

# Archive Simulations: Reading The Bertrand Sinclair Collection

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He is to be found in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (vol. 92) under "Canadian Writers, 1890-1920."<sup>1</sup> Laurie Ricou lists fourteen novels and a movie picture called "Shotgun Jones." Yet I hesitate to use his name in this piece of text. Maybe you mistook him for another widely known author, and will abandon this as soon as I correct your mistake.

The Bertrand William Sinclair Special Collection is held at, or contained within, the University of British Columbia. An archive that has not been examined countless times is the focus of my study; popular fiction that is now out of print. My reading of the Sinclair archive will necessarily be a reorganization of information. Already, in the Inventory, a catalogue of Sinclair's papers can be found offering a certain hierarchy of reading: correspondence precedes manuscripts, precedes log-books, miscellany, printed material, addendum. To impose order upon an otherwise chaotic mass of material is obviously a prime objective for storage and retrieval of data, for access to the archive. However, in this paper, I will resist the catalogue as an a priori interpretive and constructive device, since I regard the notion of access as being one of critical and creative production. In my reorganization of archival material, instead of constructing a more elaborate "Galtonian composite" of biographical evidence than that already available (the mastery of the collapsed version of the archive<sup>2</sup>), I shall offer a series of fictions which resist "finding" the author "behind the text." These fictions shall impose an ordering or structure which will fragment as soon as you enter the archive.

## *Spectator/Spectacle*

My reorganization of the Sinclair archive begins with three texts that will occupy a central site, serving to illuminate those other texts that

<sup>1</sup> Laurie Ricou, "Bertrand William Sinclair, (9 January 1881-20 October 1986)," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 92 (New York: Gale Research, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Allan Sekula, "The Body And The Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 54.

surround them: *The Hidden Places*, *Poor Man's Rock*, and *The Inverted Pyramid*. (For now their out-of-print narratives lie dormant in closed boxes and dingy second-hand book stores.) According to the logic of my alternative organization, *The Hidden Places* lies at the core of Sinclair's work. I will read the narrative of this novel as organized in a similar structural manner.

Hollister (the central protagonist of the novel) returns from the First World War with severe facial disfigurement. He is officially listed as "dead," and his first wife Myra has re-married: "with his wife had vanished his assets, his estate" (HP 8).<sup>3</sup> He moves back to Vancouver, where the central triangle of characterization is completed by Doris, a blind woman whom Hollister eventually marries. However, Hollister is the central figure, mediating this narrative of property, violence, and desire.

The visual is foregrounded at an early stage in the novel, through a constant oscillation between spectator and spectacle. Hollister's scarred, disfigured face becomes not only a sign of physical damage (for the narrator repeatedly asserts that "underneath" Hollister is a perfect specimen of mankind), but also a sign which acts upon others, which causes a reaction testing their perceptual limits. Will the gaze of the other become scattered and dispersed by the unnatural, immobile scars (averted by disgust or horror), or will the gaze penetrate the surface to reach a deeper understanding of the masked man? Hollister "had become something that filled other men with pitying dismay when they looked at him, that made women avert their gaze and withdraw from him in spite of pity" (HP 4). Ultimately, the gendered differences in response will lead to a summary statement of Doris's love for Hollister: "Doris loved him because she could not see him. When she could see, she would cease to love" (HP 246). Thus Doris has only reached a certain "sentiment" because her sight has failed; if her vision returned, her understanding would be scattered across mere surfaces. By contrast, for Lawanne, a writer and male viewer, "There was no false sentiment . . . He did not judge altogether by

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from Bertrand Sinclair's works are cited in the text using the following abbreviations:

N53: *North Of Fifty Three* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1914).

BB: *Burned Bridges* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1919).

PMR: *Poor Man's Rock* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1920).

HP: *The Hidden Places* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1922).

IP: *The Inverted Pyramid* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1924).

WW: *Wild West* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1926).

"L1": "Local No. 1," *The Gay Goose* (Sept. 1906): 125-32, The Bertrand Sinclair Special Collection (BWS) 21-1.

"JF": "Jim Fisher's System," *The Blue Mule* (Dec. 1906): 29-35, BWS 20-1.

"FD": "Feathered Death," *Short Stories* (Oct. 1930): BWS 19-1.

externals. His was an understanding, curiously penetrating intelligence" (HP 251).

Myra and Doris could be likened to "spectator" and "spectacle." Doris fulfils her duty as an obedient wife who produces a child and stabilizes the family unit. The crisis of her re-gaining her sight is averted by the breakdown of the curative process. In an earlier scene (which provides a key marker to the interpretation of this text as romance), as Hollister looks at Doris "Her expression . . . grew different, inscrutable, a little absent even, as if she were lost in thought" (HP 109/10). Unlike Lawanne's active thinking, which is displayed in speech and writing, Doris's thought is represented as confused and lost, "a little absent." But this absence could not be cured by a return to sight, for this would lead to either a failure to penetrate surfaces, or the excess of too much vision. How is this latter excess possible? The answer is to be found in the representation of Myra, whose excessive vision is equated with an excessive sexuality.

