Beyond the Borders
American Literature and Post-colonial Theory

Edited by Deborah L. Madsen
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THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Postcolonial studies, and the concomitant application of various types of related literary theory, is often concerned with analyzing contemporary fictional narratives to discern the subtleties of renegotiated cultural positions within society; personal and historical behavioral models are also brought into play in this process from a variety of critical disciplines as ideological positions within fictional texts are revealed and critiqued. As a critical tool with a pedagogic function, postcolonial literary theory often takes dual analytical and interdictive (or ethical) positions; in other words, it analyzes and reflects upon acts within texts that it is argued should be prohibited in the world now or in the future. This essay will explore three main questions that relate to this chiasmus, or crossing of the analytical and the interdictive in postcolonial theory:

1. Can postcolonial theory account for the traces of trauma that exist structurally, not necessarily thematically, within aboriginal writing (for example with the Residential School experiences and/or the banning of the potlatch in Canada)?
2. How useful is postcolonial theory in contributing to real-world solutions for aboriginal peoples (for example, with the negotiation of treaties)?
3. When it comes to the actual implementation of real-world solutions for aboriginal peoples within a postcolonial context, how useful is postcolonial theory for analyzing the resulting explosion of related contemporary narratives from a wide range of media that often blur the boundaries between fact and fiction?

Beginning with the first question and the example of the potlatch: its banning and reinstatement exists for Canada's First Nations like a painful scar; the potlatch "itself" should not be spoken about in this singular way (an example of a postcolonial interdiction here), because it resists being categorized as a homogenized entity or practice; rather the potlatch is a group of overlapping practices, named in retrospect. In The Potlatch Papers (1997), Chris Bracken argues that the colonial discursive practices that lead to the criminalization of the potlatch in British Columbia are themselves an enfolding and intertwining of notions of identity and otherness; British Columbia or the Pacific Northwest is a westerly limit where the originary conceptual center falls apart once this enfolding or intertwining is recognized. In relation to these same colonial processes in British Columbia, Chief Joe Mathias and Gary Yabsley argue that:

The economic consequence of the loss of lands and resources is easy to appreciate. What is less obvious is the extent to which federal law in particular reached into Indian communities in an effort to suffocate the most forceful elements of traditional Indian political and cultural identity. The Indian act was repeatedly used to destroy traditional institutions of Indian government and to abolish those cultural practices that defined Indian identity. For British Columbia First Nations, this assault focused on the potlatch. (1991: 36-7)

For the purposes of this essay, the interest is in the ways in which the criminalization of the potlatch registered culturally as trauma – akin to the known sexual and other abuses committed against aboriginal peoples in Residential Schools narrated in fictional texts such as Tomson Highway's Kiss of the Fur Queen (1998). The latter novel is a surrealistic text that can nonetheless be examined themesatically via ethical reading strategies, even though the novel's surrealism paradoxically disrupts thematic/ethical readings (for example, the boundaries between event perception and interpretative certainty concerning the reality of events, such as sexual abuse, are blurred). But how do we account for culturally traumatic events that may structure narrative at a more fundamental level? Such events may be present in or through narrative at the level of traces, or present as such in ways that cannot be thematized or turned into moral lessons – and I'm deliberately operating with a simplistic model of postcolonial theory here as it is a pedagogy that increasingly is taught at earlier and earlier educational stages. One critical approach is to turn to reader-response theory to investigate trauma in fictional texts, but the notion of a structural presencing of trauma may operate
in a more fundamental and profound way. Thinking here about the historical sequence between banning and then reinstating the potlatch in British Columbia, roughly seventy years (1880–1951), there was a shift between the attempt to destroy totally aboriginal cultures and an attempt to “hand back” cultural property, reversing not only the law, but the history of colonialism. As Jean Baudrillard argues, “If there is something distinctive about an event — about what constitutes an event and thus has historical value — it is the fact that it is irreversible, that there is always something in it which exceeds meaning and interpretation” (1994: 13). Baudrillard, in his usual polemical way, is concerned with the attempted reversal of history on a grander scale, whereby a kind of millennial creative accounting wipes clean the errors of the past; he also argues that this reversal of history is a way of negating the reality of events. The official reinstatement of the potlatch in Canada can be read as an attempt (actual and symbolic) at wiping clean the seventy years of colonial interference with First Nations culture and society, an assertion that the efficacy of the potlatch (and all that it represents) is no longer an issue, in other words that this efficacy had apparently been negated or cancelled out. In relation to Baudrillard here, this is a reversal of history, as if to say, this trauma did not happen, and/or, if it did, it’s all over now anyway. What happened in those seventy years is open to debate, not only because the potlatch was banned (yet still continued), but also because the notion of history “itself” was contested (that is, how and why the interpretative parameters constitutive of what we know as “history” are controlled).

