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## Patricia Grace's *Potiki*: A Case Study for the Adaptability of Postcolonial Theory to Indigenous Literature by Karim Abuawad

Even though the ideal goal of postcolonial theory is to address the ramifications of the European colonial enterprise in the modern period, some scholars working on indigenous literatures, such as the novelist and professor of indigenous literature Thomas King, have expressed dissatisfaction with the ways in which postcolonial theory has functioned within the academy, and especially with its lack of attention with regard to literatures produced by indigenous minorities. As with any other criticism of theoretical methodology, the opinions of these critics vary from partial, cautious acceptance to complete rejection. At the heart of this criticism is the idea that since postcolonial theoretical methodologies have been developed in the context of exploitation colonies, such theoretical tools would prove insufficient or unsuitable in the context of settler colonies where indigenous peoples still live under some form of colonization. King maintains that this theory (as the term “postcolonial” itself shows) places great emphasis on the colonial period. In his essay “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” he says: “while post-colonialism purports to be a method by which we can begin to look at those literatures which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against oppressor...the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America” (11).

King's observation brings up the critical need to de-centre the discussion itself so that the colonial experience is not seen as the central experience, the prime shaper, of the histories that came before it and those that came after it. Nevertheless, his critique is not a productive one because he suggests that indigenous scholars ought to do away with postcolonial theory altogether, and instead come up with terminology with which they feel more comfortable. King is certainly correct in calling for terminology that better reflects the specificities of these literatures, but that project should not have as its starting point a sweeping rejection of theoretical tools which have the potential of being both beneficial and malleable. Whenever the need arises, these tools can indeed be modified, a maneuver already practiced by many theorists in the field, such as Louis Owens, whose discussion of the Maori writer Patricia Grace's novel *Potiki* (1986), implicitly demonstrates how postcolonial theory can give insight into the power dynamics that govern the interaction between indigenous communities and the larger societies in which they live. Through an analysis of *Potiki*, I will attempt to show how this text lends itself to methodologies developed under the rubric of postcolonial theory. This case study in fact demonstrates that with some modifications, theoretical tools that seem out of place at first can be reshaped into effective and useful ones.

*Potiki* tells the story of an extended family living in a small Maori community. This community, situated on prime real estate on a pristine beach, struggles in the face of a big corporation that tries to “develop” the area and turn it into a lucrative beach resort. Such “development” would not only require that this community give up parts of its land to build a new road leading to the resort, but would also result in the disintegration and dispossession of the community. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the novel’s main focus is this confrontation with big business. Rather, the novel focuses not on the confrontation itself, but on the different ways by which the community resists difficulties. The difference between confrontation and resistance is critical. While novels that focus on confrontation tend to be polemical, those focused on resistance tend to be concerned with tactics of perseverance. *Potiki*’s multiple narrators do emphasize the centrality of resisting the plans of “development” and “progress,” but they also relate the ways in which they resist the lack of resources, unemployment, and poverty. In addition, instead of presenting the confrontation as one between Maoris and outsiders, the narrators do point out that among the people who support their cause there are environmentalists, fishermen, neighbors, and human-rights activists. The result is hardly an essentialized confrontation between two distinct peoples, but one between those who profiteer from the suffering of others and those who oppose them. The company’s representative (Mr. Dolman), for instance, is dubbed “Dollarman,” which is a representation based on power/money, not on race. As he tries to entice the people of this community to allow the project to go through, “Dollarman” promises that this development will “mean work, well-paid work... it’ll bring people...progress” (90). What he sees as “progress” is nothing less than “self-destruction”

(108) from this community’s point of view: its members are not only expected to consent to material changes to their environment and way of life, but also to accept what he presents as a universal idea of progress. Although this Hegelian conception is not imposed by a distant metropolitan centre that sees the colony as a backward, temporally removed version of itself, it still has all the marks of the “White Man’s Burden,” a project that aims to assist the Other through encouraging him or her to leave behind the “ignorance” of the past and embrace a new and foreign conception of progress. At the heart of this so called “progress,” as Johannes Fabian puts it in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (2002), is

a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time — some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derive...from evolutionary time. (17)

In short, these societies are denied coevalness. The most immediate results of embracing this conception in the case of the Maori community in *Potiki* would mean that a road leading to the resort would be built over its ancestral cemetery, that its “Meeting House” would be moved to a “more central place” (100), and that members of the community will end up working menial jobs at the new resort.

