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## Unidentified Human Remains – Brad Fraser's Theatre of Alienation

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### Zusammenfassung

*Brad Fraser ist einer der einflussreichsten kanadischen Dramatiker der Gegenwart. Der vorliegende Artikel möchte Gründe für seinen internationalen Erfolg identifizieren, gleichzeitig aber das spezifisch Kanadische seiner Texte ergründen. Auf Basis einer Kontextualisierung seines Werkes mit den Theorien Atwoods, Fries und Hutcheons offenbart eine thematische Analyse von *Love and Human Remains* (1989) und *True Love Lies* (2009) die zentrale Rolle, die Entfremdung im extra- wie intradiegetischen Bezugssystem spielt. Obwohl Fraser Strategien des epischen Theaters nach Piscator und Brecht übernimmt, passt er diese an und fügt so etwa das Element der emotionalen Komplizenschaft mit seinen Charakteren hinzu, um von einem didaktischen und intellektuellen hin zu einem erfahrungs- und handlungsorientierten Theater zu gelangen, das statt auf Debatte auf Repräsentation fokussiert. Dies ermöglicht einen unmittelbaren Zugang zu seinem meist jungen, medienkompetenten Publikum, dem er Verhaltensweisen anbietet, die geeignet sein sollen, die postmoderne Fragmentierung auf psychologischer, sozialer und kultureller Ebene zu überwinden. Dabei bevorzugt er aus seinem kanadischen Kontext heraus eine evolutionäre, kontinuierliche Identitätsbildung gegenüber teleologischen, revolutionären Prozessen.*

### Résumé

*Brad Fraser est l'un des dramaturges canadiens les plus influents à l'heure actuelle. L'article suivant cherche à identifier des raisons expliquant son succès international tout en étudiant la dimension spécifiquement canadienne de ses textes. Prenant pour fondement une contextualisation de son œuvre avec pour cadre les théories d'Atwood, Frye et Hutcheon, une analyse thématique de *Love and Human Remains* (1989) et *True Love Lies* (2009) révèle le rôle central que joue l'aliénation dans le système de référence extra et intra diégétiques. Bien que Fraser reprenne des stratégies du théâtre épique à la manière de Piscator et Brecht, il adapte ces dernières en introduisant par exemple l'élément de complicité émotionnelle avec ses personnages. On passe ainsi d'un théâtre didactique et intellectuel à un théâtre orienté vers l'expérience et l'action – un théâtre qui met l'accent sur la représentation plutôt que sur le débat. Cela permet à l'auteur de se procurer un accès direct auprès de son public, largement*

*jeune et compétent en matière de médias, à qui il propose des modes de conduite permettant de surmonter la fragmentation postmoderne survenue au niveau psychologique, social et culturel. Dans cette optique, et partant de son contexte canadien, l'auteur préfère une conception identitaire évolutive et continue à des processus téléologiques et révolutionnaires.*

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Of course I want to entertain people – that's the whole point. But that isn't all I want to do. I want to make people think. I want to force them to examine their prejudices and their beliefs. I want to shock them. I want to make them feel in that intense, visceral way that only happens at the theatre. And I want these same things done to me – every time I go to the theatre. (Brad Fraser 2004)

This passage taken from Brad Fraser's speech given at the Magnetic North festival, Canada's national event for contemporary theatre, in Edmonton in 2004 explains the understanding of and approach to the dramatic arts of one of the leading playwrights of the 'True North' in a nutshell. It is his Theatre of Alienation, as I would like to call it, that I will try to define and explain in this paper. Starting with a contextualisation of Fraser's work with his personal background and the cultural framework of Canadian literature, as well as the rest of his works and his general aesthetics, two of his plays that both mark important stages of his artistic development, *Love and Human Remains* (1989) and *True Love Lies* (2009), will be used to exemplify the author's set of techniques and leitmotifs.

At the crossroads of the individual and the collective, the private and the cultural, the human and the non-human, this is where Fraser's highly original and at the same time creatively derivative dramatic voice will be situated. By doing so, I hope to overcome shallow readings that describe him as an *enfant terrible* and to construct an awareness of his essential contribution to Canadian literature and a deeper understanding of human nature in general.

### **1. A Canadian voice**

Fraser, the self-proclaimed "white trash kid" (Hopkins 2006), was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1959 to working class teenage parents and high-school drop-outs, spending most of his youth in a nomadic existence covering interior British Columbia and rural Alberta, until he finally settled down in Edmonton during the early 1970s. Alcohol and violence were constant issues in his family, and Fraser suffered frequent physical abuse by his father, as well as sexual abuse by another male relative. The divorce of his parents when he was 12 changed his situation:

estranged from his father, he channelled much of his anger and frustration into his early texts.

At 17 he won his first drama competition, and the first professionally produced play *Mutants* followed in 1980. It was only to be the beginning of 30 years of (almost) constant dramatic work resulting in more than a dozen plays and musicals, forays into radio and film, with two screen adaptations of his plays written and/or directed by him personally, and even a three year intermezzo as lead writer and Supervising Producer of Showtime's hit TV-show *QUEER AS FOLK* (2003-2005).

Two plays stand out in his impressive catalogue of works and they will form the textual basis for my deliberations. *Unidentified Human Remains and The True Nature of Love* (also known as *Love and Human Remains*) was his national and international breakthrough in 1989. After sold out performances in several major Canadian and US-American cities, it went on to gain the attention of theatre-goers and critics in the UK, Australia, Germany, Italy and Japan. It is in this play that Fraser first establishes the groundwork of his individual style. On the other end of the chronological spectrum, *True Love Lies* (2009) expresses a maturity of voice that makes these two texts ideal to see how the author has realised his credo in his texts. His treatment of the pervading sense of alienation typical of the postmodern subject has evolved from the very personal scope of his beginnings to a national, Canadian one and eventually universal relevance.