While examining the value of a timber stand in the "Toba Valley," Hollister gazes down upon a settlement with "a pair of very powerful binoculars"; "while he stared a woman stepped out of the doorway and stood looking, turning her head slowly until at last she gazed steadily up over the cliff-brow as if she might be looking at Hollister himself" (HP 66/7). With this prosthetic supplement, Hollister's gaze can now cover a great distance; the "woman" stares directly at Hollister, but her "natural" range of vision falls short. This voyeuristic re-positioning of Hollister as spectator alone, counters the earlier classification of Myra as spectator (since the woman here turns out to be Myra). In this passage, Hollister's gaze powerfully positions Myra as enframed, a picture to be slowly examined. But this violation of privacy does not work both ways: "Hollister wished to see without being seen" (HP 71). The shock for Hollister is that of the coincidence (with which this novel is loaded), that his first wife is living in the same valley as his stand of timber. His first response is disbelief, which the evidence of his senses counteracts: "He could neither believe what he had seen nor deny the evidence of his vision. He kept watch, with the glasses ready to fix upon the woman if she emerged again" (HP 69). Hollister desires to get closer to Myra, but still retain the privacy of the voyeur. This need to remain hidden signifies the "ideological danger or threat" to the patriarchal order, which could be caused by "the woman's appropriation of the gaze."<sup>4</sup> As Hollister moves closer to Myra's home, she is again framed by the opening of the door: "She poised for an instant

<sup>4</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Film And The Masquerade: Theorizing The Female Spectator," *Screen* 23 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 83.

on the threshold, looking across the river. Her gaze pivoted slowly until it encompassed the arc of a half-circle, so that she faced Hollister squarely. He had the binoculars focussed on her face. It seemed near enough to touch . . ." (HP 72). That the first site of focus prior to Hollister seeing Myra is the garments on the washing-line, serves to intensify the sexual charge of this scene. Myra's gaze, in its carefully charted passage of "the arc," seems to be searching for some object outside of the home. Mary Anne Doane has noted how in film, "There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking."<sup>5</sup> When Hollister's vision finally penetrates into the interior of Myra's home, and sees her with a lover, his violent desires are subdued by his realization that "Myra was not worth the taking . . . she could not be faithful, it seemed, even to a chosen lover" (HP 82). His plan to abduct her had been "logically" justified by regarding Myra as the central cause of this violent desire to "repossess" his "property" (HP 77). But against Myra's lover, "he felt no grudge . . ." (HP 78), further self-justifying his claim that Myra is solely at fault. A certain ambiguity about Hollister's response to his escape from his own insane plan can be linked to the murder of Myra by Bland, her second husband, near the close of the novel. While Hollister is positioned amidst this web of desire, he notes how "it seemed to him sometimes that in the loaded chamber of his rifle lay the only avenue of escape from these vain longings, from unattainable desire" (HP 76). The rifle may not necessarily be a device for suicide; the later scene of Myra's death represents the "male" gaze fixed upon the murdered body of Myra.

In the labour practices of *The Hidden Places*, a patriarchal order excludes women from any meaningful productivity. While Doris is in Vancouver attempting to recover her sight, Hollister's empty house is kept in order by Myra: "Some one had been in the house. The breakfast dishes were washed, the dust cleared away, the floor swept, his bed made" (HP 256), as Myra says, "I have nothing much to do at home" (ibid.); she has replaced one set of unpaid tasks for another (a chain of housekeeping in the midst of the great expanses of B.C. which in this context signify "freedom" for the male worker). On his return from Vancouver, Hollister likens the empty house "to a crypt, a tomb" (HP 254). It is clear, in the order of things set up by this novel, who the "natural" occupant of this tomb should be. In the city, this metaphoric tomb is expanded to include office-work, the site of non-production that is filled by "dainty women" (HP 25) and financial speculators concerned only with fraud and theft

<sup>5</sup> "Film And The Masquerade": 83.

(HP 120). The labour practices of the “wilderness” are seen as a utopian possibility, an alternative to the ever-expanding mechanized society. For the narrator of *The Hidden Places*, the land of British Columbia is a “vast, fecund area out of which man, withdrawing from the hectic pressure of industrial civilization, could derive sustenance” (HP 50). Yet this escapism does not take into account why Myra, Hollister, and Doris are in the Toba Valley in the first place. Hollister is attempting to rebuild a lost inheritance which Myra and Bland “squandered” shortly after their marriage (HP 213). Thus Hollister is actively engaged in working the land, while Bland “. . . never worked. He never would work, not in the sense of performing any labor as a means of livelihood” (HP 171). Even Bland’s name signifies a non-identity (in this “active” scheme of things), a pale reflection of his wife’s “pleasure seeking,” which is described as “the net Myra seemed unconsciously to spread for men’s feet” (HP 173). The Blands have lost the bulk of the inheritance through “several disastrous speculations” (HP 220), while Hollister makes the most of what he has, investing his energy into a small timber stand. Like two opposing curves on a graph, Hollister’s investment, labour, and activity increase his fortunes, while the Blands’ passivity, leisure, and pleasure lead only to misfortune. Of course the narrator’s utopian vision of a space outside industrial civilization would require a mediating position between this massive investment and passive parasitism; yet Hollister stands as the “ideal” in the novel that is closer to industrial society than any utopian inhabitant.