The question then is not simply one of readjustment, of altering an existing situation to fit a new and potentially better condition; it is a question of accepting a model of progress that contradicts and

even negates the ways in which this community conceives itself. In the chapter entitled “Hemi,” the narrator describes one of the novel’s central characters, Hemi, as he reflects on his childhood. “It was funny how people saw each other” (65), we are told. The narrator continues: “funny how you came to see yourself in the mould that others put you in, and how you began not to believe in yourself” (65). Unlike his rebellious and self-assertive daughter Tangimoana, Hemi remembers himself as accepting the identity that was given to him as “native,” as one who simply fits the mould of “Maoriness.” His daughter, on the other hand, “had such a clear view of what she stood for and nothing got past her” (66).

In an analysis of “native American voices and postcolonial theory,” Owens describes the mould that Hemi mentions as a “tricky mirror.” Although Owens describes this mechanism in a Native American context, it still applies to other indigenous peoples (in particular) and minority groups (in general). This tricky mirror, Owens explains, functions in a way that prevents the Native American from establishing self-recognition while allowing the Euramerican to invent an identity (for the indigenous) that later becomes the marker of “Nativeness.” Owens elaborates on Frantz Fanon’s argument, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), that it is essential for the dominant group to incorporate a concept of recognition in order to attempt to arrive at a certainty of itself. Far from achieving a reciprocal recognition between the dominant and the marginalized, the dynamics of recognition in this case maintains the Hegelian “master” as the one who controls the mechanism. It is, in other words, a unilateral recognition that attempts to affirm only the dominant culture, and in the process ascribes an imagined, constructed identity to the Native. Owens writes:

European America holds a mirror and a mask up to the Native American. The tricky mirror is that Other presence that reflects the Euramerican consciousness back at itself, but the side of the mirror turned toward the Native is transparent, letting the Native see not his or her own reflection but the face of the Euramerican beyond the mirror. For the dominant culture, the Euramerican controlling this surveillance, the reflection provides merely a self-recognition that results in a kind of being-for-itself and ultimately, as Fanon suggests, an utter absence of certainty of the self. The Native, in turn, finds no reflection directed back from the center, no recognition of “being” from that direction. (217)

Although Owens’s metaphor itself is “tricky” (since, according to this logic, what creates reflection is the Native rather than a “tricky [transparent] mirror”), one should take it as a symbol for an asymmetrical relationship. In this encounter (think of it as a Lacanian “mirror stage” gone awry), neither the Native nor the Euramerican fully formulates a certainty of the self. However, the Euramerican, to continue with the Lacanian articulation, still manages to attain a conception of the social “I.” His consciousness is what gets reflected back to the self. Despite the fact that the reflected image can never be a “true” representation, it remains to some extent a close approximation of that consciousness. In the case of the Native, however, the reflection is a Euramerican gazing at a “Native mask” of his own creation. The Native sees himself or herself as the false image that the Euramerican sees. This structure of recognition plays out in *Potiki* as the company’s representative negotiates with the Maori community for the last time. Having failed to entice them with money, “Dollarman” leaves the meeting-house. As he walks

out, the potiki character Toko, described on the novel's jacket copy as the "prophet child," looks at the man and their eyes meet. Toko says:

Right then I saw what the man saw as he turned and looked at the three of us and as my eyes met his eyes. I saw what he saw. What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged, deformed. That was what I knew. That was when I understood, not only the thoughts of the man, but also I understood the years of hurt, sorrow and enslavement. (102)

Not only does Toko see a distorted image reflected back to him, but his condition reflects the anxiety of the novelist. This anxiety is the result of two conflicting desires on the part of the novelist: the first is a desire to portray the suffering that is an integral part of Native experience, the second is a desire to avoid fetishizing victimhood. While it is necessary for a novel aspiring to convey a situation such as the one in *Potiki* to incorporate elements of the people's suffering, it is critical not to reflect the image of brokenness that Toko sees in the eyes of the Dollarman. The challenge for the novelist, then, is not to reproduce the mask that is developed over centuries, and not to allow his or her characters to "step into" it, as Owens puts it, in order to be heard and recognized "by those in control of power" (Owens 217). In short, the novelist must resist power that expects "the native...[to] pose as the absolute fake, fabricated 'Indian'" (217). However, without embracing this constructed identity, without writing novels that reflect that identity, Owens argues, the Native would not be heard by the centre and his or her novels would be almost impossible to publish.