But is his a 'truly Canadian voice'? And what would constitute such a voice anyway? The term "Canadian" itself is a highly problematic one when describing cultural artefacts or drama in particular, as Jerry Wasserman remarks in his introduction to *Modern Canadian Plays*:

Not only does it elide the distinction between anglophone and francophone, but it presumes what some would consider an essentialist national identity subordinating the realities of regionalism and multiculturalism, the existence of First Nations, and a variety of other political and cultural contingencies. (Wasserman 2000, 7)

However, the author later concludes that "there definitely is an identifiable Canadian drama, a body of work by Canadian playwrights written for performance in professional theatres" (ibid.).

The specificity of the Canadian experience and expression has been a hotly debated issue since Confederation, and a giant leap in theorising them was taken in the early 1970s with Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood in their studies of Canadian Literature *The Bush Garden* (1971) and *Survival* (1972) respectively. Even though their theories have been challenged and sometimes even proven insufficient in the 40 years since their first publication, such as when Magdalene Redekop accuses Frye of falling into the trap of environmental determinism (2004, 270), they still have their place in the imagination of Canadian authors today.

When Atwood wrote a new introduction to the 2003 re-edition of *Survival*, she insisted that not only “[m]ost Canadian literary publishers in these hard times are still asking themselves the original *Survival* question [i.e. “Have we survived?”]. And the country asks it too”, but that the Canadian awareness of identity formation processes has increased over the decades and that Canadians still show attitudes diverging from “those of the folks south of us” (Atwood 2004, 12-13). Concerning Frye’s theories, Linda Hutcheon’s introduction to the 1995 re-edition of his *Bush Garden* ends on a similar note: “Yes, many things have changed since then, but so many of the arguments and judgements of the occasional pieces collected in this volume are still relevant” (Hutcheon 1995, xx).

One of these central arguments was that in order to understand Canadian culture, the essential role of what Frye calls “garrison mentality” needs to be taken into account (1995, 227). This is a need to constantly build metaphorical and literal walls against threats like nature, the unknown or the old and new empires threatening Canadians from outside (i.e. the UK and the US), but also against internal threats like the simmering conflict between Hugh MacLennan’s proverbial *Two Solitudes*, English and French Canadians. A pervading sense of internalised fear dominates the Canadian subconscious, unlike the US-American one that manages to externalise fears through the dynamics set up by the dogma of Manifest Destiny. Under these circumstances, the ultimate terror, according to Frye, is an individual who manages to create their own identity, breaking away from their community. In an extension of the metaphor of the garrison, Canada becomes a collection of forts, a mosaic of closed-off communities, and this national meta-narrative already implicitly contains the threat that constantly looms over Canadian society: the danger of falling apart in a “death of communication and dialogue” (1995, 228). Communication, the basis for all community, is the plaster keeping the Canadian mosaic together, and yet, after the move from the fort to the metropolis, Frye claims that the attack on conventions becomes the central aspect of discourse (1995, 233). It is thus Fraser’s obsession with communication and the challenge of what is deemed acceptable that makes his a deeply Canadian voice.

But there is more to it when one includes Atwood’s inquiry into the metaphorical structure of Canadian literature. She establishes three leitmotifs for the US, the UK and Canada that help understand the cultural artefacts created in these nations: for the US it is the frontier, for the UK the island, and for Canada survival (Atwood 2004, 40-41). These are expressions of the expansionist and revolutionary ideology of the US, the isolationist and conservative mindset of the British, as well as a Canadian propensity towards evolutionary ideas and procedural thinking. The becoming, not the refusal of change or the new state reached is at the heart of the Canadian experience. There is no triumph, no closure available for Canadian characters, and a constant state of anxiety is the result. Atwood theorises a sequence of four victim positions that develop from this emotional conundrum: out of a state of ignorance, Canadians pass through fatalism and rebellion,

and the most successful identity formations integrate the specifically Canadian experiences creatively with the personality concerned (2004, 46-49). Authors that reach this level of integration, accepting versatility and becoming part of the process, create texts that address the central thematic clusters Atwood defines for Canadian literature: nature, family, self-assertion and failure (2004, 19). Fraser and his characters both move through these stages of victimisation. They age together, and so the characters over the years become snap-shots of himself on his evolutionary journey. The tensions at the heart of the Canadian experience – nature vs. civilisation, the individual vs. the group – are also at the heart of Fraser's plays, and failure is a reality to be accepted in these open-ended, almost cyclical narratives so unlike the more linear and teleological artefacts frequently produced on the other side of the border. Not revolutionaries but survivors, Fraser's characters are thus deeply Canadian.

During the early 1990s, Linda Hutcheon took over ideas developed earlier by Frye and Atwood in her attempt to define the Canadian mindset and contextualised them with theories of postmodernism. In her *Splitting Images* (1991) Canadians are constructed as obsessed with articulating their identity, but mostly do so in a doubled voice of deconstructive, self-deprecating irony, creating a culture that is pervaded by what she calls "doubled ambivalence" (Hutcheon 1991, 15). Marginality becomes a metaphor for the internal subversion of the central, all that is Euro- and Americentric, white, male, heterosexual, Capitalist and politically or geographically centrist. The case of Canada, however, adds its highly complex post-colonial situation to the equation where Canadians are colonised by US-Americans, Francophones by Anglophones, Aboriginal Canadians by settlers, minorities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality by the majority populations. An entangled web of victimisation leads to ironies that are not quietistic, but oppositional and engaged, as double-speak makes it possible for those who do not hold discursive power in society to unmask and challenge ideologies and meta-narratives, to denaturalise them. The intricate connection between Canadian culture and postmodernism is also remarked upon by Will and Ian Fergusson in their satirical guide *How to Be a Canadian* when they claim that the typical Canadian text "should reek of postmodern alienation and ennui. The more postmodern the better" (2001, 178).

This is where Fraser's texts are at their most Canadian: the deep sense of alienation, not only from the Other but also from the Self, that is expressed by his characters in a highly ironic and caustic voice. Hutcheon's doubled ambivalence is the guiding principle for these dramas that fascinate and revolt, make the audience laugh and shock them with drastic displays of sexuality and violence at the same time. Fraser dissects naturalised concepts such as gender, love, family and humanity in his attempts to circumscribe the process of identity formation in a post-modern world, aware that this endeavour is doomed to fail from the very beginning. It is this Theatre of Alienation and the instances where Frye, Atwood and

Hutcheon's theoretical ideas surface in it that will be outlined on a textual and thematic level in the following chapters.