In touching upon issues such as the mechanisms of historical construction or versioning, postcolonial theory necessarily broadens out into a form of cultural studies, or can be thought of as one more contemporary “branch” of cultural studies. The main example considered here is the Nisga’a Treaty. Put very simply, treaty negotiations involve in part a judicial recognition of forms of evidence that function outside of Eurocentric or Western frameworks of experience and knowledge. Counteracting such recognition in British Columbia until fairly recently has been the issue of precedent. Bell and Asch argue that:

Continuity, fairness, certainty, and predictability are the rationale for this doctrine, which is viewed as crucial in maintaining a tradition of legal objectivity. The concept of fairness reflects a formal notion of equality that all people should stand equally before the law. (1998: 39)

To summarize briefly, critics have argued that the use of precedent was highly problematic in relation to aboriginal self-government. Also, evidence put forward in courts may fall outside of the parameters of tests that have been applied in the past (in other words, the evidence is not accepted as such). However, times change and precedent is not necessarily a constraining process. To quote Bell and Asch once more: “The common law evolves not only when precedent is followed but also when it is distinguished. It is not precedent itself that binds, but judicial interpretation of the past and its relevance to the present” (40). In the initial Delgamaawk v. the Queen case (a breakthrough case for the Nisga’a in a century of legal battle with the Crown), the Canadian judiciary relied upon precedents based upon an outmoded “analytical framework which was developed by the social sciences in the nineteenth century” (Bell and Asch 1998: 64). Bell and Asch argue that with the “legal theory of culture” we get the following results:

1. The legal theory of culture allows for the possibility that human beings may live in groups and yet not live in society.
2. The legal theory of culture allows for the possibility that societies can exist that are not “organized” or that may be “organized” only with respect to some aspects of social life.
3. The legal theory of culture allows for the possibility that organized societies exist that do not have jurisdiction over their members and their territory.
4. The legal theory of culture allows for the possibility that organized societies exist where there is no “ownership,” particularly with respect to land. (65)

There was a positive outcome from the Delgamaawk case: the recognition by the British Columbia Court of Appeal that the Nisga’a had unextinguished rights to their territory and further, that negotiation would be the best way forward in solving the issue of aboriginal title, resulting in the ratification of the Nisga’a treaty (see Nisga’a Final Agreement, Web Resources and References, below).

So what has this got to do with postcolonial theory and my second question: “how useful is postcolonial theory in contributing to real-world solutions for aboriginal peoples?” One of the issues in the ongoing court cases that led to the final Nisga’a Agreement was the problem of what actually constituted “evidence” in courts; crudely speaking, there was a division among Western peoples, between those on the court benches who at times rejected aboriginal practices and oral narratives as evidence, and those experts who were either involved positively with putting forward (and helping to authorize) such evidence, or, who commented in anger and disbelief over its rejection. Of interest is this
division and how postcolonial theory, in part, may be responsible for the development of a more open, although not necessarily more sophisticated, acceptance and respect for other cultural viewpoints (and this will eventually lead me to the media responses to the Nisga’a treaty). Thinking of the general response to postcolonial literatures among a wide range of readers, there is often an almost automatic interest, respect and acceptance of, for example, aboriginal spirituality, as with Australian aboriginal Dreamtime, by the very readers who reject, say, Christianity or Islam as being irrational, too fundamentalist or in some ways totalitarian. A respect for other cultures may go hand in hand with the ongoing dissection and critique of colonial misdemeanors performed in the name of Eurocentric spiritual values, or, such a respect may simply be an expression of the complete commodification of all cultural belief-systems. Regardless of these arguments, it seems to me imperative that we reach a deeper understanding of what such an acceptance of other spiritual or religious systems means within a predominantly secular society.