Despite this, Owens says, it is difficult to accuse the dominant culture because dominant cultures always produce and consume artifacts that reflect and reinforce their own sense of self. This publishing dynamic, to put it bluntly, is to be expected. Those who cannot be excused are "those individuals and institutions who make a self-satisfied profession of challenging the orthodoxy and monologic authority of the imperial powers" (Owens 212). Owens critiques prominent postcolonial figures such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha for their inattention to, and disregard for, the work of indigenous writers. Bhabha's celebrated book *The Location of Culture* (1994) lacks any mention of the resistance literature "arising from indigenous, colonized inhabitants of the Americas" despite "giv[ing] the impression of being acutely aware of a wide panoply of minority voices" (Owens 210). Add to Bhabha's inattention Said's single reference to Native literature in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), where he describes it as "a sad panorama produced by genocide and cultural amnesia" (304). One could argue, however, that this "erasure of Native American voices" (Owens 210) in postcolonial theory does not have to signify a cycle of marginalization, where even those not recognized by mainstream culture manage to produce their own outcasts, but may simply represent a lack of meaningful discussion between those working in indigenous and postcolonial studies. There is absolutely no benefit in trying to absolve or provide excuses for those who fail to see how they too function in ways comparable to those who affirm exclusionary, dominant cultures. There is great benefit, however, in trying to adapt the work done under the rubric of postcolonial theory, whenever possible, to new situations.

Although he levels a severe attack on these postcolonial theorists for their negligence of indi-

genous writings, Owens is far from dismissing the whole enterprise as insufficient or ineffective in relation to indigenous literature. Throughout the chapter in which he criticizes postcolonial theory, a theory he labels as a “loyal opposition” (226), Owens frequently cites postcolonial critics and theoretical formulations within his discussion on indigenous issues. He cites Spivak’s notion of the center’s tendency to address the silence of the margins through “selective representation” in relation to the selective publishing of indigenous writings (215), cites Said’s notion of the author’s “strategic location” in relation to his own writings (207), refers to Dipesh Chakrabarty who calls attention to the historians of the metropolis who never feel the need to mention the histories of the margins, alludes to Leela Gandhi’s idea of how non-Western thought is seen as “deterritorialized” knowledge, and even quotes Saleem, of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), when he says “above all things, [he] fears absurdity,” in order to describe the condition of the Native American who is forced to retreat behind “a static death mask” (218). Far from completely rejecting the potentials of using postcolonial theory in the context of the indigenous situation, Owens implicitly recognizes that while critiquing the negligence of theorists can be a healthy phenomenon on the part of the scholar of indigenous literature, dismissing the theory as a whole is neither necessary nor desirable. In his critique, Owens makes critics responsible for their shortcomings while at the same time demonstrating how the theories they develop can indeed be relevant.

In *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (2002), a comparative study of Native American and Maori literatures, Chadwick Allen performs a similar move when he engages with Bhabha’s

theories of ambivalence and performativity. In doing so he reveals that the scholar of indigenous literature can neither accept unconditionally nor reject categorically these theoretical tools. He acknowledges that Homi Bhabha’s theory of performativity allows for a fuller understanding of “a complex contact zone...where Maori meet not only other Maori, with whom they may or may not share common experiences, traditions, and views, but also a diverse range of Pakeha (Europeans)” as well as other groups of immigrants (11). Bhabha’s conception of identities as ambivalent and non-static proves to be productive in this context because it counters other essentialized conceptions of what it means to be “Maori” or “Pakeha.” Having said that, Allen points out that Bhabha’s notion of the ambivalence of colonial discourse is not as productive. Because the aim of locating this ambivalence is to “displace” colonial discourse, Allen argues, it becomes counterproductive as a tool because it undermines, among other colonial discourses, the treaties that guarantee the rights of indigenous populations. The Treaty of Waitangi, considered by many New Zealanders as their country’s founding document, was signed by the British Crown’s representative and more than five hundred Maori tribal leaders. Although the Maori version, which the tribal leaders have signed, was slightly different than the English one (it offered Maori tribes better provisions in order to entice the leaders into signing it), this imperial document remains significant for Maori activists today because it affirms Maori sovereignty. To displace the discourse of treaties, Allen suggests, is to undermine historic documents that “recognize indigenous nations as sovereign [and] continues to offer strong legal and moral bases from which indigenous minority peoples can argue for land and resources rights as well as articulate cultural and identity politics” (16). The ar-

gument that Allen puts forth is a strategic one. He recognizes that these documents are far from being fair, but suggests that to displace their discourse is to allow governments to renege on them without being legally challenged.

