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Postcolonial Imagination and Postcolonial Theory: Indigenous Canadian and Australian Literature Fighting for (Postcolonial) Space

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The paper focuses on the shifting and problematic term of “postcolonial literature” when applied to indigenous writing in Canada and Australia. Discussion offers a whole range of versatile definitions of postcoloniality and postcolonial theory from the publication of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) onwards relying on the works by the authors such as B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, V. Mishra, B. Hodge, S. Slemon, etc., as well as the reactions and alternative solutions coming from Indigenous writers such as Thomas King, Lee Maracle and Marie Battiste in Canada, and Mudrooroo and Ian Anderson in Australia.

The term “postcolonial” has definitely avoided some of the problems of its terminological predecessors (Commonwealth literatures and New Literatures in English), but has created problems of its own. The very simple question may be when was the “postcolonial,”¹ and whether the “postcolonial” is too universalist a category which tends to swallow starkly different histories and places of utterance.

Both the prefix “post” and the root “colonial” seem to be loaded with ambiguities.² Colonialism in OED is defined as a “settlement in a new country [...] a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state” (Loomba 2001: 2). Obviously, the definition does not mention the possibility of any other people apart from the colonizers who might have been living in that “new country” and, consequently, a very complicated process of “forming a community” excludes such people for their invisibility is legitimized by this definition. The sole process of forming a community lies at the very core of the “great discoveries” of the world from the 16th century onwards and has been a continuous mark of human history. But this mark has also left a rather bloody trace behind, because forming one’s community meant forming a primarily white community in a

new country by applying a wide range of practices including “trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions” (Loomba 2001: 2). Practices such as plunder, warfare, genocide and enslavement would not have been necessary, had the colonizers not had somebody to plunder, fight against, put to genocide or enslave.

Another problem stems from the word “settlement” and the agent “settler” which led to a type of European colonies usually known as settler colonies. Already in the mid 1960s, D.E.S. Maxwell introduced two broad categories of European colonies which have been accepted, albeit also criticised, by the scholars: the so-called settler colonies and the invaded colonies or colonies of occupation (Ashcroft *et al.* 1991: 26). One of the differences between these two types stems from the fact that in the invaded colonies, “indigenous people remained in the majority, but were administered by a foreign power” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2000: 211) whereas in case of the settler colonies, the first peoples were overwhelmed and dispossessed by European colonists and following the European arrival, ceased to represent a majority group. There is a rather unclear distinction between the settler in the settler colony and the invader or occupier in the invaded colony or colony of occupation. Given the fact that scholars have started using the term “settler-invader colony” for the first group, both categories are drawn together and overlap, because the white settlers in settler colonies were invaders to the people already residing on the locations “discovered” by white colonists such as Indians in Canada and Aborigines in Australia. So, settling immediately implies invasion or occupation.

As regards the prefix “post” in postcolonialism, it seems that the slippage of the concept of colonialism becomes even greater following this prefixation since “post” can always denote a possible “postness” or posterity in relation to colonialism. This becomes particularly poignant when the label “postcolonial” is applied to the literature of settler-invader colonies such as Canada and Australia, countries where colonizer/colonized relationship can also be multiplied from colonialism within. In other words, the colonial subject (e.g. Anglo-Celtic Canadian and Australian) can be both “oppressor (with respect to the indigene) and oppressed (with respect to the metropolitan colonizing culture)” (Griffiths 1996: 175), whereas, in the same token, indigenous peoples (of e.g. Canada and Australia) can be either once or twice oppressed.

This brings us to the definition, or rather a whole variety of definitions and even spelling solutions, with or without hyphen, of the term “postcolonialism”. In the beginning, the term was used to denote the post-colonial state which had a clear chronological meaning and referred to the period following independence though such post-colonial nation-states have usually been “coterminous with the boundaries of the colonial administrative units” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2000: 193) or remained economically dependent on the mother country. But from the late 1970s critics have been using the term “postcolonial” to discuss various cultural/political/linguistic effects and experiences triggered off by colonization which gave rise to the so-called colonial discourse theory. To that effect, the term, as ambiguous as it is, became the site of “disciplinary and interpretative contestation”. The authors of the groundbreaking study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) offer a definition of postcolonialism as covering “all the culture effected by the imperial process *from the period of colonisation onwards*” (Ashcroft *et al.* 1991: 2, emphasis mine). Hence, the “post” in postcolonial, notwithstanding the application of the hyphen, does not imply posterity in regard to colonialism, but is a product of it. On the other hand some authors, primarily those into colonial discourse theory such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak insist on the hyphen to “distinguish postcolonial studies *as a field* from colonial discourse theory *per se*, which formed only one aspect of many approaches and interests that the term ‘post-colonial’ sought to embrace” (Ashcroft *et al.* 2000: 187, emphasis in the original).