## 2. Textually, actually Fraser

What is extraordinary about Fraser's plays is the degree to which the author is aware of their textuality, as he tries to "acknowledge the traps and at least comment on them in some way" (Fraser 2004). His strategy to create awareness of genre conventions and formal constraints in his audience is mainly to actively use the feeling of alienation by violating expectations. He alienates the audience to communicate to them the alienation inevitably created by the systems that bind the individual in society.

This use of alienation for dramatic (and in extension social) effect is reminiscent of the school of epic theatre, established in the early 1920s by Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. According to David Edgar, this tradition is all about "present-tenseness" and about making authorial choices visible to the viewer (2009, 107), while Brecht claimed that the "essential point of epic theatre is that it appeals less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason", stressing its didactic nature (in Cuddon 1999, 274). This is achieved using a set of techniques including, but not limited to the following: violating the three unities (time, place and action) and the fourth wall (separating audience from performance); presenting a narrative play as a series of episodes in a simple and direct way; using a chorus, narrators and other media to comment on the events portrayed; expressing ideals and ideas without being overly propagandist; using a style close to the documentary, but not imitating naturalistic theatre (Cuddon 1999, 274). It relies on the power of the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-Effekt*) to make the audience and actors aware that this is a play – not reality, but a representation. It is about 'showing the showing in the showing' and, following Edgar's argument, it also serves to make the playwright more visible (2009, 17).

Building upon these precursors, the cornerstone of Fraser's aesthetics is what he calls his "poetry of profanity," "the grace of violence and the intoxicating freedom of theatrically exploring nearly every sexual deviation known" (Fraser 2004). The aim here is to provoke an instinctual, emotional reaction, to instigate discussion, as "the essence of drama is conflict" (Fraser 2006, xxvi). In a move echoing Hutcheon's doubled ambivalence, the author however does not want his audience to disengage emotionally from what happens on stage. On the contrary, the whole experience is designed to prevent exactly that from happening. He forces them to become complicit, while at the same time alienating them, setting up Hutcheon's paradoxical postmodern duality of "complicity and critique" (Hutcheon 1989, 11). He not only confronts his audience with their prejudices and preconceptions but also himself, as his main characters have aged with Fraser over the decades. Beyond shock value, he wants to "transcend mere entertainment and say something valid about the human condition and the complexity of life" (Fraser 2004), a goal

that, according to Braham Murray, artistic director of the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester and as such responsible for Fraser's European artistic home, he achieves by "penetrating through the veneer of our society to find the wellspring of behaviour and [...] express[ing] the transformative power of the individual" without falling into the "cynical, nihilistic twist" of many contemporary British authors or the "sentimental cop-out" of their US-American counterparts (Murray 2000, xi). Even if Murray's overly simplistic and reductionist characterisations of contemporary UK and US theatre can only be insufficient, by keeping his distance from the voices of both empires Fraser's is a genuinely Canadian one, interested in the "essential humanity" of his characters and not eclipsing it for a cause or an idea (Fraser 1995, 4).

The first method used to alienate his audience is his choice of themes. Sexuality is at the top of this list, as all of his plays focus to a large extent on sexual and gender identities. Fraser rebuts allegations that this dominant position and frank display of sexual acts on stage might be a strategy to sell seats: "People have sex. All kinds of sex. I find it impossible to write about relationships without including sex. It seems unrealistic and irresponsible" (Fraser 1995, 2). He also refuses the classification of his plays as 'gay plays,' even though all of them include representations of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) identities. As a gay man himself, his perspective is coloured, but such is the case for any author regarding their ethnic, social, religious or sexual identities. There is also an evolution in Fraser's work towards more inclusive character constellations, especially since the turn of the millennium. In plays such as *Snake in Fridge* (2001) and *Cold Meat Party* (2003), Fraser clearly goes beyond his more radical experiments which had been intended to challenge traditional expectations of gendered behaviour. In *Martin Yesterday* (1997), Fraser declares his intention:

I wanted the straight audience, as they watched the play, to feel uncomfortable with the way they were being represented. I wanted them to feel the way gay people do when they watch yet another gay or lesbian stereotype mince and lumber across a television, stage or movie screen. I wanted them to face the same indifference to their stories and feelings that gay people face every day. (Fraser 1998, 3)

Besides sexuality, violence takes centre stage in most of Fraser's plays, and sometimes these two appear in combination: rape, castration, wilfully infecting others with HIV and sexually motivated serial killings are all treated with harsh realism. Other marginalised aspects of society like drugs and their subcultures, the mechanisms of the porn industry or the dynamics of relationships with large age differences complete the thematic catalogue Fraser confronts his audience with, most intensely in *Snake in Fridge* (2001).

His style of representation takes the concept of alienating the audience to another level. His is an action-oriented theatre – “physical action, sexual action, violent action, dramatic action” (Fraser 1995, 4) – in response to much of contemporary theatre that he perceives as too intellectual and ‘brainy,’ too much focussed on debate not representation. He frequently transcends media boundaries as “film, television, music, video, comics, books and computers have changed the way we think, the way we see, and the way we absorb information” (1995, 4). Theatre, he argues, needs to adopt new ways of communication and organisation to reach out to younger generations who have completely different habits of thinking and speaking from earlier generations. Language itself becomes crucial in communicating successfully with his target audience: Fraser uses the language of everyday contact, the connotations of reality that it lends to his texts, and abandons traditional theatrical language that is understood as artificial and removed from life. He wants a “theatre that speaks the vocabulary I use day to day. Not the one that I inherited second rate from my inbred English cousins or less than sophisticated American neighbours” (1995, 4). He thus reinforces the alienating effect of his choice of themes, and he even takes his idea one level deeper: into the structure of his plays.