My third question was: “when it comes to the actual implementation of real world solutions for aboriginal peoples within a postcolonial context, how useful is postcolonial theory for analyzing the resulting explosion of related contemporary narratives from a wide range of media that often blur the boundaries between fact and fiction?” Hamar Foster looks at some of the extreme responses to the Nisga’a treaty, summarizing them with the following questions:

1. Is treaty government “race-based”?
2. Is the treaty a “giveaway” by “compliant politicians”?

Taking the first question only, a summarized sub-set of statements might go something like this: such a treaty is race-based and therefore a form of racism against white/Euro British Columbians, and anyway such a treaty treats aboriginal peoples differently and is therefore violating principles of equality. Foster replies: “Prejudice against Indians may be based upon race, but treaties are based upon property rights and sovereignty: in this case, property rights and sovereignty that have long been ignored and denied” (1998–9: 28). Further, the notion of equality in British Columbia’s history “has been more of a flag of convenience than a true principle.” Further still, “there is something distinctly hypocritical about stripping a people of their resources and then describing a complex and careful attempt to restore some of those resources as ... a violation of equality before the law” (29). In the same issue of BC

Studies John Borrows parodies key statements from David Black, a media baron, and statements made on the (Canadian) Reform Party’s website. Here are the statements, via Trickster: “Let’s trash the treaty. Let’s scrap any talk of special group rights in British Columbia. We can’t countenance race-based entitlements that sanction apartheid in our midst” (Borrows 1998–9: 106), and: “We must be vigilant against government attempts to erode our democratic rights without input or participation. Too much has been done in secret; the government has kept the average person in the dark” (1998–9: 106–7). While freedom of expression is sacrosanct, such statements are made with no cultural, historical or ethical understanding whatsoever.

Perhaps the third question has more to do with methodological issues: whether postcolonial studies is part of a wider cultural studies approach, or whether it is something placed on literature courses, usually within English departments, examining almost exclusively literary texts. In the latter case, there may be no time or space made available institutionally to examine other types of narratives circulating within the media, the courts, and so on, in comparison with the selected novels, plays, and poems usually focused upon. Why is there a need for this comparison? Because the production of an ethical stance produced via postcolonial theory needs to be contextualized in relation to the various stakeholders within the communities directly affected by cultural and economic renegotiations, with the concomitant awareness of the fact that those stakeholders themselves adopt complex political positions and allegiances that can shift at a moment’s notice. For example, the overriding cash benefits of, say, a treaty, may in fact play a large part in changing the attitudes of key players who, crudely speaking, are usually portrayed by simplistic postcolonial readings as “the bad guys”; I’m thinking here of projected net financial benefits for British Columbia after all 50 potential or future treaty settlements; in 1999 Grant Thornton Management Consultants argued that this net benefit for British Columbia would be between 3.8 and 4.7 billion dollars. Stakeholders don’t always change their attitudes because they have to: say, via judicial process; other factors come into play.

RECLAIMING MAPS AND METAPHORS

To examine one literary example of contemporary First Nations writing in relation to some of the above observations and arguments, Haíla author Eden Robinson’s Monkey Beach (2000) is a text situated historically, geographically and culturally via the colonial and postcolonial
formation(s) of British Columbia. In many respects, *Monkey Beach* is a narrative reclamation of the name “Haisla”; the book is intensely funny in places as a complex piece of trickster writing. The humor is in part a survival mechanism for the protagonist, but in this case not just in relation to the personal and community catastrophe generated as an effect of colonialism, but in relation to the sheer magnitude of power unleashed through the overall schema of contemporary First Nations writing: that of sacred text. The opening pages of *Monkey Beach* explain the mis-naming, the doubling (and beyond) and the displacements of the Haisla town of Kitamaat where the events of the novel are situated:

Early in the nineteenth century, Hudson’s Bay traders used Tsimshian guides to show them around, which is when the names began to get confusing. “Kitamaat” is a Tsimshian word that means people of the falling snow, and that was their name for the main Haisla village. So when Hudson’s Bay traders asked their guides, “Hey, what’s that village called?” and the Tsimshian guides said, “Oh, that’s Kitamaat.” The name got stuck on the official records ... even though it should be called Haisla ... To add to the confusion, when Alcan Aluminium moved into the area in the 1950s, it built a “city of the future” for its workers and named it Kitimat too, but spelled it differently. (Robinson 2000:4–5)