It seems that both spellings and both concepts often collapse one into the other which has motivated Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge to come up with the third possibility – post(-)colonialism, with the significant hyphen in brackets, which can be used in plural as well. As they claim, this form of “postcolonialism” is not a marker of something following something else, but is rather “implicit in the discourses of colonialism themselves” (Mishra and Hodge 1993: 284). The reason for accepting the plural form of postcolonialism is that this field comprises a set of “heterogenous ‘moments’ arising from very different historical processes” (285). Simon During has concluded the same when he stated that the postcolonial “‘affect’ is specific to each ex-colony. Obviously New Zealand postcolonialism is not the same as Australian postcolonialism, is not the same as Nigerian, is not the same as Indian and so on” (During 1985: 369).

Most importantly, both Mishra and Hodge, and During as well as scholars such as Elleke Boehmer, Gareth Griffiths, Stephen Slemon to name a few, have tried to tackle the problem of naming the text of the Other in the context of postcolonialism, or whether the term “postcolonialism” can rightfully carry a load of the postcolonial hierarchy. As Ania Loomba has noted, in the framework of postcolonialism there is a hierarchy of oppression and “one’s experience of colonial exploitation depended on one’s position within this hierarchy” (Loomba 2001: 8).

To show the potential of the term “postcolonialism” Mishra and Hodge suggest that there are two kinds of postcolonialisms: oppositional postcolonialism which can be identified in “post-independent colonies at the historical phase of ‘post-colonialism’; and the so-called complicit postcolonialism which is an “always present ‘underside’ within colonization itself” (Mishra and Hodge 1993: 284). Whereas the former cannot be readily applied to the indigenous text since indigenous peoples are still “‘at the far economic margins of the nation-state’, so nothing is ‘post’ about their colonisation” (Loomba 2001: 9), the latter makes space for such text. Simon During comes to a similar conclusion identifying two forms of postcolonialism. The first refers to the so-called postcolonising forms which include “those communities and individuals who profit from and identify themselves as heirs to the work of colonising” (During 1985: 369-70), and the second to the so-called postcolonised forms implying those who have been “dispossessed by that work and who identify with themselves as heirs to a more or less undone culture” (370). Indigenous text can fit into the second group of postcolonising form. Stephen Slemon also deconstructed so hotly contested load of the term “postcolonialism” by claiming that we should distinguish the post-colonial state, or the “post-colony” from the “post-colonial condition”. Accordingly, indigenous text is embedded for better or worse in the post-colonies, but does not share the same kind of post-colonial condition. Whereas the white postcolonial text has been operating in the sphere of the colonizer/colonized, the indigenous text has been operating in the field of colonized/twice-colonized condition.

If white academics are rather cautious and enter into heated debates in relation to this umbrella term that can cover a whole set of heterogeneous positions, then it should not come as a surprise that native literati, scholars, public intellectuals cannot turn a blind eye to the assumptions this term makes in relation to the indigenous cultural production.

According to the Native Canadian novelist, poet and anthologist Thomas King, the term “postcolonial” purports a method for analysing literatures “which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer” which can imply that the initial point for that discussion is the “advent of Europeans in North America” (King 2004: 184-5). As King notes, when interpreted in this manner, this method neglects the fact that before the arrival of Europeans, in other words notwithstanding colonization, there were pre-existent traditions/cultures in Canada (or in other former colonies). This in turn means that postcolonial, though striving to find new centres, “remains, in the end, a hostage to

nationalism” (185) – in King’s case, Canadian nationalism. Though King is very much aware of the multi-layered application of postcolonial methodology, he rightfully claims that it is “unfortunate that the method has such an albatross – the term [itself] – hanging around its neck” (185). This seems to be the reason why he remains sceptical that postcolonial could describe a non-centred method which can indiscriminately include very locally identified, marginal and, once, twice muted voices. Another problem that he perceives lies in appropriating the term “postcolonial literatures” to suggest specific development stages, a notion of progress in a given literary corpus of a former colony. In case of native literatures in general, this would most frequently imply transition from oral into written, or appropriation of the English (or French) language or Western genres. Of course, obvious problem arises from the notion of progress inscribed into development, as if primitivism has given way to sophistication which is natural and desirable. As King claims, Native literature has become written “while at the same time remaining oral”, and it has “expanded from a specific language base to a multiple language base” (185) which is why new descriptors should be found which avoid privileging one culture over another, which do not erase the former imperial centre just to construct a new one. Hence, King replaces the prefix postcolonial for the Native literary production and offers terms such as tribal, interfusional, polemical and associational to describe the range of Native writing. Such terms, according to the author avoid the notion of centre; they do not imply progress but render possible a cultural and literary continuum for Native literature. At the same time they do not function as tags, but specific “vantage points from which we can see a particular literary landscape” (186).

