a regional pride. Newlove's allusions to David Thompson in this section point to another potential inspiration for the title of his poem. As he draft-

ed “The Pride,” Newlove tentatively titled it, “THE IMAGE, THE PAWNEES” (Diary, 13 July 1964), but then retitled it the next day: “Long poem is now called THE PRIDE” (Diary, 14 July 1964). The initial title appears to derive from Hyde’s work, of which Newlove is quite critical; it would therefore have seemed inappropriate to the poet’s material. Thompson may have offered Newlove a more fitting title:

[The Chipewyan tribe] are in possession of many secrets for making baits[:] . . . the bait for the Trout the largest fish of the Lakes, was the head half of a White Fish, well rubbed with Eagles [*sic*] fat, for want of it, other raw fat . . . but *the pride* of these people is to angle the White Fish an art known to only a few of the Men; they would not inform me of it’s [*sic*] composition.” (164-65; emphasis added)

There are notable parallels between this passage in Thompson’s journal and Newlove’s poem:

in summer and in the bloody fall
they gathered on the killing grounds,
fat and shining with fat, amused
with the luxuries of death,

relieved from the steam of knowledge,
consoled by the stream of blood
and steam rising from the fresh hides
and tired horses, wheeling in their pride
on the sweating horses, their pride. (*BNW* 109)

The texts certainly relate different events, but both share an admiring portrayal of cultural “pride.” Specifically, lines such as “fat and shining with fat, amused / with the luxuries of death” bear close resemblance to Thompson’s journals, suggesting that the “luxuries” should be associated with the Chipewyans’ manipulation of natural fats for fishing (or, in Newlove’s depiction, hunting for “hides”) and not just with “death.” But the context of Newlove’s apparent allusion to Thompson is important to note, as it contrasts with the earlier allusion to Hyde, in which the damage caused by European contact is explicit. Thompson’s narrative is much more focused on the traditional and pre-contact practices of the Chipewyan people and the pride with which this particular group conducted these traditions. If Thompson’s text was indeed the inspiration for Newlove’s title, then the latter writer was evidently captivated

by expressions of First Nations' "pride." Thompson's text, offering a perspective on this pride, thus provides a counterpoint of sorts to the narrow perspective on prairie history that Hyde presents.

Newlove, then, adopts a complex web of interconnecting allusions in "The Pride" in order to propose a more progressive concept of prairie history and culture than had been previously offered in many antecedent literatures and histories. He alludes to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as an anchor for his modernist multivocality and in an effort to create a positive metaphor for the prairie experience. Newlove's prairie resembles Eliot's "wasteland" not because of its alleged barrenness but because of its valuable assortment of histories piled together in a heap, which deserve fuller study; some of these histories are gathered in Section II as part of Newlove's rapid-fire catalogue of First Nations peoples, myths, and stories. Among these histories are those of G.E. Hyde and David Thompson. Hyde's historical writing serves as an illustrative example of Anglocentric histories that have misrepresented the prairie past. Histories such as Hyde's *Red Cloud's Folk*, the speaker observes, elicit a reader's skepticism. Alternatively, David Thompson's journals are an example of a history that counters Hyde's image of the post-contact empowerment of the Arikaras and "weakening" of Sioux with the poignant image of a prideful Chipewyan people continuing a unique tradition. Each of these allusions expresses the fertility and discursive complexity of prairie history. That is to say that a complex balancing of various fragments or partial images of prairie history defines Newlove's poem: the romanticized "indians" from Hyde's work, the empowered and prideful peoples in Thompson's journals, and the numerous fragments of First Nations myths, histories, and traditions that the speaker hopes will be part of a rewritten and cacophonous prairie history. All of these historical perspectives are part of the half-understood prairie past.

Newlove's speaker, however, is not focused entirely on the past. He desires to populate the "bare" prairies with more diverse "stories" that cumulatively offer "the grand poem / of our land" (*BNW* 109). The "grand poem" should be regarded as a distant ideal, rather than as an impending or realized event. His envisioning of this ideal reveals a persona who, as Bartley points out, "wants to believe in history regardless of the difficulty" (23):

we seize on
 what has happened before,
 one line only
 will be enough,
 a single line and
 then the sunlit brilliant image suddenly floods us
 with knowledge, shocks our
 attentions, and all desire
 stops, stands alone (*BW* 109-10)

The “sunlit brilliant image” contrasts with the distorted image that commences Newlove’s poem, as well as with the “image” that the “bewildered / son of all men” provides. “The grand poem” epitomizes a perfectly illuminated and flawless knowledge (hence Newlove’s pun on “brilliant”), which significantly comes as a “flood”; the allusion to the story of Noah implies that knowledge, like God’s flood, will morally cleanse the world. There is a spiritual and ethical benefit to flooding the country with new histories.

