## Indigeneity, Colonialism, and Literary Studies: A "Transdisciplinary, Oppositional Politics of Reading"

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While Len Findlay's exhortation, "always indigenize," could usefully apply to all social relations throughout the Americas, he is particularly concerned in this essay with the ways the university replicates and reinforces the "aggravated inequality" of indigenous peoples. The complicity of the university in colonialism takes a broad range of forms, including the Eurocentric biases of academic knowledge and the devaluation of indigenous perspectives in the curriculum as well as hiring and admissions processes that favour white applicants. While these problems affect all communities of color to varying degrees, in us institutions, the vantage point from which I write, they are particularly acute for indigenous peoples, who remain the most underrepresented group in the academy. Even ethnic studies programs dedicated to interrogating social power and racial inequalities have, for the most part, ignored or neglected Native America: many such programs do not include indigenous studies as part of the curriculum, at least not in any substantial way, while scholars working in adjacent fields—African American, Chicano/Latino, Asian American, postcolonial, and gender studies—rarely have even a rudimentary knowledge of indigenous scholarship and issues. This is true despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that, in Findlay's words, there is nothing hors-Indigène

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in the Americas, an acknowledgement that necessitates the difficult task of rethinking the histories and interrelationships of communities of color. In the us context, Findlay's exhortation thus points to a badly needed corrective both in dominant academic culture as well as in emerging fields dedicated to challenging the hegemonic order.

For Findlay, this corrective necessitates structural changes to transform the university into a place that supports indigenous self-determination and self-representation, a process in which, Audre Lorde's contention notwithstanding, "the master's most important tools—like the domestic and international division of labour—can be used to 'dismantle the master's house, though [crucially] not if they are the only tools used and if they remain within dominant patterns of ownership and means of production" (310). These changes entail inclusive curricular, hiring, and admissions practices throughout the institution. More specific to literary studies, they require a new hermeneutic—in Findlay's terms, a "transdisciplinary, oppositional politics of reading" (318)—to interrogate and challenge, rather than support, social inequalities. Indeed, Findlay's essay itself exemplifies such a practice because it adapts deconstructive and Marxist theories for indigenous purposes in a way that also underscores and counters their Eurocentric foundations. Findlay's approach thus provides a model for an oppositional politics of reading that is critical as well as constructive and that contributes to a broader anticolonial project. In what follows, I shall look more closely at Findlay's adaptation of Jameson to consider, however briefly, what tools Jameson's conception of political criticism might provide for such a hermeneutic.

Findlay's exhortation rewrites the opening of *The Political Unconscious*, the work in which Jameson develops a Marxist hermeneutic that provides a useful starting point for an oppositional politics of reading dedicated to analyzing the positions of indigenous peoples under ongoing colonialism, conceptualizing social change, and considering the role of culture in these processes. Although Jameson does not address these issues directly, The Political Unconscious offers a critical practice that insists on the social significance and ideological nature of literature and that thus lends itself to adaptation for anticolonial purposes. Political relationships, Jameson contends, constitute the "absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" because "there is nothing that is not social and historical ... everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (17, 20). The political nature of culture, for Jameson, follows a Marxist model: exploitative and antagonistic class relationships shape and are manifested in the interrelated levels

of the social order, including that of cultural production, and literature thus inevitably constitutes a "socially symbolic act." But, in The Political Unconscious, Jameson departs from conventional Marxist analysis and utilizes instead an Althusserian framework in which literature does not simply reflect underlying, more fundamental class histories and dynamics; rather, culture is an inherently ideological process that can perform a range of complicated operations with regard to its social subtext, including "production, projection, compensation, repression, [and] displacement" (44). Consequently, the political and ideological work of texts is rarely transparent. The task of the critic is to illuminate the vexed relationships between culture and its subtext, showing, for example, the ways that literary works repress or symbolically "resolve" social conflicts. Interpretation serves a demystifying function because it reveals social contradictions and analyzes the relationship between culture and political power.