As with the multiple and contradictory naming of place, the central protagonist of the novel “Lisamarie Hill” is dealing with multiple trauma: in the narrative present, it is the trauma generated by the loss of her brother Jimmy, who has gone missing along with the fishing boat that he was working on, called the *Queen of the North*. There is another more subtle emotion at work: that of the “traumatic imperative” she experiences in reclaiming indigenous knowledge and the spiritual powers that have been degraded historically (there is also the anxiety that “reclaiming” may be something that she cannot achieve). The novel as a whole mixes an immense number of genres and modes of writing, switching rapidly from self-parody, to intense seriousness, also utilizing literary, historical and journalistic discourses. Postcolonial hybridity, however, is not necessarily regarded by the narrator as a positive fact; rather it is one of the factors that leads to this rapid discursive switching and instability that makes cultural reclamation difficult to achieve. At a fairly factual level, the novel reimagines colonial encounters, as with the confusion quoted above about the naming of place; Lisamarie travels by boat to attempt to find Jimmy, and the journey also becomes a re-imagining of the early colonial explorers: “Early explorers traveling through the Douglas Channel were probably daunted by both the terrain and the new languages they encountered” (Robinson 2000:193). This observation is juxtaposed with a reflection on Haisla language, and a lesson concerning how the name Haisla is pronounced:

The actual word for the Haisla language is Xa’isla:k’ala, to talk in the manner of Xa’isla. To say Xa’isla, touch your throat. Say the German “ach” or Scottish “loch.” When you say the first part, the “Xa,” say it from far back in your throat. The apostrophe between the syllables signals both an emphasis and a pause. Say “uh-uh,” the way you’d say it if you were telling a child not to touch a stove. Put that same pause between the first and last syllables of Xa’isla. Haisla is difficult for English speakers to learn partly because most English sounds are formed using the front of the mouth, while Haisla uses mainly the back. (Robinson 2000:193)

Such pedagogic sections of the text are to be distinguished from those that occur at the level of story; for example, the narrator’s grandmother teaching her how to gather native foodstuffs, how to prepare various indigenous dishes, and how to harness spiritual powers. With the example concerning the difficulty of actually pronouncing Haisla, the narrator appears to be directly addressing the reader, not only drawing the reader into the story world, but at a more subtle level attempting to transform the reader from a passive consumer to an active participant in the “lessons” of the text. In other words, the reader is treated in a way similar to that of the “audience” or participatory members of a ritual, where the efficacy of the ritual is one that affects all of the people involved. Lisamarie can be thought of not just as a mediator between two worlds (crudely speaking, the Western world and the indigenous spirit world), since she is also a conduit to another way of experiencing the world through the act of reading. The novel can be thought of as telling a story – Lisamarie’s growing up, the typical events of a *Bildungsroman* – and as creating a number of incidents and lessons that form a critical constellation, in Walter Benjamin’s sense (a critical constellation is a montage form, where disparate and disjunctive images and events are brought together to create shock effects). That is to say, the story progresses chronologically through flashbacks to Lisamarie’s past, and through incidents in the narrative present after Jimmy has gone missing, and the story develops structurally via the reconfiguration of narrative (the fact that the novel reworks the Canadian Gothic) and knowledge (literally teaching the protagonist and the reader about the Haisla First Nation). Jennifer Andrews, in her essay “Native Canadian
Gothic Refigured: Reading Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*, explains exactly how Robinson’s text works through and upon genre:

the novel retains many of the traditional markers of a [Canadian] Gothic text, incorporating settings and beings that reflect the emotional turmoil of a Gothic protagonist through a first-person narrative voice. But Robinson transports the Gothic to a Native context and, rather than depicting Haisla characters who populate the novel as potential threats to the safety of a white, Eurocentric community, lets them form their own world, in which monsters exist but are not necessarily destructive. What Northey [in *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and the Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*] describes as Canadian writers’ ambivalence toward the New World and the dislocation experienced by early settlers is replaced in *Monkey Beach* with uncertainty about the world beyond the Haisla community. It is this external world that proves to be potentially destructive, at least for the protagonist, Lisamarie Hill, who falls into a pattern of drug and alcohol abuse when she runs away to the urban centre of East Vancouver. Furthermore, instead of presenting the Gothic as a means of exploring how Canadians are haunted by a wilderness that they find unfamiliar and threatening, Robinson negotiates a space in which her characters can examine the possibilities inherent in connecting to the natural world, monsters and all. In *Monkey Beach*, she traces her characters’ strong relationships to a wilderness that they recognize as having a burgeoning, though not necessarily just human, population and to a powerful tribal history that is far more important than the structural imposition of white, Western standards of civility. (Andrews 2001: 10–11)