According to Newlove’s speaker, this flood of knowledge will yield “the grand poem.” Clément Moisan argues that “The Pride” *is* the “grand poem” (116) — and this claim seems implicit in many antagonistic readings of Newlove’s poem — but the speaker’s forward-looking language (“one line only / *will* be enough”) proves he is *awaiting* the moment in which “all desire / stops.” In *The Concept of Modernism* (1991), Astradur Eysteinnsson asserts that the skeptical — or what he terms “interruptive” — poetics of modernist literature necessitates that modernity and the modernist remain “in abeyance” (240), hovering between the totality (whether temporal, ideological, ethical, or hermeneutic) they challenge and the one they desire. This circumstance describes that of Newlove’s persona in “The Pride,” who observes the world through the aperture between the fraudulent, crumbling “romantic stories” of the Anglocentric past (and present) and the desired “grand poem” of the future. His position may not lead to the fulfillment of anyone’s desire for a “clear image” of history — certainly not to his own — but it allows Newlove to voice the historical crisis he observes, his hope for the future, and his faith in the stories of the prairies. These features of the poem point to the “masterful” (Wah 218) poetic model Newlove established: a skeptical, modernist lyric that is attentive to regionalism but resistant to romantic valorizations of the past and that meditates on conflicts, ambiguities, and fragments of prairie history.

Although my reading of “The Pride” in the context of its composition, modernism, and allusions clarifies Newlove’s project and submits reasons for its importance to his contemporaries, the shortcomings of the poem shouldn’t be ignored. Certainly, Newlove’s description of “d’sonoqua” as “the wild woman of the woods” (*BNW* 107; he also uses the phrase in “The Big Bend” [*BNW* 102]) reinforces stereotypes of the romanticized “Indian” who is “closely associated with the wilderness” (Francis 162); Annis Pratt criticizes Newlove’s unflattering description of D’Sonoqua by focusing on more favourable depictions in works by Emily Carr (272-74). There are, too, his potentially damning final lines.¹⁰ Critics who read these lines as evidence of Newlove’s assimilationist agenda or alleged claim to “Native ancestry” (Campbell 105) present them out of context, however, and so an extended quotation is necessary. First Nations peoples, the persona says,

still ride the soil
 in us, dry bones a part
 of the dust in our eyes,
 needed and troubling
 in the glare, in
 our breath, in our
 ears, in our mouths,
 in our bodies entire, in our minds, until at
 last we become them

in our desires, our desires,
 mirages, mirrors, that are theirs, hard-
 riding desires, and they
 become our true forbears, moulded
 by the same wind or rain,
 and in this land we
 are their people, come
 back to life. (*BNW* 111)

Newlove’s vanishing race motif may seem off-putting to contemporary readers, but in 1964, it was commonplace, and the poet can hardly be accused of appearing to celebrate the myth. His argument that the prairie experience has been shared by First Nations and later settlers, however, is notable, especially because Newlove criticizes the latter group’s obliviousness to the antecedent peoples who first “r[ode] the soil” and first experienced the “same wind or rain.” Paul Denham likewise regards

these lines as a reminder “that the history of the prairies antedates the history of white settlement” (27). “We” are like “their” ancestors (and descendants) by virtue of a shared regional experience; “we” ignorantly breathe the dust *they’ve* made. Even if Newlove’s final lines are far from a paean to colonialism, they are disappointingly effortful in comparison to the rest of “The Pride”; the concluding lines also replicate the all-too-familiar binary of “us” and “them.” However positive the overall message in this section, there are uncomfortable flaws here that deserve note.