### *Inverted Pyramids*

Moving outwards from the central text in my reorganized archive structure, the two novels *Poor Man’s Rock* and *The Inverted Pyramid* are brought into consideration. Both novels are concerned with the theme already discussed, the loss of property. In *Poor Man’s Rock*, seemingly through a feud, but actually by the monopoly growth of Horace Gower’s various companies, Donald MacRae has lost the bulk of his land, leaving to his son Jack “a rocky corner of a few acres which included the house and garden” (PMR 44). With Stubby Abbot, an owner of a B.C. Cannery, Jack MacRae fights Gower’s monopoly hold in the local salmon fishing market, eventually breaking Gower and recovering his land along with Gower’s daughter as his wife. A larger stake of land is at risk in *The Inverted Pyramid*, where the Norquay Estate (“Hawks Nest”) is ultimately lost because of Grove Norquay’s financial speculation. The romance narrative, where Rod marries Mary Thorn, a woman of lower class status,

could be said to end about a third of the way through the novel (IP 137). However, the utopian reparation of damages, which Rod undertakes after the fall of the Norquay Trust (to uphold the family name and honour), is a romantic working-out of a common bankruptcy situation. That is not to say that the novel simply continues to function by the formula of the romance genre, since the last two-thirds of the novel put into practice the narrator's dictum "that even the simplest thing contains within itself all the elements of the profoundly complex" (IP 138). Indeed, the destruction of the stately Norquay forest is undertaken by Rod as if to illuminate the economic base upon which depends the (superstructural) romance statement "that they lived happily ever after" (ibid.). This "illumination" produces another organizing diagram for a reading of the Sinclair archive; his Canadian fiction is concerned with investigating a world that has been turned upside-down, where (natural) "man" has evolved into a mere part of a top-heavy society composed of "parasites" and "drones." In the world of this inverted pyramid, a hierarchy is constructed where experience and action are valued far more than writing or criticism (financial speculation is a form of fiction writing); the reverse order is not only unnatural, but dangerous and open to ideological manipulation. The city is seen to produce propaganda, gossip, lies, disturbing the simplicities of life.

In a letter to Major F. Yeats Brown, Sinclair refers to C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment*. In this historico-critique of the First World War, Sinclair read a "profound feeling for what is the matter with the whole fabric of modern life."<sup>6</sup> Montague writes in a chapter called "The Duty of Lying": "Any weapon you use in the war leaves some bill to be settled in peace, and the propaganda arm has its cost like any other."<sup>7</sup> The three central novels of my re-organized Sinclair archive all concern themselves with the residual cost of the war on the psyche of the protagonists and the cost upon the local economies to which they have returned. The Norquay Trust in *The Inverted Pyramid* becomes a version of such a propaganda cost (with all of the destabilizing implications), where the sign which casts the neon glow of the jazz age across the city of Vancouver is a sign which lies. Montague writes of a shift in values, a shift down a sliding scale: "When a man feels that his tampering with truth has saved civilization, why should he deny himself the benefit of such moral reflections as this feeling may suggest?"<sup>8</sup> The actual gaining of distinction by propaganda is seen as

<sup>6</sup> B. Sinclair to Major F. Yeats Brown (24 April 1923), BWS 15-3.

<sup>7</sup> C. E. Montague, *Disenchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922): 113.

<sup>8</sup> *Disenchantment*: 118.

a danger to the ability to have any form of honest argument, since truth has been undermined by the powerful possibilities of falsehood:

The general addition of prestige to the controversial device of giving false impressions and raising false issues would naturally be immense. To argue any case merely on its merits and on the facts would seem to the admirers of the new way a kind of virtuous imbecility. In what great industrial dispute or political campaign, in what struggle between great financial interests would both sides or either, forgo the use of munitions so formidable? Such conflicts might almost wholly cease to be competitions in serious argument at all; they might become merely trials of skill in fantastic false pretences. . .<sup>9</sup>

The dialogue between Rod Norquay and Andy Hall in *The Inverted Pyramid* narrates a suspicion of the ultimate value of such speculative theorizing, “of skill in fantastic false pretences,” particularly when their dialogue concerns the economic and social basis of society. When Rod is thrown back into the world of capital accumulation, he attempts a redistribution of his accumulated wealth as a way of restoring faith in a moral order which does not produce propaganda; he attempts to replace fiction with action: “If I can give men just a little more security in their jobs, a little better conditions under which to work, a little more return in wages, that’s more to them than all the theory in a thousand books” (IP 262).

A similar re-evaluation of physical labour takes place through the misrepresentation of fiction (Donald MacRae’s letter to his son), that urges forward the repetitive narrative of *Poor Man’s Rock*. In this novel, the rock off Point Old is the interpretive nexus that instead of unfolding the complexities in simple statements draws the reader back to a consideration of labour relations at a simplified level. The evolutionary description is matched with the “natural” evolution of capital accumulation or redeployment: “The cliffs of north of Point Old and the area immediately surrounding the rock are strewn with kelp. In these brown patches of seaweed the tiny fish, the schools of baby herring, take refuge from their restless enemy, the swift and voracious salmon” (PMR 21), and: “But there are places where the salmon run and a gasboat trolling her battery of lines cannot go without loss of gear. The power boat cannot troll in shallows. They cannot operate in kelp without fouling. So they keep to open water and leave the kelp and shoals to the rowboats” (PMR 22). Nature keeps out the ravages of the professional trolling fleets, creating a primitive utopia where any man with the strength and energy to row a boat can exact a living. But this living becomes a step in the evolution of a capitalist:

<sup>9</sup> *Disenchantment*: 119.