Another way of thinking about this process of re-coding the Canadian Gothic and transforming it into the Native Gothic is as a significant part of the reclamation of maps and metaphors that occur throughout the novel. That is to say, the re-coding of genre is not simply an arbitrary stylistic or literary choice; rather it is a way of writing back against the colonial literary canon and other modes of representation of First Nations time and space. Thus, when the narrator opens the novel with the paradoxes of naming and mapping, and the ways in which the two are closely interrelated, she is also suggesting that older names can be recovered and colonial maps re-drawn; in other words, reclamation, while necessarily taking into account recent cultural and historical developments, can utilize the processes of misnaming and appropriation in a positive sense, that of overturning. To read *Monkey Beach* solely through the reversal of the usual codes and conventions of the Canadian Gothic, an act of metaphoric overturning, which produces the Native Gothic, is however to minimize the fact that the novel also works, as suggested, as a critical constellation. One of the real-world solutions offered by the novel is its rejection of a simplistic and nostalgic return to the aboriginal past; rather, the novel asserts the importance of re-learning and re-appropriating aboriginal cultural and spiritual values in relation to, and as a part of, the present, without this relational awareness being totally subsumed by present-day values. As a critical constellation, *Monkey Beach* resists post-modern notions of subjectivity. For example, Lisamarie’s spiritual experiences are presented via a multitude of discourses, at times expressing and poking fun at what she experiences and at other times representing them as deadly serious. The overall point, however, is that these experiences are not subjectively accessed: they are an encounter with forces that approach and constitute Lisamarie’s identity. Just as Walter Benjamin “interpreted literature as objective, not subjective expression” (Buck-Morss 1989: 222), so Eden Robinson represents the recovery of First Nations identity and belief as an objective process.

**HISTORICAL CONSTELLATIONS**

Walter Benjamin once wrote that: “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (1992: 246). *Monkey Beach* is a *Bildungsroman* and a chronicle, that is to say, it is not just an account of important events in the protagonist’s development, but also the seemingly unimportant, the trivial, if not ridiculous ones, such as the encounter with a sasquatch portrayed in childish and stereotypical terms: “a glimpse of a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed” (Robinson 2000: 16). Of course the so-called “unimportant” turns out to be central and of great consequence; the humorous and friendly meeting with sasquatch is indicative of the more positive relationship that Lisamarie can experience with the spirit world, and the world of “mythological” creatures such as sasquatch and trickster. “Chronicle” is a powerful word, indicating strong links with the storytelling of oral cultures, and also linking *Monkey Beach* with a notion of sacred text (“Chronicles” being the historical Biblical texts of the Old Testament). Narrative has long been considered to have a redemptive function, and can form a major part (even if unwittingly) of cultural and
spiritual recovery and restitution; in *Monkey Beach*, the personal stories and educational journeys of the protagonist merge with those of the Haisla Nation. Benjamin argues that "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (1992: 247). Lisamarie's account of her life is one of moments of danger; she fears the loss of her own contemporary, Western identity precisely at those moments that she is profoundly connected to an aboriginal "past"; but this connection is something that creates a strong temporal link rather than a distance, and her task becomes not one of merely reconstructing some dead version of the past, but one of realizing the past through and as the present.

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13

Thomas King and Contemporary Indigenous Identities

Laura Peters

The central incident of Thomas King's short story "Borders" is the moment in which a Blackfeet woman and her son attempt to cross the U.S./Canadian border to visit her daughter in Salt Lake City. When the woman responds "Blackfeet" to the gun-toting U.S. Customs and Immigration officer's question as to whether she is American or Canadian, she is refused entrance to the U.S. and is sent back to the Canadian border. When she offers the same reply to the Canadian Customs and Immigration officer's query as to her citizenship she is refused re-admittance to Canada. The woman and her son are relegated to the in-between space of the Duty Free store until sufficient media attention forces the Canadian officials to allow them to return to Canada.

"Borders" encapsulates the dilemma faced by the indigenous peoples of North America who have seen colonial borders/frontiers eclipse their longer-standing affiliations. Part of the central issue in the story is that the U.S./Canadian border has split the Blackfeet population nominally into Americans and Canadians; their ethnic affiliation as a group has been placed under erasure. This act of erasure is one that has also been enacted in the colonial settlement of Canada and further enshrined in various acts from the assimilation strategy of Duncan Scott, the first Minister of Indian Affairs (who early this century infamously declared that if his strategy was successful then "there wouldn't be an Indian left in Canada") to the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 which enshrines the English and the French populations as the "two founding nations." While there has been significant critical attention focusing on the distinctness of Canadian literature from American literature, there has been less attention paid to the racialized historical assumptions underlying the term "Canadian" and how those who are not descendants of the "two founding nations" negotiate this term. Of more