Unlike King, who rejects a set of dynamic and functional theoretical tools because he does not approve of the rubric under which these tools are arranged, Owens and Allen show how a healthy and productive critique rarely ends in complete dismissal. Even when a friend of King's points out to him that postcolonial theory is not a "simple thing," that its methodologies do address issues he himself is concerned with ("centres, difference, totalizing, hegemony, margins"), King responds by saying that "if this is true, then it is unfortunate that the method has such an albatross—as the term—hanging around its neck" (12). It is important to keep in mind that King writes in an ironic tone. He is surely aware of the nuances his friend insists he must consider, but he chooses instead to "remain skeptical that such a term could describe a non-centred, non-nationalistic method" (12). The alternative terms King prefers to use are ones that do "not depend on anomalies such as the arrival of Europeans in North America" (12). While it is crucial to maintain that indigenous and postcolonial writings are not mere subsidiaries of European traditions, that their existence is not just determined by the experience of colonization, the attempt to eliminate the connections between these literatures and the European ones can only be successful if one is willing to deny the concrete historical realities of colonialism.

To play down the importance and the impact of colonialism or the arrival of Europeans is to do a disservice to literatures that, out of necessity, emerge in response to these historical injustices. The stories that come about to resist partial narratives cannot be

interpreted simply as either dependent on, or independent from, the initial partial narratives. In *Potiki*, Roimata, the mother of four children, takes it upon herself to teach her children the stories they never learn in school. These stories were "known stories," she says, "from before life and death and remembering...Given stories...it was a new discovery to find that these stories were, after all, about our own lives, were not distant, that there was no past or future" (39). Unlike "school stories," which one character describes as teaching him that he is "not somebody," that his "ancestors were rubbish," and that he is "rubbish too" (74), Roimata's stories assert their own identity as they understand it rather than as it is constructed by others. Roimata's stories are the stories of resistance and resilience in the face of the accepted, canonized narratives. Although they are stories about the "now-time" (39), a time "centred in the being" rather than centered on the premise to establish some definitive truth about a given people, these stories of resistance must be read and understood as an integral part of the histories within which they emerge, be it anomalies such as the arrival of Europeans, or injustices such as genocide or dispossession.

One example from Allen's *Blood Narratives* makes it clearer how anomalies and constructed notions cannot simply be dismissed as such. He describes how the Maori "did not conceive of themselves as a single cultural or ethnic group until Europeans described them as such, and their locally defined identities have persisted until contemporary times" (3). This is an excellent example as to why one needs to discuss multiple histories simultaneously. While the ethnic group "Maori" is to some extent a European invention, one cannot simply dismiss this ethnic category as some sort of a constructed, fictional identity. The ramifications of this European

act of grouping are considerable to the extent that suggesting we should shift our focus from anomalies such as the arrival of Europeans becomes as insufficient as the assumption that the marker “Maori” corresponds to a concrete reality in the world. The complexity of people’s experiences and identities teaches us that absolutes never fully map out in the real world. There must always be a certain degree of flexibility that allows one to read reality not as one would like it to be, but as a constant interaction between peoples who do not always see eye to eye. It is for this reason that Roimata’s stories must be read “contrapuntally.” In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said suggests that the cultural archive of empire must be read contrapuntally, that is, read “with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (51). While Said puts forward this method of reading in relation to the cultural products of the empire itself, the same can be said about reading the writings produced by the margins. “In the counterpoint of Western classical music,” Said writes, explaining what it means to read contrapuntally, “various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work” (51). Said’s metaphor has the quality of being dialectical rather than oppositional. Unlike his argument in *Orientalism* (1979), which has been attacked as reifying the opposition of colonizer vs. colonized, this way of reading is based on the premise that there are “various themes” that must be considered within a single work. Although there is still a sense of a dichotomy in his formulation of the history of empire

as opposed to the “other” histories, there is still the possibility of overcoming that initial opposition through deploying his notion of reading contrapuntally in new ways.

Not only does reading *Potiki* contrapuntally allow for understanding Roimata’s narratives of resistance in relation to settler concepts of progress and development, but it also makes it possible to take account of what Bridget Orr characterizes as the “polyvocal” nature of Grace’s novels. In an article entitled “The Maori House of Fiction,” Orr argues that *Potiki*’s multiple linguistic registers reveal how the novel addresses multiple audiences simultaneously. Throughout the novel, the narrators and characters use Maori phrases which they never explain either implicitly or explicitly. The title “Potiki” (Maori for the youngest child in the family) is never translated or explained. In addition to using Maori phrases without providing any translation, the narrators never interrupt the narrative to explain the specifics of the culture being described. Instead of elaborating on cultural and religious nuances, the narrators simply relate the story while refusing to accommodate the reader who might not be familiar with such nuances. As a result, Orr says, Pakeha (non-indigenous New Zealanders) “will find themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, cultural outsiders in the world presented” (82). The position of this cultural outsider, however, is not that of “a distant spectator” because the narrative is “intensively performative and undertake[s] in turn to educate, to welcome, to argue with, and to accuse such readers” (82). Through avoiding an easy accommodation, narratives such as *Potiki* challenge the cultural outsider while inviting him or her into a dialogue about questions facing the indigenous community—so long as he or she is willing to participate in this dialogue without imposing his or her own cultural pre-

judices and worldview. It is essential not to see such tactics as devices of deliberate alienation. The ultimate objective of these tactics, as I read them, is to compel the reader into making a compromise by being willing to encounter an unfamiliar culture out of his or her comfort zone. Rather than the unfamiliar culture adjusting itself to the reader, the reader bears the responsibility of coming to terms with difference without expecting that everything ought to be entirely comprehensible.