“Some who came to the Cove trolled long and skillfully, and were lucky enough to gain a power troller in the end” (PMR 24). Such a parallel between natural evolution and capital accumulation indicates both abstract relationship (i.e., where there is a relationship of transcoding) and an inevitability which explains how those who invest labour gain a return. Frederic Jameson remarks that “the constitutive feature of an apprehension of super-structure lies . . . in the mental operation by which the apparently independent ideological phenomenon is forcibly linked back up with the infrastructure: by which the false autonomy of the super-structure is dispelled.”<sup>10</sup> The “rock” as central signifier in this novel thus serves to undermine the revenge-plot and the romance narrative, by always returning critical attention to the “solid referent” hidden by a web of false ideology.

In *Poor Man's Rock*, writing (the letter from Donald MacRae) enters and initiates the revenge-plot. Writing as superstructural (in the narrator's scheme of things) is inevitably a distortion of “reality.” Donald MacRae's legacy to his son is not land, fortune, or an education; it is the writing of disrupted dreams and desires, of the fragmentation of the war, and mispent labour. The solid refuge of land proves to be anything but that. In a world of commodification, it can be taken away, spent like paper money, destroying the validity of Donald's statement that land “is the base of everything. A man may make a fortune in industry, in the market. He turns to land for permanence, stability. All that is sterling in our civilization has its foundation in the soil” (PMR 44). Sinclair's critical trilogy signals the ideological causes that lead to the rape of the land: the psychological and physical struggle to recover that which was lost (*Poor Man's Rock*), the misrepresentation of land-value (*The Hidden Places*) and the destruction of the land/legacy formula through the recovery of moral and financial bad-debts (*The Inverted Pyramid*). Jack MacRae must re-learn the past, overcoming the textual distortions of his legacy with a new text: that of praxis.

In *The Inverted Pyramid*, writing follows this dialectic of truth and distortion; writing both embodies the sign that lies — the neon signifier of the Norquay Trust — and the “truth” of the historical document. The latter is produced by Mary, although Rod wonders earlier in the narrative “why no poet had sung the song of this swirling water; why no novelist had lovingly portrayed this land as a backdrop for his comic and tragic

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House Of Language, A Critical Account Of Structuralism And Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974): 102.



puppets?" (IP 1/2). Sinclair's narrator can be read as propagandist for a manifesto of historical verisimilitude. The loggers who spin "Rabelaisian yarns" and "Homeric tales" (IP 327) may seem, stylistically, strangely out of place. Such a description, however, juxtaposes the low with the classical high style, where the latter as signifier of an originary literature in historical terms always precedes the former. Such a disjunction of discourse and description serves to foreground the ludicrous appropriation of labour-relations in such high literary modes as the pastoral. From a narrative viewpoint, the character who comes closest to a historical account that does not distort things is Mary: "I'm not a propagandist. I don't know that this book, or any other books I may write, has a message, unless it is the oblique inference that stupidity and ignorance and intolerance are more fatal than guns" (IP 206). Parallels can be drawn between Sinclair's experience of the publishing trade (as narrated in the correspondence) and the statements made within this novel. Mary makes a statement concerning the content of her texts and how the market demands something else: "Nearly everyone is affected directly and indirectly by the war. Therefore the publisher concludes people want to ignore the war, or that they will uniformly recoil from a given aspect of the war . . ." (IP 297). The publishers, Little, Brown & Co., wrote to Sinclair concerning the relatively poor sales of *Poor Man's Rock* and *The Hidden Places*, concluding that too much business and the disfigurement caused by war were not popular subjects "to suit the tastes of your readers."<sup>11</sup> Writing to an audience already in place, who were ideologically fixed in advance, involved disfiguring the narrative more than the character's physiology.

### *Parasites/Propaganda*

Working outwards from the central trilogy (forwards and backwards from a purely chronological perspective), the novels of the Range West compete in my reading with those of North West America. The question of property that has predominated in the trilogy becomes transformed into a different question, that of freedom: freedom to move, travel, or traverse land-spaces.

In Sinclair's *Wild West*, a novel concerned with the detection, surveillance and eventual outwitting of cattle thieves, the "hidden place" or enclosure is both a hiding place for stolen cattle and an opening or point of transition through which to move the cattle into new lands. By killing branded cattle to leave unbranded calves (which are removed from the

<sup>11</sup> B. Sinclair to A. MacIntyre (16 Feb. 1921), BWS 2-5.

main herd at a later date), another type of enclosure is created. Since an unbranded calf has no signature of capital inscribed upon it, it is both inside and outside of property laws. Invisible in all of their visibility, the calves are protected along with the rest of the herd, but may be "siphoned" off during their travels across the plains. Once they have been separated and driven into the Badlands, where they may disappear without a trace, visibility is replaced with uncertain memory: "The two came at last to a point where uncertainty rested upon them . . ." (WW 148). The Badlands are a labyrinth, sunk beneath the all-encompassing gaze of the "detectives" who operate in the vast space of the open plains, thus providing an escape from the possibility of constant surveillance. Like a "network of broken land" the Badlands have "no peaks, no hills; it is etched deep in a general level, like a sunken garden planned by a madman" (ibid.). However, the open plains of the cattle country give another type of paradoxical freedom; land not yet enclosed, but under constant acquisition, any borders or boundaries restricting cattle movement are seen as purely natural: "Robin looked. He saw far off the dark line of the Missouri, flanked by the crisscross gashes of the Bad Lands. He saw far beyond the river the Moccasin Mountains, the Snowies, the Belts . . ." (WW 66).