Nonetheless, these flaws are still instructive. Perhaps one reason Newlove’s poem has been so heavily criticized is because of the privileged place it has as the concluding poem in *Black Night Window* (1968): the seemingly intended effect was to end the volume with a tour de force. But it is vital to remember that “The Pride” was, as I noted earlier, Newlove’s first attempt at historically conscious writing; perhaps its prominent placement in the volume misled critics into believing it was Newlove’s magnum opus. The relatively clumsy conclusion of “The Pride” reminds readers that the poem was an early experiment: it was born out of his anxious impulse to compose “a good poem” in the spring of 1964, a period during which he had just begun to discover his literary influences, interests, and poetics. For that reason, readers of “The Pride” should take a cue from Newlove’s confession to Robert Bringhurst that the poem was and always would be “somehow . . . unfinished” (Letter to Robert Bringhurst). Influential though it was, “The Pride” was not Newlove’s crowning achievement, and the author himself knew it. It was, however, an accomplished poem that not only was ahead of its time in many ways but also brought Newlove to write some of his best poems in the later 1960s (such as the oft-anthologized “Crazy Riel” and “Ride Off Any Horizon”) and drew many peoples’ attention to prairie history as a subject ready for literary and historical treatment.

Here, I feel obliged to quote W.J. Keith at length because his very balanced reflection on “The Pride” anticipates my own reading of the poem. Speaking about Newlove’s “culturally essential” poems, Keith pauses to consider “The Pride”:

In the foregoing list [of Newlove’s poems], I did not mention “The Pride.” For me, it belongs in such a list, but current sensitivities require that it be given separate treatment. . . . Addressing the vexed question of white-Indian relations on the North American contin-

ent, it seemed to speak for a desired new age of increased understanding and cooperation. But . . . the poem now exists among controversies over political correctness, one not-so-bright spark recently going so far as to brand it racist! This is an irresponsible libel. . . . When the ideological dust settles, it will be recognized, I believe, that “The Pride,” if not *quite* as impressive as many of us — including myself — thought in the 1970s, is nonetheless a substantial achievement. (281)

Amidst the somewhat-settled “ideological dust,” critics should now be able to read Newlove’s poem as a useful departure point for his own writing and for many poets writing during the Centennial Era. His demand for a “single line” that shocks audiences and mines the great wealth of prairie stories understandably appealed to his contemporaries. “The Pride,” Susan Gingell notes, obliged many to “credit” Newlove with “helping to create a voice in which Saskatchewan and other prairie poets could speak” (124). Paul Denham similarly concludes that “perhaps no single person can be assigned the credit for making the prairies available at last for poetic treatment, but John Newlove has excellent claim. . . . Newlove’s first three books . . . broke ground, pointed the way” (26). Newlove’s experiments with multivocality and his powerful reframing of the prairie “wasteland” motif justify such praise: for contemporary writers, these qualities of the poem demonstrated, as Barry McKinnon notes, that “the prairie experience, historical or otherwise, could be a ‘subject’ for [poetry]” (Personal interview).

Furthermore, the numerous challenges to mainstream theories of regional and colonial history that Newlove poses in “The Pride” affirm the significance of his poem to Canadian literary history more broadly. The fact that his poetics have been overlooked or misconstrued as unprogressive for decades lends considerable weight to Neil Besner’s rather provocative assessment of “unexamined” postcolonial methodologies: “one of the siren calls of the postcolonial, if it is simply left unexamined, is to rush, ever more quickly, to the contemporary, past the several dark ages of pre-Confederation, followed by Confederation, followed by blinkered nationals — past the dead white male-rails of angry Earle Birney or angry Al Purdy . . . this practice represents a reductive homogenizing of Canadian history, and a severely limited and reductive understanding of postcolonialism” (47). Newlove’s work has too often been read in the context of these “unexamined” methodologies. Not only does “The Pride” pose provocative questions about the habitualized

colonial narratives familiar to his generation, but it also urges readers and writers to explore and create new literatures that might form the basis of a new discourse on prairie literature and history. In addition to its aesthetic and poetic achievements, “The Pride” should also be considered one of many preliminary, though understandably limited, engagements with fundamental questions about a postcolonial Canada. That being said, much work remains to be done on Newlove’s reputation more generally, as well as on that of his contemporaries; if his writing has been misrepresented and denied sustained critical treatment due to assumptions about his era (such as those Besner identifies), one has to wonder how many other important poets have been similarly and too precipitously cast aside.

NOTES

¹ Hereafter cited as *BNW*.