If, for Jameson and other Marxist critics, class struggle constitutes the fundamental history that is manifested and realized in cultural production, an indigenous oppositional politics of reading would instead take as its foundation the understanding, in Findlay's words, that "there is no hors-Indigène, no geopolitical or psychic setting, no real or imagined terra nullius free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous (pre)occupation" (309). This supposition, as I understand it, entails acknowledging the past and contemporary presence of indigenous peoples, supporting indigenous interests, and analyzing the formative nature of ongoing colonialism in discourse and social relations. However, it does not simply replace class with colonial struggle in a Marxist framework; instead, it recognizes that colonialism has provided an enabling condition for mutually constitutive power relationships—including capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—that have shaped life throughout the Americas for more than 500 years. A transdisciplinary, oppositional politics of reading would consider the relationships between these histories and social processes—examining, for instance, the systematic disempowerment of indigenous women during and after the European invasion, or the ways in which the exploitation of indigenous labor and resources provided necessary support for the emergence of capitalism. Colonial politics, in its various manifestations, would provide the "absolute horizon" of interpretation, and this has several implications for critical practice.

1 Although Jameson is particularly concerned with narrative, he uses "literature" and "culture" almost synonymously, and his interpretive approach easily applies to a range of cultural practices.

Following Jameson's model, an indigenous oppositional politics of reading would analyze how cultural production, including literature, supports, represses, and, in some cases, symbolically resolves exploitative social dynamics (in this case, those related to colonialism). This practice involves reinterpreting canonical works and, at the same time, reading indigenous and non-indigenous texts together to illuminate colonial dynamics. In addition, it would consider the ways in which indigenous writing challenges dominant practices and ideologies or, at times, is complicit in colonial processes. These complicated relationships show literature, in Stuart Hall's words, as an arena where the "struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged" (466), and they provide a foundation for what Findlay has described as "new alliances between English literary studies and Indigenous studies" (308). Yet, as Findlay suggests, an oppositional politics of reading must necessarily be both critical and constructive (here, he reprises Jameson's contention that Marxist criticism includes a negative and a positive hermeneutic). As a result, critics must also attend to indigenous practices and worldviews, many of them derived from traditions, that are not reducible to colonial interactions. Indeed, because the destruction of traditional cultures, languages, and histories has been integral to European colonialism, the recovery and perpetuation of these traditions necessarily comprises part of the anticolonial project. This "recentering" provides indigenous ways of understanding the world as well as possible foundations for a genuinely postcolonial society. Yet both aspects of an oppositional politics of reading must aim primarily to support social justice and, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has argued in the Kenyan context, to "create a revolutionary culture that is not narrowly confined by the limitations of tribal traditions" (*Homecoming* 19).

An oppositional politics of interpretation, then, affects both what and how we read: it compels us to pay greater, more careful attention to indigenous culture in its various forms, to attend to the colonial politics of texts, and to consider whom our critical practices benefit. In an attempt to implement some of the goals of this practice, in what follows I shall provide very brief interpretive sketches of two US Native<sup>2</sup> novels, D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936) and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). While these novels do not represent the range of cultural work that indigenous texts perform, they lend themselves to a critical

<sup>2</sup> Recognizing different preferred terminology in Canada and the Us, I shall use "indigenous" to refer to Canadian or to hemispheric peoples and issues, and "Native" more specifically to refer to the Us context in a way that includes Indian and non-Indian indigenous peoples.

practice that aims to illuminate colonialism and to envision a postcolonial future in the Americas. In the early part of the twentieth century, McNickle undertook to criticize decades of "benevolent" federal Indian policies aimed at assimilating Native peoples into the dominant society, showing their devastating consequences in order to argue for self-determination. Silko, writing as the quincentennial of Columbus's "discovery" approached, similarly contests the obfuscations of colonial history. In a stunningly ambitious project that narrates 500 years of conquest throughout the Americas, she adapts Marxism to portend anticolonial revolution even as she uses indigenous perspectives to criticize its Eurocentrism. Together, these works exemplify what Findlay describes as indigeneity—a project that criticizes ongoing colonialism even as it "moves the center," 3 in political and cultural terms, from Europe to Native America.

McNickle's The Surrounded is set in the early twentieth century, the period following the federal government's implementation of assimilation policies, including the 1879 boarding school policy, designed to eradicate traditional Native languages and belief systems, and the 1884 Dawes Act, which broke up collectively held reservation lands into privately owned allotments and made them available for white settlement. Assimilation policies aggravated problems instituted with the reservation system, which had created economic dependency and given non-Native agents authority to govern tribes. In the opening scene of *The Surrounded*, its protagonist, Archilde, returns to the Salish reservation in Montana after a long absence, first to attend boarding school and then to work in Portland. Upon his return, he encounters his Salish mother, Catherine, and his Spanish father, Max, who owns reservation land made available by the Dawes Act, and these meetings exemplify the devastating effects of colonialism criticized throughout the novel. Archilde returns home (only, he thinks, for a short, final visit) because of his affection for his aging mother, but their reunion shows the distance between them and reflects his alienation from the tribe as a result of his absence. Archilde's feelings towards his mother, moreover, are ambivalent, vacillating between love and a disdain borne of colonial education. Their reunion is interrupted when his imperious father summons him, and if his interaction with his mother demonstrates