A strange twist in the description of the plains adds another dimension to this portrayal of the landscape. The narrator notes how Robin "didn't look for anything in particular." Instead of this statement preparing the reader for the suspended regions of repetitive emptiness, the vast distances which will disturb any fixed focus of the gaze, the narrator stresses a distancing from a particular discourse:

He didn't expect to see anything of sensational import such as a stampeding herd, or vigilantes pursuing train robbers, or cloud-bursts flooding low ground nor indeed any of the high lights which in other times and places are presumed to be shed almost continuously upon the cattle country. (WW 66)

"In other times and places"; the narrator not only shifts the chronological placing of Robin's non-expectations from the present time of the narrative, but also the site of representation. This site could be Sinclair sitting aboard his fishing boat the Hoo Hoo or in his house at Pender Harbour on the B.C. coast, or it could be the Hollywood film-productions which continue to this day. Indeed, a Hollywood discourse fills the gap created by Robin's non-expecting gaze, and constructs a scene which the narrator states belongs to this other era. Such a filmic discourse is seen to operate a priori on the expectations of the modern viewer/reader. "In other times and places" could also refer to information in the archive, such as Sinclair's correspondence, where the narrator constructs a self-legitimizing series of



FIGURE 1

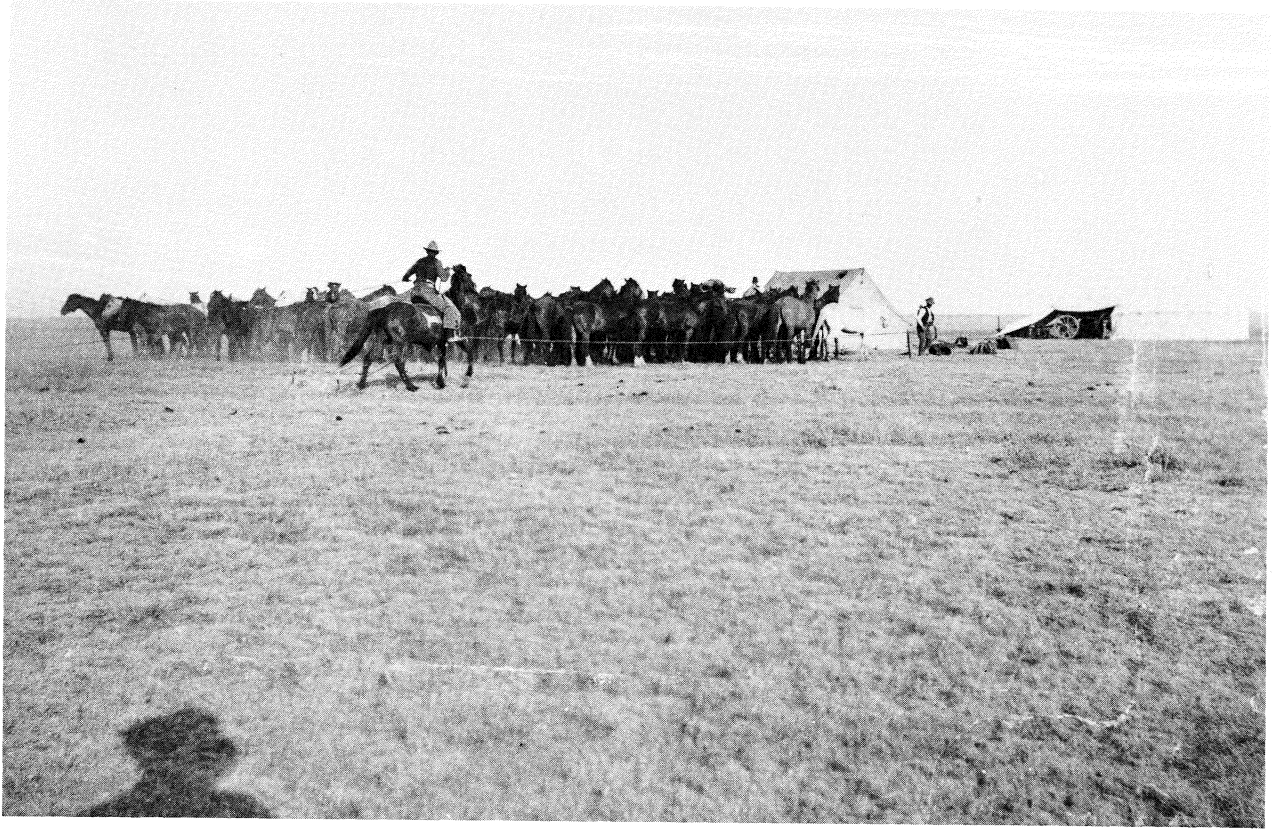


FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3



FIGURE 4



historical claims. In a letter to Gary Cooper, the narrator notes how “I’ve seen it time and again on the screen. Clouds of powder smoke, bunches of riders in violent, unmeaning action, with no reasonable motive behind it all. The range west was full of action, but there was always purpose behind that action.”<sup>12</sup> In other parts of the correspondence, a narrative is constructed with “Sinclair” as the central character; a narrative of apprenticeship, of “working knowledge,”<sup>13</sup> of first-hand experience, all of which lead “naturally” to the production of literature with a historical claim. The character “Sinclair” becomes a writer, and distances himself from “propaganda” and “illusions,” those powerful textual chimeras that can “influence the human mind and human action” by “getting accepted as the reality.”<sup>14</sup> The character Sinclair then goes on to write a series of letters out of which this powerful reading-guide emerges. As in *Don Quixote*, action may precede containment by writing, but the whole narrative is contained within the book in an infinite regress (i.e., the book within the book in part two); action legitimates the text, the text legitimates the action.

The narrative intrusion in *Wild West*, causing a chronological break or anachronistic upheaval in the reading, indicates the necessity for the narrator to be both inside and outside of his narrative to “prove” historical accuracy and to point out how this accuracy is different from other popular fictions representing this era. The narrator is always present in Sinclair’s work, not just as voice, but there in the scene of representation. In figure 2,<sup>15</sup> the shadow of the photographer breaks the frame in a way which places the scene somewhere between the professional simulations of the movie industry and the genre of the amateur photograph (home movies, family snapshots, and so on). Both professional and amateur are necessary if this text is to be used as evidence upholding the claims of the correspondence; the amateur photographer has an aura of authenticity signified in this very disturbance or break of the smoothly functioning representation machine. If the image were technically “perfect,” more real than the “real,” then any claim for a historical ground or anchorage is lost — the viewer is in the realm of the “hyperreal.”<sup>16</sup> The historical “truth” is thus found where the simulacra machine breaks down, where the technician (read “narrator”) allows his or her own subjectivity to enter the field of vision. However, this break or disturbance to the frame adds another per-