² Newlove’s other well-known historiographic poems were written between 1964 and 1966. After writing “Ride off any Horizon” in late 1964, he mailed it to *Poetry* in Chicago; he received a rejection letter in January 1965 and published it the following winter in *Prism International* (see issue 5.3-4). In a diary entry from 22 September 1965, Newlove says he spent a “rough day . . . sitting before the typewriter with a stiff neck and an incipient headache” while taking “some preliminary notes from Samuel Hearne’s book.” He “noted some (perhaps useful sometime) paragraphs and copied out a few quotes” (John Newlove Archives, box 1, folder 4) that eventually became part of “Samuel Hearne in Wintertime” (1965). Lastly, one of Newlove’s most anthologized poems, “Crazy Riel,” was first published in *Black Night Window* (1968), but it was written in 1965. On 31 August 1965, Newlove sent Kiyooka his first draft of “Crazy Riel” and noted that he wrote it after his most recent visit with Kiyooka, which was in July that same year (John Newlove Archives, box 19, folder 30).

³ See also Robert McTavish’s documentary *What to Make of it All? The Life and Poetry of John Newlove* (2006). As well, in “John Newlove isn’t Sippy or Stuff and He Doesn’t Languish” (1978), Susan Carson notes that Newlove’s long poem, “The Fatman,” which is approximately the same length as “The Pride,” took him five years to write (13).

⁴ A.J.M. Smith included a revised version of “The Pride” in *Modern Canadian Verse* (1967) that is nearly identical to the one that concludes Newlove’s watershed collection, *Black Night Window* (1968). Newlove revised and reprinted “The Pride” numerous times: two more versions appear in Andy Wainwright’s *Notes for a Native Land* (1969) and Newlove’s *The Fatman: Selected Poems, 1962-1972* (1977).

⁵ John Ferns, for instance, championed “The Pride” as “an important Canadian poem,” one destined to “become a staple of university Canadian literature courses” (73).

⁶ Each of Dennis Cooley’s “RePlacing” (1980), Gary Geddes’s “The Site of a Loss: or, the Pleasures of Rewriting the Text” (1996), and Patrick Lane’s “The Unyielding Phrase” (1989) offers insight into this eagerness and partly locates its energy in Newlove’s early publications.

⁷ The prairie wasteland motif has persisted in literary criticism. Laurie Ricou, for

instance, draws heavily on it in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Prairie Fiction* (1973): "The prairie settings of [Edward] McCourt, [Christine] van der Mark, and [Margaret] Laurence draw on [Eliot's] wasteland motif. . . . The absolute sterility and life-denying quality of the prairie wasteland anticipates, and blends with, the bewilderment and alienation prevalent in the post-Hitler and nuclear era. In an attempt to depict the universal meaninglessness posited by existentialism, the Western Canadian writer found an obvious metaphor in the prairie landscape" (120). Responding to such criticism, Alison Calder wonders, "Why is prairie realism so widely accepted as the pinnacle of prairie fiction? . . . What significance should be granted to the fact that the prairies are continually being re portrayed in the classroom as hostile, life-denying, and imaginatively sterile?" (51). These judgments, Calder laments, "fail to recognize . . . that the empirical conditions of life represented in those fictions no longer necessarily exist" (55).

⁸ Readers of "The Pride" and Newlove's other poems about history will notice the poet's general reluctance to capitalize names. He explained the habit in a letter to George Bowering from 2 November 1965: "Probably I made indian names, d'sonoqua, etc., with no capitals because caps in the middle of the line interrupt it, to me, clog the eye: anyways they have an effect, like any move, and I didn't want the effect. Actually only believe in caps for start of sentence, nowhere else. That's the greek in me. Coming out. Geek." (John Newlove Archives, box 18, folder 14).

⁹ See Dennis Cooley's "RePlacing," in which he proposes that the urge of new poets to explore the local "derives from William Carlos Williams. An answer to pentametre [*sic*] and conceit in our bare hands, handling the telltale words. A local pride — poetry in the commonplace, the cows and cars and tall tales in this place" (17). Although Cooley's argument is a bit overstated (Newlove, for instance, never openly spoke of Williams as an influence, though he certainly read him), his reflection is nevertheless noteworthy.

¹⁰ In Andy Wainwright's anthology *Notes for a Native Land*, Newlove added "again" to the last line of "The Pride." According to a letter to Rebecca Gould from 9 September 1975, Newlove considered this version to be the official ending to the poem (John Newlove Archive, box 19, folder 19). My discussion here, however, concerns Newlove's project as it took shape during the sixties; I, therefore, have relied on the versions he published in *Black Night Window* and, where relevant, in *Tamarack*.

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