According to King, tribal literature would imply literature produced within a tribe or a community that is shared among the members of that community and which is presented and preserved in a Native language. As such, it is not exposed or is exposed in a very limited manner to the outsiders. Polemical literature would be that written in a Native language or in English or French that focuses on the clash between native/non-native cultures emphasising the importance of preserving native values. This literature would also reveal struggle of native people against the attempts (social, political, scientific, linguistic, etc.) of the non-natives to subdue their culture. It would function as a specific historiographic literary chronicle of white hegemony over various native communities. Interfusional literature, on the other hand, would imply that part of Native literary production which is a “blending of oral and written literature”. In other words the language of mediation would be English whereas the patterns, metaphors, structures as well as the topoi and characters would come from oral literature. The example for this, according to King, a rather limited corpus of Native writing in Canada, would be Harry Robinson’s *Write It on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller* (1989). Its counterpart in Aboriginal writing in Australia would be Paddy Roe’s stories in *Gularabulu: Stories of the West Kimberley* (1983), a masterful collaboration of the Broome storyteller, Paddy Roe, and the invisible editor Stephen Muecke. In both cases the authentic voice of the storyteller recreates an “oral syntax” evoking the rhythm of the spoken phrase with lines of uneven length, repetitions, etc.

Finally, associational literature, according to King, would imply the native literary corpus written by contemporary Native writers (e.g. Basil H. Johnston’s *Indian School*, 1988, or Ruby Slipperjack’s *Honour the Sun*, 1987). This writing describes non-Native and Native communities, but does not focus the narration on the former. Rather, it concentrates on everyday Native life, exposes a continuous discrepancies in the relationship between the non-Natives and Natives, and still focuses on the group rather than on the single isolated character.

Though King’s terms tribal/interfusional/polemical/associational avoid ambiguities surrounding the term “postcolonial”, one cannot but wonder whether his tentative taxonomy can include all Native literary works, especially those, and there will be a growing number of them, which rely, to a certain extent, on the so-called Western literary genres or techniques of

writing. King himself admits that his terminology cannot be readily applied to the work of such Native writers as Gerald Vizenor's novels *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* (1978) which he labels a postmodern novel, and Craig Kee Strete's *The Bleeding Man* (1977) or *If All Else Fails* (1980), which he identifies as collections of surreal speculative fiction. Though his terms more rightfully include precolonial heritage of the First Nations in Canada, they cannot include comfortably a very important body of Native works which create a very significant Native continuum – not that of the Native form, but that of the Native content wrapped in white forms. This writing which uses readaptations and transformations of the “established” genres, the juxtaposition of styles, numerous textual interplays even though being absorbed by Native content can also be read as instances of postmodernist pastiches and shiftings of literary forms whereas the ungrammaticalities of the text which threaten language as mimetic representation, the glossing over the texts claiming to present objective reality can be read as markers of postcolonial texts and as such can easily fit into the term established by primarily white scholars – that of postcolonial literatures. Another problem arises from his claim that his terms “do not depend on the arrival of Europeans for their *raison d'être*” (King 2004: 189, emphasis in the original). Unfortunately, polemical literature, as he terms it, does not depend on but still is a product of the arrival of Europeans and their mechanisms of colonization, otherwise the basic theme, that of the clash of cultures, would not be in the focal point of such narratives. The same can be applied to the so-called first generation of Aboriginal Australian writers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal or Kevin Gilbert who produced the poetry *engagée*.

King ultimately admits that it may come out that his terms will not do in the end at all, but still, he rejects the term “postcolonial” because “at its heart, it is an act of imagination and an act of imperialism” that demands that he imagines himself as something he did not choose to be, as something he would not choose to become (190).

The Native Canadian writer, Lee Maracle claims that postcolonial presumes that Indigenous people have resolved the colonial condition at least in the field of literature. She asserts that even in the field of literature Native writing is judged not by the standards set by the Native writing, but by the Western one even though the Native writers themselves have criteria for their literature. As she continues:

“With conditions as they are, it is a luxury for me to wander into my dreamspace and conceive of “post-colonial.” A multitude of faces, all white and too numerous to name, gather around the edges of my dreamspace. [...] And still I imagine new words to deal with old dilemmas that still stand on the way to freedom.” (Maracle 2004: 205)

Obviously, what she has in mind is what Slemon has identified as postcolonial condition which is not the same for the Native and non-Native Canadians. This implies that the sole term “postcolonial” as a prefix to literature incorporating indigenous writing blurs social hierarchy which is a direct consequence of colonial experience.