<sup>12</sup> B. Sinclair to Gary Cooper (17 May 1930), BWS 1-7.

<sup>13</sup> B. Sinclair to Alex Brockway (13 Nov. 1913), BWS 1-4.

<sup>14</sup> B. Sinclair to Mrs. Bodger (7 Dec. 1924), BWS 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> B. Sinclair; Prints from negatives, BWS 29-3.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

spective to the scene; instead of the spatial dichotomy — the great freedom of the plains/the enclosure of the horses — the range riders themselves become enclosed between the viewer/photographer and the inner roped circle. The plains are no longer delimited by natural figures of the landscape (rivers, hills or mountains, Badlands), but by the viewer and the broken frame. Where is the historical “truth” in this representation? Is it inside or outside of the frame? Or both? According to the narrator’s claims in the correspondence, it is “inside” the frame (in the fixed historical past, as the narrator suggests), but like H. G. Wells’s time-traveller, he must break and enter the frame to retrieve that truth for us.

Our time-traveller wrote in 1913: “sometime I want to write a history of the cow business from time they first ran the iron on a calf’s ribs in Texas to when sheep and barb wire and irrigation made grangers out of cow outfits. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Invisible in my reproduction of figure 3, but clearly extending across the upper-right horizon of the negative, the “barb wire” fence already marks another form of enclosure competing with the natural corral and wooden fence. Sinclair notes how this “transition was beginning when I left Montana for good in 1906”;<sup>18</sup> the freedom of the “open range” is replaced with “the flood of the land-hungry.”<sup>19</sup> The ruin of the Range West by the transitional and disruptive activities of the land hungry finds a counterpart in Sinclair’s writing in the move north towards British Columbia. In comparison with the negative portrayal of the transformation of the plains, the massive influx of settlers, prospectors, and loggers is seen as a natural, positive development. However, there is also a dramatic shift in the gender of narrative perspective or focus; whereas women belong to the home or ranch in the Range West, this notion becomes slightly more problematized (although ultimately reinforced) in the novels of the northwest.

Unlike Grainger’s *Woodsmen of the West* (1908), Sinclair’s short stories and novels are not solely concerned with the men who logged and prospected this region. In *Big Timber* (1916), Stella Benton is the character trapped as the cook at her brother’s logging-camp; Grainger’s short novel ends with the victorious escape from Carter’s camp, whereas Stella, after being constantly refused her wages or permission to leave has the choice of marrying Jack Fyfe. *North of Fifty Three*, published two years earlier, has Miss Hazel Weir as the protagonist escaping from the immoral

<sup>17</sup> B. Sinclair to Alex Brockway.

<sup>18</sup> B. Sinclair to Harry Daniels (14 Jan. 1929), BWS 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> B. Sinclair to Gary Cooper.



blackmail of the city of Granville into the physical imprisonment of Roaring Bill Wagstaff and the northern “wilderness” (as it is depicted). Both Stella and Hazel are portrayed as parasites at some stage, in a world where hard work, the transformation of the land, and capital accumulation belong, positively, to a patriarchal order. If the demise of the Range West was seen as a negative event, the logging of North America is seen as a chance for “man” to achieve self-sufficiency, a degree of autonomy in a world of increasing industrialization. The great fear of an approaching modernism can be read in practically every narrative of the city, the office, and factory work.