None of his dramatic texts follow the traditional five-act setup. Most of them only have two acts whose length varies strongly according to the needs of the narrative, not abstract symmetry: plot and story determine textual shape. Scenes also frequently dovetail into each other, with dialogue from one seeping into the other where it serves as an ironic comment on what unfolds. The effect this creates is reminiscent of Raymond Williams’ concept of the Flow that he used to describe the textuality of TV-programmes: a sequence of information that overrides its component elements with the aim of keeping the audience watching (Williams 2003, 86). Fraser also taps into the structures found in comics, using captions on stage that contradict, extend or replace the characters’ verbal communication and set the narrative rhythm (*Poor Superman*), or sitcom setups and urban legends for character dynamics (*True Love Lies* or *Love and Human Remains*). These borrowings from new media coexist with elements such as adaptations of the chorus in Greek tragedy when characters that are not engaged in a scene comment on its events on stage (*Love and Human Remains*).

Fraser, using his choice of language and themes, his style of representation and the structures of his plays, creates textualities that are eclectic and provocative, but at the same time immediately accessible to his target audience: a young, urban population. He provides them with experiences that oscillate between fascination and alienation and thus echo the ambiguous and uncertain state of living in western, postmodern societies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



### 3. Of Human Remains ...

*Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* established Fraser's voice as a new talent in Canadian drama. It was created in a process of bricolage from several sources, all of which are tied to the author's private life. There was a series of already developed scenes about a group of long-time friends struggling for loving relationships in the big city that contributed the "True Nature of Love"-bit to the concept. The other, darker aspect of the play is based on two real events. A female murder victim was found at a place where Fraser and his best friend had been camping earlier and that triggered an unsettling question in the author: "What if your best friend was a serial killer?" This incident was then amalgamated with a police poster Fraser saw in a gay bar showing the forensically reconstructed face of a sexually assaulted, tortured and mutilated male murder victim found in a septic tank outside Edmonton. The caption on the poster read: "Unidentified Human Remains." Fraser was intrigued by the poster and what it meant: "Someone being so invisible that his body couldn't be identified fascinated me. [...] This was the imagery. Mutilated people missed by no one, friends or family. Those were my characters" (Fraser 2006, ix).

The guiding principle for writing the play was: "No Rules". He wanted it to exude rawness and vitality, but that created serious problems in getting the show produced as "people were afraid of the play" (Fraser 2006, xiv). Eventually, however, it was sold out in Calgary, and went on to hit runs in Edmonton, Toronto and Montréal where it attracted the interest of Québécois director Denys Arcand resulting in a successful film version in 1993 entitled *LOVE AND HUMAN REMAINS*, written by Fraser himself. It also crossed the border into the US with productions in Chicago and New York, but only received mixed reviews, a setback that was more than balanced by the enthusiastic reception the play was given globally: from Edinburgh to Milan, Berlin and even Tokyo. For the 2006 re-edition of the play Fraser updated the language, pop-cultural references and use of technology, since the advent of the cell phone had drastically changed communication habits. Fraser also removed most of the indications of time or space, making it more universal in appeal and following a trend in international productions to adapt the location and time period to that of the staging for the experience to be more immediate and relevant to the audience. In an interesting case of cross-media contact, this new edition also took on the title of the film as many, including the author, had started referring to it by the film title anyway.

One of the strongest themes in the play is alienation from the Self, as all of the main characters have to a large extent lost any connection with their own personality, or as Kane expresses it: "There is nothing inside me" (Fraser 2006, 31). David, a gay waiter/actor approaching 30, looks only for casual sexual encounters to avoid commitment. Candy, a literary critic who hates literature, is bulimic and deeply insecure about her body and her sexuality. Kane, David's busboy, looks for

a surrogate father cum lover in his older colleague. Robert, a bartender, begins an affair with Candy even though he has a wife and daughter. Jerri, a lesbian primary school teacher, develops an obsessive love for Candy. And Bernie, a civil servant and David's best friend, channels his unwanted feelings for and sexual attraction to David into serial killings of women, establishing a close relationship between Eros and Thanatos that is typical of Fraser's works. The only exception to this general state of alienation is, ironically enough, Benita, a psychic prostitute whose name ("the blessed one") already hints at her special function. With her ability to 'read' people ("I see stuff in people," 30), she helps them to get in touch with their subconscious and brings a supernatural element into the text. This makes her a facilitator, a guardian of the threshold of initiation, which is certainly why she is also the first one to utter the play's central sentence – "Everyone lies" (34) – before it is in turn picked up by all the other characters. Benita is also the keeper of urban legends, expressing humanity's need for meta-narratives on the one hand and for the need to deconstruct myths of family, romance and love on the other. The atmosphere that surrounds her hints at the suppression of the dark aspects of human nature that leads to this state of alienation from the Self. When Benita reads Kane, this is expressed in a short passage where the chorus of uninvolved characters sketches the metaphorical realm of the subconscious:

CANDY: Dana.

JERRI: The wind.

CANDY: I found her body.

BERNIE: I drive.

CANDY: She didn't leave a note.

ROBERT: The night.

CANDY: She would've left a note.

JERRI: The dark.

CANDY: She would've left a note! (Fraser 2006, 32)

Several characters show strategies designed to contain their dark urges, like Candy's ironic obsessive cleaning ("I enjoy cleaning," 36). Bernie, following conventional patterns of relationship, married a woman he does not love since "I thought it would change things" (52). Robert goes through the motions of stereotypical romance to have sex with Candy: dinner, small talk, compliments, music, wine (24-25), while David utterly denies the existence of love in the first place: "There's no such thing" (34). Only Benita successfully acknowledges and integrates what C. G. Jung would have called the Shadow with her personality, and she also helps others do the same. After satisfying a customer's special needs she argues, "Just think Davey – if we hadn't been here to help him live out that fantasy he might've forced it on someone else – for free" (47). Here again, her name might echo concepts associated with pre-Christian female divinities that were keepers

of both life and death, creation and destruction in a dynamic paralleling post-modern ambiguity.

Alienated from the Self, Fraser's characters in *Love and Human Remains* are unable to communicate with others. The media that were originally created to connect here ironically serve to separate. People hardly ever talk to each other about important issues, but leave messages on answering machines or voice mail:

*[The characters are singled out on their cell phones.]*

ROBERT: Candy, I'm sorry. Call me.