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<sup>3</sup> The term is Ngugi wa Thiongo's; see Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms.

the destructive effects of assimilation policies, the dreaded meeting with his father embodies colonial power relations. Max is patronizing, ridiculing, and commanding, and although he attempts defiance, Archilde fails miserably and helplessly offers only the responses "of a child" (6-7).

The paternalistic colonial system exemplified by Max is actuated by a host of other characters, each of whom represents one of its dimensions: Parker, the Indian agent; Moser, the exploitative trader; the overtly racist and terrifying Sheriff Quigley; and the boarding school teachers. The only complex character among these is Father Grepilloux, the kindly priest whose benevolent intentions are at odds with the destructiveness of his actions. As the primary exemplar of the mission system, Grepilloux inflicts immense harm because he undermines Salish traditions and contributes to the tribe's political disempowerment. Together, these characters transform Salish life completely in a way that compels Max to ask the central question of the book: "Grepilloux had shown the way over the mountains and the world had followed at his heels... As for the Indians who had been taught to understand sin ... one had to ask of them—were they saved or were they destroyed?" (139).

The answer comes to bear on the character of Archilde. Years spent in mission schools have left him paralyzed by an uncontrollable fear of hell and stripped him of the ability to act independently; he has, in short, become "our child." These qualities characterize the tribe as well. Desperately poor, their traditions, means of subsistence, and structures of government all taken away, the Salish endure lives of "misery and hopelessness" (232). A chapter near the end of the novel serves as a colonial allegory that crystallizes McNickle's point: discovering an apparently starving mare in a desolate area, Archilde vows to save her, and in his pursuit, unwittingly drives her to her death. In the end, Archilde realizes that she would have been best left alone, a revelation that clearly reflects on the tribe's situation. Archilde's well-intentioned but ill-fated efforts resonate with the colonial processes described elsewhere in the book, and the mare's death suggests the fate of the Indians under colonialism even as it foreshadows Archilde's own demise. Arrested for a crime he didn't commit and helpless to defend himself, he, like the tribe as a whole, is "set upon and destroyed" by the settlers.

Yet, however dire *The Surrounded* shows the effects of colonialism to be, the situation is not altogether hopeless. The novel suggests two paths towards a solution, the first of which is a return to tradition—a path taken, in different ways, by Archilde and Catherine (although the novel does not hold this idea consistently, doubtless in part because the conditions

for cultural revival did not yet exist when McNickle wrote). Tradition, in the novel, serves both to underscore problems in the colonizing society and to provide a foundation for postcolonial (although McNickle did not use this term) social reconstruction. The second, related solution is selfdetermination, and in this suggestion, the narrative engages struggles for autonomy that gained renewed importance in the 1920s and early 1930s when McNickle penned the novel. During this period, the failure of assimilation policies galvanized debates about the status of Native nations that resulted in the 1934 passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), which returned circumscribed powers of self-government and reversed prohibitions of traditional practices. McNickle's account of the devastations of colonialism resonates with criticisms of federal Indian policy intended to compel political change, and in the novel's critical and constructive dimensions, cultural traditions play an important role.

While *The Surrounded* focuses on federal Indian policy to engage specific debates about self-determination, Almanac of the Dead undertakes a broader project of critically depicting 500 years of colonialism throughout the Americas, a task that involves dozens of characters and plotlines set in widespread geographical locations. If conventional historiography has explained European expansion as progress, the novel, by contrast, depicts colonialism as unadulterated destruction and degeneracy embodied in characters like Beaufrey, a creator and seller of snuff films; the neo-fascist Serlo, who is obsessed with blood purity; Max, a crime family leader who derives his only pleasure from orchestrating assassinations; Trigg, who murders homeless people to sell their blood and organs; and the corrupt Judge Arne, whose perverse sexual proclivities include relations with his basset hounds. Together, these characters exemplify the bloodthirstiness, callous exploitation, emptiness, and boundless greed of the dominant European society, especially its capitalist manifestations. "The Indian wars have never ended in the Americas," writes Silko in the epigraph to her novel, and these characters constitute contemporary agents of slaughter and destruction repeated throughout the conquest. These stories, too, become part of Silko's narrative as she describes historical murders of Indians and other forms of racialized violence, such as African slavery.