*Burned Bridges* (1919) is concerned with the land and the city, but focuses upon the transformation of an individual, the Reverend Wesley Thompson. In an ironic reversal, this character’s main fault is that he occupies the site usually reserved for Sinclair’s female characters, and it is Sophie Garr who pours scorn upon his abilities as a man: “‘If he had any clear conception of manhood I don’t see how he could devote himself to preaching as a profession,’ she said composedly. ‘Of course its perhaps an excellent means of livelihood, but rather a parasitic means, don’t you think?’” (BB 74). Thompson’s education in the novel is one of reversal, the shedding of artificial, social ideas that determine his behaviour and initial failure in the wilds. An essentialism is found throughout the Sinclair archive which posits some “basic” gender characteristics that Thompson must ultimately uncover. The essentialism provides the foundation for Rod Norquay’s ethical stand in *The Inverted Pyramid*, and in the novels narrated primarily from the perspective of the worker, provides a possible framework for the construction of a reactionary utopia (a back to the future world based upon these primary characteristics). In the short story “Feathered Death,” such characteristics are seen as a cure for the modern psyche:

. . . there must be even in highly civilized people a streak of pure savage. To quit the anthep, to live where there are only a few primitive rules for the game of living, to depend on your efforts for every bite you eat and every mile you travel, to suffer hardship and sweat and strain to accomplish something. . . it seems to be good for your soul. It can wipe out things that torture your mind and make them seem unimportant. (‘FD’ 42)

The “streak of pure savage” operates throughout these texts a priori to socially constructed characteristics. In *Burned Bridges*, Thompson must shed his “feminine” traits since they are seen as unnatural; what this signifies, however, is that “the chosen standards for femininity are natu-

ral,"<sup>20</sup> when the "feminine" is confused with a biological "femaleness." Thompson's eventual success in the business community is still not enough to redeem his parasitic character. The outbreak of war gives Sophie Carr the opportunity to engage in charity work, while Thompson stays "at home living easy and getting rich in the security that other men are buying with their blood and their lives" (BB 257). Unknown to Sophie, Thompson has joined the Royal Flying Corps, the élite "supermen, the favoured of God" (BB 266), and finally redeems himself with this re-positioning toward what in the Sinclair archive is the essential man. After Thompson's return from war, the reward for his burned bridges is not only Sam Carr's daughter Sophie, but the possibility that he will eventually take control of Carr's utopian "self-supporting community" (BB 302), a socialist type joint stock company clearing the forested valleys for agricultural purposes. With Thompson's re-positioning, Sophie also sheds much of her earlier identity: "I'm proud of dad . . . what he has accomplished makes all my puttering about at what, after all, was pure charity, a puerile sort of service. I gave that up after you went away" (BB 305). Again, a similar re-positioning of gender values can be found at the close of *Big Timber* and *North of Fifty-Three*. In the latter novel, Bill Wagstaff returns to the "old woods" after uncovering a fraudulent stock-market gamble. But Hazel, now married to Bill, refuses to leave the city. Bill states that "I don't think that honestly and deliberately you prefer an exotic, useless, purposeless, parasitic existence to the normal, wholesome life we happily planned" (BB 311). Once more, the familiar rhetoric, but in this novel, the return to essentialism is achieved by Hazel's pregnancy. As Bill has already said, prior to the event: "I wish we'd had a baby . . . You'd be different. You'd have something to live for besides this frothy, neurotic existence that has poisoned you against the good, clean, healthy way of life" (N53 307).

The move towards a gendered closure in Sinclair's novels is always portrayed as a successful return to some fundamentally humanist value; the "firm faith in humanity" (BB 308) that Thompson is finally left with in *Burned Bridges*, is seen as the ground upon which a new social order may be constructed. As Toril Moi has pointed out, "this projection of male and female as unquestioned essences is surely always dangerous."<sup>21</sup> This projection applies not only to a feminist reading, but also one which perceives the various texts stored within the archive as units of information that may be interpreted from different, or opposing, perspectives.

<sup>20</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985): 65.

<sup>21</sup> *Sexual/Textual Politics*: 154.

### Conclusion

Reaching furthest out from my central point of *The Hidden Places*, the reader comes to the later novels and the earlier short stories. Representations of working people stay clearly in focus, in a dialectical struggle with “misunderstanding” and “misrepresentation.” In a short story published in 1906 — “Local No. 1” — the forming of a cowpunchers’ union can be seen as a meditation upon this dialectic. The “union workers in the cities” arrive at the town of Yantic “to lend a helping hand to their fellow-toilers in the wild” (“Li” 125). Initially, the narrative seems to engage with the union voice: “In the gigantic struggle between capital and labor all classes of labor must stand shoulder to shoulder, lest they be overwhelmed” (ibid.). However, the parody is immediately developed: the guileful “walking delegate” deceives the politically innocent rangers into forming their own union, followed by a winter of ideological indoctrination:

. . . the handbill gentlemen made sundry visits and thoroughly grounded the embryo unionists in the tenets of organized resistance to the insidious encroachments of capitalistic employers. He taught them that they must struggle for principles. . . the sturdy upholding of their rights and the betterment of their conditions of toil. . . he pointed out the effectiveness of that truly powerful weapon, the strike. (“Li” 126)

With the “inflammatory” comments of an “agitator” who is fired from the Y Bar ranch for “voicing some ultra-revolutionary sentiments,” an insurrection is initiated by the range riders (ibid.).