JERRI: It's Jerri. Call me.

KANE: David, call me.

BERNIE: Call me.

JERRI: Call me.

KANE: Call me.

ROBERT: Call me! (79)

Without communication there is no community, so the media, alienated from their purpose, also alienate their users from each other: Frye's death of communication and dialogue. Language itself fails, becomes hollow and empty:

CANDY: Don't you ever wish you had a lover?

DAVID: I have many lovers.

CANDY: Not lover lovers. (20)

Dialogue is often reduced to small talk following conventions and expectations, no longer an attempt to meaningfully connect to others:

JERRI: So, do you want to go out or something sometime?

CANDY: Sure.

DAVID: Bullshit.

JERRI: When?

CANDY: Well – uh – whenever.

JERRI: Should I call you?

CANDY: Sure.

JERRI: Why don't I give you my number then you can call me too – if you want.

CANDY: Why not?

JERRI: Great. (23)

Some of the characters, especially David, are used by the author to create awareness of this implosion of language in ironic re-writings of conventions, violating social expectations:

DAVID: So Candy tells me you're a lesbian.  
 JERRI: That's right.  
 CANDY: David.  
 DAVID: I'm queer myself.  
 JERRI: I know.  
*[Pause.]*  
 DAVID: Well, we seem to have exhausted that particular topic. (61)

Establishing communication between stage and audience and producing instances of dramatic irony, characters not involved in a scene frequently act as chorus, contributing things left unsaid or repressed, or contradicting false statements:

DAVID: I worry about you darling – you need to get out more – sleep around a bit.  
 CANDY: With the men in this town?  
 DAVID: Now now. We have some fine men.  
*[The other men are isolated.]*  
 BERNIE: Fire.  
 KANE: Dark.  
 ROBERT: Cold. (9)

Ironically, it is thus those that are excluded from a scene, marginalised, who are the only ones providing inclusive communication.

The collapse of communication inevitably leads to a state of alienation from the Other where all characters live in isolation. Jerri is desperate to connect to Candy emotionally and physically. Kane only gets financial and material attention from his biological father ("I was given this car and its insurance when I turned 16. I got a Visa card when I was 17."), and the lack of emotional support surfaces in a rejection of his own emotional and sexual needs ("Sometimes I dream I have worms in my scrotum", both 19-20). This is why he is looking for shelter with David, who in turn debates the very existence of love itself with Candy, claiming that "[w]hat you're talking about doesn't exist" (21). The carousel keeps on turning when she shows the internalisation of clichéd media representations in what she claims to be looking for ("Everybody need somebody", 20) and at the same time is only interested in sex. Fraser constructs David as Candy's complementary opposite, enjoying a promiscuous sex-life and looking to form a real, emotional connection. Unfortunately, Kane – the object of his affection – is blocked in his development due to serious father issues bordering on the incestuous, which is why he perceives David more as a function ('the Father') than a person (a potential lover), as is revealed by Benita's reading of Kane: "Men. A man. Older. Glasses. Moustache.

You. [...] Your face superimposed over the man's. Your voice. Your hands. Loneliness. Fear." (33). In a long and difficult process and only after overcoming alienation from his own desires, David, intrigued by Kane's naïve belief in love, can overcome his alienation from the Other and find contentment in this new relationship:

*[DAVID moves behind KANE and puts his arms around him.]*

DAVID: I won't let you fall.

KANE: That's pretty close.

DAVID: Trust me. Close your eyes. (77)

The role of David in Fraser's attempt to understand the pervading sense of alienation from the Other in postmodern societies is akin to the one of the trickster in Aboriginal storytelling: he highlights naturalised patterns of behaviour, makes them visible again through his ironic and self-aware comments. A prime example is his coming-home ritual that first references and then immediately undercuts clichés established in 1950s films and TV:

*[DAVID enters.]*

DAVID: Honey! I'm homo.

*[CANDY rushes to him.]*

CANDY: Darling!

*[They fake kiss.]*

DAVID: I feel like I just fucked a football team. (5)

In a metaphor introduced by the author when he uses video games to highlight dominant patterns of behaviour ("It's the patterns," 23), games people play along with the structures of alienation they establish are deconstructed. Besides David, Candy also exhibits aspects of his function. She is the only one critically questioning David ("You're a loser David. You turn everything into a joke so you don't have to face what a fuck-up you are," 66.), and when Robert tries to seduce her, she anticipates the emerging pattern and surprises him by cutting to the chase, openly asking him: "Do you want to fuck me?" (26). As the mood collapses and sex is no longer an option, Candy again shows awareness of the patterns at work: "I shot your little game down and blew it. Sorry. The soft and romantic thing doesn't really work for me" (26). Here the intermedial reference serves to reinforce the ironic deconstruction of an otherwise stereotypical scene.

Sex in *Love and Human Remains* is not constructed as a force of life. Especially the character of Bernie Fraser depicts it as rooted in the dark side of human nature, closely linked to death, violence and the struggle for power:

BERNIE: Let's drop the shit for once. We're the ones with the brains, David. We're the ones with the power.

DAVID: What power?

BERNIE: The power to make people do whatever we want to. (99)

Dana, Bernie's girlfriend, kills herself when Bernie rejects her after an abortion. With her, the only (potential) mother in the world of the characters dies, and the impact of this event is reinforced by naming her after the Celtic mother goddess Danu or Dana. This absence of Venus- or mother-figures is typical of Canadian literature according to Atwood (2004, 237), as the fertile and life-giving aspect is eclipsed in favour of the sterile or even life-threatening. This might be why Fraser puts sexual predators at the centre of his play. Bernie the serial killer of women is an extreme case, but there are also such aspects in David, as he thinks about AIDS, death and decay while cruising for anonymous sex in a park:

Sometimes, when I come down here, I think about what it would be like if I stumbled across a dead guy on these paths. I'm following some humpy number deeper into the bushes when my foot hits something soft. [...] Like a rotten log. Only it's not a log. It's some dead boy. Some dead boy with moss growing in his hair and maggots living in his eye sockets. It could happen. This is the perfect place for it. (Fraser 2006, 42)

Sex and the body image are central obsessions for Fraser's characters, while love is seen as dangerous and to be avoided. Robert and Candy for example only talk body parts after sex – tits, skin, hair, face, chest, prick, feet – not emotions (53).