What makes this "easy accommodation" undesirable? Why is it counterproductive to accommodate readers who might come to the text with the best of intentions? Owens suggests that the answer to these questions lies in the practices of publishers who are only interested in narratives that have a hint of exoticism while lacking any elements that have the potential to upset readers. Such narratives, Owens writes, "are both accessible to the aesthetic and political tastes of the metropolitan center and, perhaps more significantly, present to such readers a carefully managed exoticism that is entertaining but not discomfiting to the non-Native reader" (225). Although written by indigenous writers, these narratives, through the selectiveness of the publishing industry, produce the phenomenon that Owens calls "literary tourism." These narratives lack any potency because they cater to a clientele rather than to a reader. Instead of offering a story that argues with or accuses the reader, as Orr puts it, the story offers him or her access to an inauthentic culture that confirms the imagined culture that the reader had already anticipated, thus giving him or her a false impression of knowledge and understanding: the Natives are close to nature, they live simple, uncomplicated lives, their communities are close-knit, etc.

This "literary tourism" is not unlike the kind of tourism where tourists travel to oases built on "exo-

tic" islands. The corporations that own these resorts give their clientele the impression that they are experiencing foreign places, although everything they encounter from the time they leave their countries to the time they get back is carefully staged by tourism agencies, all done in order to give tourists that hint of exoticism without exposing them to the "inconvenient" realities of the places they visit. In her essay collection *From A Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i* (1999), Haunani-Kay Trask calls this phenomenon "cultural prostitution" (185), because, far from encountering a new culture, such tourists encounter an "utter degradation" of the Native community.

The thread that runs through these two forms of tourism is appropriation: in one instance it is physical, in the other, figurative. While appropriation of the other's cultural artifacts is done through domesticating these artifacts, through turning them into diluted expressions rather than unsettling ones, physical land is appropriated through labour. The attempt at appropriating land in *Potiki*, first by financial enticement and later by intimidation, is predicated on the old colonial idea that land can be acquired through labor, that land belongs only to those who can make it bloom. The land's value as such is dwarfed in comparison with the value of the work that transforms it. Since the people in possession of land are unwilling or incapable of bringing about such transformation, this kind of reasoning goes, the right to the land must be handed over to those who can turn deserts into oases. In *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), David Spurr writes that "the colonizing imagination takes for granted that the land and its resources belong to those who are best able to exploit them according to the values of a Western commercial and industrial system" (31). The capacity locked within the land can only be materialized

through the labour of the enthusiastic outsider, who is the only one capable of appreciating such potential. “Maybe you have not seen [the land’s] full potential,” “Dollarman” says to the land owners in *Potiki* (92). He can see the potential; they cannot see it. Because they see the land’s “potential” differently, it becomes easy to accuse the Natives of perpetuating their own poverty, and halting their assimilation into the larger societies in which they live.

These accusations against Natives who cause their own affliction is a common story. Notice that the difference is not at all about who the Natives are or where they happen to be geographically (in exploitation or in settler colonies), but about whether or not they are willing to question the epistemology that ascribes radical difference to them. This is one reason among many to highlight the overlap between the colonial experiences of exploitation and settler colonies rather than try to diminish them. In an essay on the state of the field of comparative literature in the early twenty-first century, Roland Greene writes that the continual challenge faced by those working in colonial and postcolonial studies within comparative literature is “to maintain a focus on how rather than what we are reading” (221). If I may extend this comment, I would suggest that we ought not to preoccupy ourselves with what a theorist said or did not say, but rather with how we can utilize his or her work in useful ways. Greene’s essay is entitled “Not Works but Networks,” in reference to the need for comparatists to focus not on a specific program, but on the ways in which literatures come into being. His title, however, can also be adapted to this context of indigenous literature vis-à-vis postcolonial theory. Instead of only thinking about specific, canonized works by postcolonial theorists, it might be more productive to consider the net-

works between these works, their shared ambition to critique the assumptions and prejudices of empire despite the specificities of different situations.

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