A number of issues that traverse the archive intersect in this short story; for my study, these will form the arbitrary point of closure. The range rider is presented as an individual who works collectively by his own consent; unlike the factory or city worker who is visualized as a mere cog or wheel in a machine, the range rider is a part that can function independently of the whole. The empty arguments of a capitalistic society which are found in this story, such as “they’re hurtin’ themselves just as much as they hurt the cattlemen by kickin’ up a fuss” and “Human beings . . . act just like cattle . . . if one bellows and runs, all the rest run after” (“Li” 128/9), are superfluous to the fact that the union structure or model of labour organization simply does not fit the ideology of the individualist. In other words, the model fails to function because of its misrepresentation. A contradictory ideological circuit is thus once more present; in the Sinclair archive, early stages of capitalism are seen as closer to the individual’s rights as a human being (to “own” oneself, so to speak), whereas late capitalism, the formation of vast corporations or monopoly ownership

(with the loss of individual subjectivity) commits the average individual to little more than a form of slavery. The so-called socialists of "Local No. 1" fail to address individual problems; they are presented merely as disturbing and indoctrinating the innocent essentialism of the "free" ranger who accepts toil and struggle as part of the proudly performed exchange process. However, even on the plains, the cancerous growth of monopoly ownership eventually threatens this idealized family of respected individuals working together. *Gunpowder Lightning*, published by Sinclair in 1930, tells the story of the conflicts that arise when a ranch undergoes such rapid expansion.

"Local No. 1" ends on a light-hearted note, as the union representative is left stranded on the "Walsh trail" before he can even begin the strike. Just before this comic closure, the reader is informed that "Mr Thompson was an authority on the woes of the working classes — as behooved a young man who clothed himself in stylish garments, and fared sumptuously, by ministering to the needs of those who toil. But Bess failed to discover that he ever indulged in manual labour himself . . ." ("LI" 130). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the minister in *Burned Bridges* will also be named "Thompson."

The results of treating a cowpuncher like a machine are more fully explored in "Jim Fisher's System," (also published in 1906). In this story, the foreman of Circle Four's round-up camp has failed to protect the cattle from an approaching storm: "but when he finds himself out on the bald prairie with a rip-snorter of a storm blowin' up, to camp his wagons in the only sheltered place for ten miles so as the herd'll be out where they'll get the full benefit of the breeze, why — oh, hell!" ("JF" 29). Again, the problem has been caused by an incorrect model being applied to the cattle industry: "Running any kind of business successfully, according to Jim, was simply a matter of reducing it to the automatic motions of a machine. He was the engineer, and his men were the wheels — and as wheels he treated them" ("JF" 30). The tension in the story is created by this imposition of an alien system from outside the West brought into conflict with the dynamic, "natural" order that was in place beforehand. Although the foreman, Jim Fisher, is "of the West," he is thus called "alien in spirit" ("JF" 33); he fails in this introduction of a mechanized paradigm.

Clearly both the "union" and "mechanistic" models are given in Sinclair's narratives a similar treatment to that of the movie industry, which is also seen to impose an alien model of representation, rather than faithfully documenting the essential spirit of the individual on the open range

(this being the narrated perspective of course). An alternative or replacement to such various models is Sinclair's own representational system. In the movie screenplay "Shotgun Jones,"<sup>22</sup> the hero and heroine are both deliberately unconventional from the perspective of the "cowboy" movie: "The heroine. She is pretty, of course. A sensible girl who has been raised in the range west and can ride well. But she is not the short-skirted, rolled-up sleeved, sombreroed girl of the typical Western melodrama, by any means."<sup>23</sup> Shotgun Jones is described as "inclined to near-sightedness, and so wears glasses." Apart from this initial emphasis upon the characters' differences, the cowboy film conventions follow "thick and fast." Considering that this was a silent movie, one wonders how much of a difference this characterization actually made. An argument could be constructed that the binary good/evil structure will be projected far more powerfully by film, reinforcing the Hollywood stereotype rather than performing any type of radical critique. Similarly, in the various analyses of economic and labour practices across the archive, there is a curious reluctance to move beyond the binary model of master/slave, and the associated paradox of the slave becoming the master, thus contradicting the teleology of the idealist narratives. The problem is that the various critiques of representational models given across the archive are never made self-reflexive, suggesting a trust or faith in a solid ground of writing (this "writing" has been briefly looked at as those things in the Sinclair collection called "history," "authenticity," "self," "author" and so on). Once this ground is seen as merely another model or interpretation, the institutional archival structures may be called further into question.

<sup>22</sup> B. Sinclair, "Shotgun Jones," BWS 15-1.

<sup>23</sup> "Shotgun Jones," character page.