Similar concerns regarding incorporation of Aboriginal writing in Australia into a wider field of Australian (postcolonial) literature is shared by Australian Aboriginal writers. They also feel the sneaking suspicion that the term “postcolonial” has been framed by non-indigenous scholars in ways which can still leave out indigenous peoples as well as conceal the fact that neo-colonial and imperialist practices still have not been dismantled in former colonies, now democratic, even multicultural countries (Both Canada and Australia introduced the policy of multiculturalism in the late 1970s).

One of the major Aboriginal literary critics and writers, Mudrooroo, whose identity was placed in the limelight in 1996³, wrote two extensive studies in which he tried to name that area of Australian postcolonial discourse that refers to literary production of Australian Aborigines. The collective denominator he came up with was either “Aboriginal writing”,

“writing from the fringe” or “Indigenous literature of Australia”⁴, but nowhere did he use the term “postcolonial” in relation to Aboriginal texts. Moreover he reserved the term “postcolonial” for new Western texts (Mudrooroo 1997: 76) thus rejecting any possibility of labelling any kind of Aboriginal writing with this prefix.

Interestingly enough, a new collection of contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians entitled *Blacklines* (2003) rejects the term “postcolonial” all together. It is only mentioned once in the “Introduction” to a specific segment of Aboriginal critical writing in which Ian Anderson explains in brief the reason for rejecting the mere mentioning of the term:

Nevertheless, in the context of settler colonial states, such as Australia, colonial structures have never been dismantled. Colonial ways of knowing are not historical artefacts that simply linger in contemporary discourse. They are actively reproduced within contemporary dynamics of colonial power. Yet this fundamental observation does not really seem to have penetrated mainstream postcolonial theory. (Anderson 2003: 24)

It seems that Indigenous authors believe that the term “postcolonial” when used in relation to indigenous cultural production attempts to take just another type of European theory of criticism and place it like a grid upon indigenous text thus creating a specific postcolonial inferiority complex.

Finally, what can be done in this game of perpetual naming of native/indigenous literary publications which themselves defy simple categorization? Naturally, the sole attempt of naming the text of formerly muted voices perpetuates *bovarysme collectif*, a typical colonial trope of being “fated to obey suggestion of an external milieu, for lack of an auto-suggestion from within” (Jules de Gautier in Gates 1984: 8) if it does not include native scholars, and/or writers. Without their contribution in the sphere of literary criticism we will never be able to move further away from the stage in which indigenous literary production remains “the black monolith of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*.”⁵ In order to reveal a “revealable” segment of this literary Signifying Monkey, maybe it is worthwhile telling the story of the elder’s box told by an Indian educator. An Indian elder presented him with an empty box and asked:

“How many sides do you see?”

“One”, I said.

He pulled the box towards his chest and turned it so one corner faced me. “Now how many do you see?”

“Now I see three sides.”

He stepped back and extended the box, one corner towards him and one towards me.

“You and I together can see six sides of this box,” he told me. (Qtd. in Battiste 2004: 210)

The question is whether and how these six equally valuable perspectives can be blended into one. Ultimately, we may ask ourselves whether this quest to name is necessary at all because there is always a possibility of supporting generalizations about a supposedly universal “colonial” or “postcolonial condition” of all indigenous texts. The good thing, though, is that indigenous literary production that has become very prolific owing to numerous less literary conditions has not lost its heterogeneous nature. It has not become a transferable and marketable discourse because one thing is sure: Indigenous writing throughout the world can hardly be appropriated and swallowed by the mainstream which may bear the prefix

postcolonial, because as the Native Canadian poet, playwright and anthologist Daniel David Moses concluded, mainstream is “pretty wide but it’s spiritually shallow. [...] If we become part of that mainstream we’re going to be the deep currents” (Moses 1998: xxi).

Endnotes

- ¹ Question appropriated from Hall 1996.
- ² See similar points raised in Slemon 1996.
- ³ This issue goes beyond the scope of this paper. For details see Annalisa Oboe (ed.) (2003) *Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo*, Cross/Cultures 64, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, especially essays by Adam Shoemaker and Cassandra Pybus.
- ⁴ The first two terms are found in Mudrooroo Narogin (1990) *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Melbourne: Hyland House, and the third one in Mudrooroo (1997) *Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka*, Melbourne: Hyland House.
- ⁵ The term is appropriated from Adam Shoemaker which he uses to stress mystifying nature of Aboriginal traditional production. See Shoemaker (1988: 53).

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