Harking back to Atwood's idea of the different stages of victimisation and the evolutionary process necessary to overcome it, growing up is a leitmotif throughout Fraser's work. In *Love and Human Remains* a group of twenty-somethings know that they will have to grow up soon, leaving the irresponsibility of youth behind. For them this means the loss of dreams and of their unrealised plans, a reduction of possibilities and ultimately selling out to society, as "[e]motionally speaking, you've experienced everything you can by 16 – everything after that's just a variation on a theme" (75). Since social expectations and conventions demand a denial of human nature, they feel like failures. This in turn leads to frustration, alienation and ultimately violence, exemplified in Bernie's comment that "[b]eing married's like being a grizzly in the zoo. If you don't have to hunt all you can do is pace" (54). The only way to still feel alive once trapped in a conventional, socially acceptable life ("I'm not even sure what I do sometimes," 50) is to take risks, to court death, be it in the shape of killing or HIV, because "[n]othing's any fun if the possibility [to die]'s not there" (54). Fraser paints the picture of a young, urban generation marked by discontent and utter alienation from Self and Other: "I hate my job. I hate myself. I hate this city. I hate myself. Jesus. I hate myself,"

Candy exclaims in desperation (95). David grows beyond this fatalistic self-victimisation when he finally takes responsibility for Kane, well aware of the anxieties that are inherent to all relationships, or as he puts it: "If it's not scary it's not worth doing" (77). Bernie, however, is unable to muster the negative capability necessary, so he sticks to power fantasies, victimising others to forget about his own victimisation, and escapist fantasies taking up a well established topos of male lovers abandoning an oppressive society (as in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, 1917). He remains unable to integrate his anxieties and feelings of alienation with his personality in a stable way and seeks salvation outside of his Self, which ultimately results in his suicide.

This extreme experience makes David move beyond his co-dependent relationship ("I don't know you anymore," 99). He stands at the beginning of a new road when his unpossessive love for Kane makes an alternative family structure with Candy possible. Yet the fear of isolation, alienation and the death of communication remains expressed in David's confession at the end of the play: "I get so scared sometimes" (103). There is no closure for him, Kane and Candy, an instance formally signalled by an intratextual reference to a spot on Candy's futon that was first mentioned at its very beginning (cf. 9 and 103). The cycle of life, the constant and ongoing process of evolution replaces a teleological, linear and progressive model of time, and in the end it is Benita, the guardian of thresholds, who utters his first "I love you" for David as the final words of the play (103).

#### 4. ... and True Love Fraserian Style

Questions raised about the 'True Nature of Love' were answered 20 years later by Fraser in *True Love Lies* (2009). After a creative crisis in the early 2000s, proclaiming the death of theatre and writing *Cold Meat Party* (2003) – the mellow and traditional play in style and (mostly) content that he had said he never wanted to write, Fraser returned to the Royal Exchange Theatre. David, now in his 50s, has aged together with his creator. Years after their relationship has ended, he moves to the city where Kane lives with his wife Carolyn and his children Royce and Madison. A sense of continuity with earlier works on a formal level shows in the use of a non-naturalistic stage and everyday language, as well as the absence of clear cut scene endings. The same thematic clusters that were present in *Love and Human Remains* also still occupy centre stage in *True Love Lies*.

There is above all alienation from the Self. Kane's love for David is denied validity by his wife Carolyn ("Kane's whole thing with David wasn't real," Fraser 2009a, 34) in an attempt to build metaphorical walls reminiscent of Frye's theories against what threatens their relationship. She even invests it with shame ("We've all done things in our pasts that we're ashamed of," 10), prompting Kane to bury his feelings. This internalised shame reads like a caustic comment on Canadian attitudes towards the national ideology of diversity, with Fraser accusing his compatriots of containing social elements that cause discomfort in a passive-

aggressive way, while implicit rejection still shines through. Royce is overburdened by the systemic lies that are told to children that every one of them is special in their own way: "People shouldn't tell ordinary kids they're special. It fucks them up when they get older and realize they're not special" (59). When falling short of these exaggerated expectations, the penned up pressure, suffering and frustration eventually translates into violence, like when Royce goes on a rampage and is only stopped by David's reality check:

*[DAVID suddenly hits ROYCE with the butt of the gun, very hard on the bruised area. ROYCE screams in pain.]*

ROYCE: Ow! Fuck! What did you do that for?

DAVID: That's the first bullet hitting a Mormon girl you don't even know.

ROYCE: What?! Shit.

*[DAVID hits ROYCE again in the bruised area. ROYCE screams].*

DAVID: That's the second bullet hitting a Chinese kid from your English class.

ROYCE: Okay! I get it!

DAVID: This isn't a fucking game. People get hurt. Really hurt. And it's never the bullies who get it. (94)

All of the characters also show severe cases of image obsession, mistaking appearances for reality. Even after it has collapsed, Carlyne wants to follow her internalised master-narrative of marriage: "I was raised to get married as soon as I finished school. It's what my mother did. It's what her mother did. I never even questioned it" (70). Appearances of a functioning family life have to be kept up for others, even at the price of lying (11). And especially physical appearance and body image are main sites of identity (de-)formation and a cause for harrowing fears of insufficiency. Royce suffers, because he sees himself as ugly:

KANE: What do you want me to do?

ROYCE: Make me not ugly. Teach me to understand how people work.

KANE: You're not ugly.

ROYCE: Quit lying to me. (61)

He even accuses a teacher of not helping him against bullies who beat him up in school "[I]ike I deserved it for being ugly or something" (91). Kane is worried that his age and growing belly could harm his sexual attractiveness and make it impossible for him to find a new partner after Carolyn decides to leave him: "Carolyn don't leave I can't I don't I have a belly. I'm old and I have a belly" (96). David has even had a complete make-over including liposuction, new teeth, face-lifts



and a false hair weave to remain attractive, “[b]ecause I don’t want to be discarded. I don’t want to be not sexy. Not viable. Not yet” (93).