If Almanac challenges conventional understandings of history by showing this deprayity, it also contests commonplace predictions of the inevitable "disappearance" of indigenous peoples. On the contrary, in the revolutionary vision of the novel, it is things European (political structures and social practices) that will disappear when the sheer enormity of destruction drives the dispossessed (indigenous, black, and poor people)

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to revolt and indigenous peoples to retake their land. At the end of the story, armies from the north and south converge on Tucson, the site of many of the events described in the novel. But it is not only the armies that will cause the destruction of capitalist, colonial society; rather, its own greed, corruption, and violence also contribute to the downfall. This is most obvious in the fate of Iliana, a descendent of an original colonial family in Mexico, when she falls to her death on the marble stairs of her lavish house, a monument to capitalism.

In linking social exploitation, capitalist decadence, and revolution, Silko explicitly draws inspiration from Marx, a significant figure in Almanac. Marx's appeal, as revolutionary leader Angelita La Escapía explains, lies in his insistence on describing suffering in order to compel social change, also the method of Silko's novel. But Marxism's usefulness nevertheless remains limited because it neglects indigenous histories and politics, especially the necessity of indigenous peoples reclaiming land as part of anti-capitalist revolution. While Marxism falls short, indigenous worldviews and practices prove more consistently useful. *Almanac* is modeled in part on the Mayan codices as well as the *Popul Vuh*, the sixteenth-century text that linked mythic and historical time, as well as past and present events, to support Mayan land claims. Silko's novel similarly insists on the importance of history, as well as prophecy, to support land claims, and in addition to adapting Marxism to advance their goals, her characters rely on dreams, tribal histories, and prophecy as revolutionary tools. Crucially, however, Silko also casts a critical eye on some traditions and their uses, especially those related to the disempowerment of women.

In *Almanac*, the future of the Americas is embodied in the characters of Seese and Sterling, whose intertwined stories open and close the immense narrative. At the novel's beginning, Seese, a young white woman, has been unwittingly caught up in Beaufrey's web of murder and destruction. Because her baby Monte has been kidnapped (unbeknownst to her, Beaufrey has had him murdered in a snuff film), she seeks out Lecha, the caretaker of the ancient almanac and a psychic with the ability to locate the dead. Lecha, however, does not reveal Monte's fate, insisting instead that Seese help transcribe the almanac, a process, she promises, that will provide Seese with the answers she seeks. Seese's story, then, is tied up with histories and prophecies in the almanac that portend the future. As she transcribes the almanac, she gradually realizes the certainty of Monte's death, and the revelation leaves her despondent and wishing to die herself. Both her name (a homonym for "cease") and the fate of her child suggest her ultimate demise and, by implication, that of things European as fore-

told by the almanac. In *Almanac*, these events signify the end of capitalist, colonial practices—but not white people—in a postcolonial society. Although Silko draws distinctions between many of her indigenous and white characters for the purposes of anticolonial critique, the composition of the revolutionary armies shows the necessity of interracial coalitions in accomplishing social change. Moreover, the story culminates in the "recentering" described by Findlay, which privileges indigenous politics and practices to achieve social justice for all.

For Sterling, understanding the past carries vastly different implications for the future. A character in some ways like Archilde, Sterling has long been absent from his home on the Laguna reservation, at first to attend boarding school, later to work, and finally because of banishment by the tribe. The mistake that culminated in his banishment resulted from his alienation as well as from his lifelong ignorance of and desire to forget the past, a lesson learned in colonial institutions. For Sterling, historical knowledge and dawning political awareness result, in the final chapter of the book, in his return home to the reservation and the beginnings of his reintegration. Because his return home parallels the armies' return to retake indigenous lands in the book's final scenes, his story represents the ascendancy of indigenous peoples foretold by prophecy.

*Almanac of the Dead* thus gestures towards revolutionary social change accomplished through critical historical awareness, strategic political alliances, a critique of colonialism, and a selective revival of indigenous worldviews and practices. Like *The Surrounded*, it draws inspiration from indigenous and European sources, adapting both to demystify social relationships and to serve indigenous interests. Although they make different kinds of political interventions, both novels lend themselves to, even as they themselves constitute, an oppositional politics of reading that counters ongoing colonialism in the interest of social justice.

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