Like twenty years earlier, the characters also show serious deficits in their ability to communicate. The media take a central role in the play, especially the internet that is shown to dehumanise people and their relationships. Google replaces getting to know another person, being “[s]o much easier than small talk” (21), ‘net friends’ turn out to not be real friends after all (56), and young web-surfers are flooded with sexual imagery they cannot relate to or comprehend:

DAVID: You’re the computer dude. You’ve seen worse.

ROYCE: Oh yeah. Chicks with dicks Guys with pies Pop on Top K-9 Brown-eye. Everything. (44)

Royce is so disturbed by the constant flow of sexual images that he eventually becomes asexual:

DAVID: Everyone has sexual feelings.

ROYCE: I don’t. I’ve been looking at porn since I was eight years old and it’s the most repulsive thing I’ve ever seen.

DAVID: Then why are you looking at it?

ROYCE: Hoping something’ll kick in. Everyone’s fucking hooked on it. Guys at school have hardcore porn on their ipods – their cell phones. I know girls in the tenth grade who run their own fuck sites out of their bedrooms. (92)

As internet porn replaces sexual reality, we also see David unsuccessfully engaging in phone sex, being unable to connect to real partners (cf. 36). Fraser extends his media criticism to the isolating influence of TV when Madison’s boyfriend du jour is “controlled by television” (12) and the numbing effect of computer games on their consumers determines Royce’s answer to David’s question “What do you really enjoy?”: “I don’t – computer games I guess,” (58). This bleak outlook is again a deeply ironic re-writing of the role and function of media in western society: they do not connect people but isolate them, alienating them from each other.

No wonder then that parents and children see each other not as people, but as functions, echoing Kane’s initially disturbed relationship with David:

MADISON: They’re falling apart.

DAVID: Mum and Dad?

MADISON: They just seem so.

DAVID: Human? (83)

On their side of the divide, parents have internalised their roles so well that they are afraid of losing all meaning in their lives without children to take care of. It takes great effort for Carolyn to reclaim her own life: "I don't want to be one of those crazy middle-aged women with a mannish hair cut and a sensible car. I don't" (70). Other examples of alienation from the Other include old people being put away in homes and separated from their families where they slowly lose themselves (47), and no-one even missing David for five months when he moves to another city (12). The family as a social unit is reduced to a façade:

That's hysterical. The nuclear family. One day it just blows up. Ka-boom! There's a giant explosion and bingo – no more family. Everyone's become body parts in a mushroom cloud. The only thing that holds them together anymore is the fallout. (81)

There is no real interpersonal connection left in love or sexuality either. They are nothing but means to exert control over others or to prove a point, as is the case with Kane and Carolyn:

KANE: Don't stop loving me.  
 CAROLYN: I never will.  
 KANE: Please.  
 CAROLYN: But I've never had another lover. Or been through a break-up or lived on my own.  
*[They're kissing one another softly. Both are crying.]*  
 KANE: It's not as good as you think.  
 CAROLYN: Woke up alone. Called a girlfriend up for coffee.  
 KANE: It's not worth losing your family over.  
*[Their hands begin to move over each other's bodies sensually.]*  
 CAROLYN: I'm just renegotiating the terms of engagement.  
 KANE: I can't wake up without you.  
 CAROLYN: We shouldn't.  
 KANE: It's always so good.  
 CAROLYN: Yeah but.  
*[They have started to fuck.]*  
 KANE: Please don't leave me.  
 CAROLYN: I have to.  
 KANE: I love you so much.  
 CAROLYN: I love you.  
*[They fuck.]* (97)

All of Fraser's characters are utterly alienated not only from themselves but also from others. They exist, not live, in a state of fragmentation steeped in Hutcheon's

doubled ambivalence. This is cleverly expressed in the text through puns and intertextual or intermedial references. David's silent partner in the restaurant that he opens after moving to Kane's city is one Mary Reily. Adding another 'l' to the name, this is the title of a novel by Valerie Martin published in 1990 (and an eponymous film adaptation by Stephen Frears in 1996) that is a re-writing of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) from the perspective of Jekyll's maid. In a play peopled by characters constantly torn between appearance and reality, their socially acceptable façades and the darker urges and desires hidden beneath, this is hardly a coincidence.

There is another connection to Stevenson's text: an atmosphere charged with uncertainty and anxiety, also symptomatic for post-9/11 western societies, that is shown to infiltrate personal relationships. Fraser's characters live in constant fear: fear of climatic change (cf. Fraser 2009a, 16), fear of the gay community disintegrating ("Between substance abuse and AIDS they're all pretty much drunk crazy or dead," 30), fear of aging ("Over forty and you're invisible," 39), especially in gay men as the community is dominated by "body Nazis" (Fraser 1998, 42), fear of personal relationships failing (cf. 2009a, 52), fear of terrorism (cf. *ibid.* 83), even though Fraser remarks upon how in perfect irony terrorists seem to be the only ones nowadays taking responsibility for their actions (cf. 86). This conglomerate of diffuse fears creates a general sense of angst, culminating in Royce, representative of the young generation, exclaiming: "I don't have a fucking future!" (91). The threat is nothing less than the complete disintegration of the concept of reality itself (David: "This isn't real." – Madison: "What is?," 64). A symptom of this malaise are the rehearsed travesties of so-called 'reality-shows' that prompt Madison's statement that "[r]eality's not what it used to be" (46). The collapse of the 'real' is thus at the heart of these characters' constant state of panic.

Twenty years after *Love and Human Remains*, Fraser still sees the evolutionary process of growing up as the only solution to this problem, exhorting his characters and audience: "Time to grow up" (100). The teenagers in his play, Royce and his sister Madison, have no idea what to do with their lives. They are destroyed psychologically by school and aware of the stereotypical patterns they are forced into:

DAVID: What high school stereotype do you fall into?

ROYCE: Angry outsider with a gift in cyber.

DAVID: Computers?

ROYCE: Are my bitch.

DAVID: I guess there's no point asking if you've got a girlfriend. (29)

But growing up is also a necessity for the adults in Fraser's world. They need to learn to take responsibility and to actively create themselves on a day to day basis, to "[a]dopt traits you find attractive in others. It can be done" (59). Identity,

however, is “not about labels it’s about individuals” (41), and the characters have to learn to balance the need to believe (“When you fall in love with someone you have to believe it’s forever. It’s not real otherwise,” 102) with a realistic attitude and expectations towards relationships, acknowledging their darker aspects: “insecurity, co-dependency, fear” (83). The only way to survive today’s world is to develop the ability to constantly renegotiate relationships in real and meaningful communication, as Kane, Carlyne, Royce and Madison only manage after their family has already fallen apart. “He [i.e. Royce]’s started talking to me again. For real,” Madison tells David (103). Here, Atwood’s reading of the Canadian family as a trap that you can never really leave behind in spite of all the problems (cf. Atwood 2004, 158) surfaces in Fraser’s text: “It’s all just a habit now. Fear of the unknown” (Fraser 2009a, 113). At the end of the play the characters develop strategies of survival Fraser suggests as possible ways of dealing with life in postmodern societies: accept failure, as everyone is flawed – “Fucked up, who isn’t?” (114); accept victimisation when it happens – “Shit happens. We never really know why” (114); and grow by creatively integrating these experiences with your personality.

At the end of the play we find Kane and David bare of all façades, brutally honest with themselves and each other:

DAVID: How you doing?

KANE: My family’s fallen apart. You?

DAVID: My restaurant’s failing and I have no life or friends.

*[Pause.]*

KANE: I am such a total failure.

DAVID: No. (113)

They are denied a happy ending, and what Fraser leaves them and his audience with is an utterly ordinary scene: two people in love sitting down to have dinner together. A simplicity that is elegantly mirrored by the final words of the play:

KANE: I guess there’s a lot we can catch up on.

DAVID: Yeah. And we will. Later.

KANE: Are you sure? That might be kinda weird after everything.

DAVID: Kane.

KANE: What?

DAVID: Eat.

*[They eat as the lights slowly fade to black]. (114)*

Following Fraser’s credo that “[c]losure is overrated” (105), the process of living, of surviving, of growing never ends as it is evolutionary in nature, not revolutionary.

### 5. The Theatre of Alienation

Brad Fraser alienates his audience by re-writing the basic conventions of epic theatre. Echoing Edgar's "present-tenseness", he claims to be "obsessed with finding ways to keep theatre in the present tense", as most of contemporary drama for him is caught in a "safe, slightly sentimental 'past tense' style that keeps everything from being immediate" (Fraser 2009b, ii). According to the author, this is the ultimate betrayal of theatre as an art form, since it is supposed to be "all about its immediacy" (ii). Unlike Piscator and Brecht, however, whose drama was didactic and geared towards the intellect, Fraser produces an emotional attachment to his characters in his audience and thus a sense of complicity in a shift from modernist to postmodern aesthetics, following Hutcheon's doubled ambiguity of complicity and critique.

Moving between and beyond monolithic concepts of identity, he becomes what Erin Hurley saw Canadian theatre as a whole to be, a "*refracting* mirror [...] show[ing] the world *around* itself, through itself" (2003, 172). He presents us with a menagerie of alienated characters who become expressions of his impressions of the postmodern experience that he describes in his Magnetic North speech: a time when the reaction to terror is war, controversy is undesirable and expressing dissent is considered treason, when artistic success is only measured in financial figures not innovation, daring or impact, when the people leading our countries are no longer leaders, and implicit and explicit censorship curtails free speech, and when the ability to empathise is lost to humanity, even though it is exactly what makes us human in the first place. "We are being divided, ruled and conquered by fear, and it's reflected in every facet of our lives and our art," Fraser claims (2004).

In his plays, the only way out is to acknowledge the state of alienation from the Self and the Other we live in and to actively move beyond it by truly and meaningfully connecting to each other, forming new relationships transcending existing meta-narratives of identity, or, as Madison puts it: "Gay is so over. The word doesn't really mean anything anymore. Like Negro or Jewess" (Fraser 2009a, 63). Thus Fraser, on the cultural crossroads where the multiple layers of our identities intersect, moves from a post-traumatic personal to a post-colonial national context framed by Frye's 'garrison mentality' and Atwood's 'survival', and, propelled onwards by the predominant Canadian cultural logic of doubled ambiguity identified by Hutcheon, goes beyond it. He finally touches on the universal, human nature, as far as this is possible in the fragmented discourses of postmodernism, and approaching an understanding of the aporia of identity formation in his wake, we are urged to no longer remain 'alien nations' to our fellow human beings.

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Part thriller and part comedy, *Unidentified Human Remains* follows a group of friends who struggle to find love in the modern world. The only catch is - one of them is a serial killer. *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* Cast Members: Lauren Castellano, Diana Ascher, Brandon Thompson, Joe Stipek, Greg Jackson, Caroline Cagney, Andrew Frost. *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* Creative Team. Author: Brad Fraser Director: Robert Bella Press Agent: Brett Singer & Associates, LLC. *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* Quick Facts. Loading. Brad Fraser. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Jump to navigation Jump to search.Â Fraser first came to his prominence as a playwright with *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*, an episodically structured play about a group of thirtysomethings trying to find their way through life in Edmonton, Alberta, while the city is haunted by a serial killer.Â Porter Anderson, theater columnist for New York's Village Voice, conceded that *Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love* was "under-rated during its 1991 run at the Orpheum", and that the play "had a grunge sensuality that could seduce a young audience to live theatre" and a "slasher plot [that] ripped away at the exhausted cynicism of alienated Canadian youths".[ citation needed]. "*Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*" is the play that made Brad Fraser an internationally known playwright. It's still his best known work and most produced play. It basically broke traditional theater in Canada and was responsible for getting young people to buy tickets and give live actors a shot at engaging them. It's not a one set piece with a group of characters talking about something that happened in the past until a terrible secret is revealed. No no no. It is hot thea "*Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love*" is the play