

Indigenous Modernism: Dehabituating Reading Practices

Madeleine Reddon
University of British Columbia
madreddon@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

This paper experiments with formal style as a way of working through the literary discipline's lacunae regarding aesthetic value, race, and coloniality. Using a "counter taxonomy" as an example of academic dissent, this paper considers the limits of this form of dissenting speech within "public discourse" (Fraser; Habermas) by demonstrating a persistent occlusion in the literary discipline related to this mode of speech, which concerns the "primitive" subject. I define a term to unsettle a series of categorical terms long-held as guiding frameworks in our discipline: modernism, Native and Harlem renaissances, etc. This term is "Indigenous modernism," a category that is a contradiction in terms because it announces its inclusion of the original term's constitutive exclusion, ie. the primitive within the modern, through the language producing its erasure. Through this experiment, I argue for the necessity of a different kind of dissent, specifically a more capacious form of literary critique that interrogates the problems of holding a discourse in common and the specific needs of anti-colonial work. As a pedagogical exercise that models the benefits of failure, I suggest that this intervention requires us to think about how we represent truth through critique.



This essay defines a term in order to unsettle a series of categories long-held as guiding frameworks in our discipline. By sketching the term “Indigenous modernism,” I argue that an established set of taxonomic classifications of literature (Modernism, Harlem renaissance, Native renaissance) are purifying apparatuses that create the illusion of racially pure zones of literary production within “the canon.” Canon formation often decontextualizes literatures as it creates isolated scenes of racial uniformity. In English Literature, this problem can be described broadly as the “periodizing impulse” in which one uses “apolitical” terminology—such as modernism—to justify racial exclusions and erasures. In response, this paper deploys an anti-colonial taxonomy against a colonial episteme, leveling another set of aesthetic, psychic and political attachments against an imperial site of investment. A set of divergent readings are suddenly thinkable when one opens up a closed imaginary onto another space of possibility. Yet, a counter-taxonomy can be limiting. Despite enabling an intervention into a field of knowledge, a counter-colonial taxonomy can also entrench forms of foreclosure. This article is interested in demonstrating and exploring the limits of this method of critique.

To do so, I use two articles as examples. One is a symptom of the problem I identify and the other identifies the problem I am articulating but fails to theorize this problem in relation to broader academic trends. I suggest that, even when these terms are disavowed, they often remain guiding frameworks for research. Operating under an erasure, these terms have significantly shaped histories of reading in the nationalist traditions in both Indigenous and Black studies.¹ The provisional mobilization of a taxonomic system allows me to identify points of instability within an epistemological field. Yet I maintain that, beyond the scope of this essay, the term Indigenous modernism cannot cohere as a field. To reify it as a category would be to hold up another set of racial inscriptions in place of the old. The terms we use become obsolete as we shift into newer dispensations of power. I think that we need to publicly struggle with the frames of reference for our work in order to resist

¹ Modernism as a field relies on the distinction between a “primitive” and “modern” subject. This “primitive” figure is not always Native or Black but includes other racialized figures such as Asian and Arab. Orientalism is after all endemic to the field. Since the examples I use to ground this essay are firmly situated in Indigenous and Black studies, I have chosen to limit my conversation to these fields. My choice of the term “Indigenous” is a bit incidental and is linked to my desire to think through global networks of anticolonial resistance on the basis of shared histories of dispossession and violence. I am not interested in re-scripting “Blackness” as “Indigeneity” by using this term. Instead, I am using the term (in conjunction with modernism) to create a small opening in sedimented genealogies of signification. The point is not to collapse one figure into another but to think about racial parameters and occlusions by using the term “Indigenous” to press open fields at points of convergence. It is my hope that this will open space for other organizing figures besides Indigeneity.

the reconstitution of coloniality. “Indigenous modernism” provides us only with an interim space for thinking through what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as “the vanishing present” of textuality (Spivak 359).

A taxonomy is a system of classification that organizes things (and beings) according to a hierarchy; the ordering of categories provides a horizon of legibility that is historically specific. Within literary studies, taxonomical guidelines often guide how we read literature. They help us assemble groups of like things through categories such as genre, historical periods, race, nations, and geographies. Innovation and originality in academic circles often consist of a novel reading of a text within a well-established taxonomical framework. Many scholars work to enlarge and justify the existing classificatory terms and some scholars do that labour with progressive intentions. However, most of these classifications are relics of an earlier colonial period of epistemology building. Consequently, there are many scholars who disavow these terms and seek to work outside of them and in another idiom of classification against those founded by the hegemony. These scholars develop new categories for reading whose political, historical, and psychic investments are articulated against the preceding terms. The work that many counter-taxonomies do is urgent and necessary. Indigenous literature, for example, creates space for cultural affirmation, decolonial action, and makes certain political projects possible by emphasising Indigenous survivance in all its complexity.

In each case, scholarship opens up possible readings (that can be rich, interesting and productive) through the categorization of literature. However, each method necessarily forecloses some interpretive possibility. To highlight the function of taxonomy and categorization in our research is to draw attention to the minutiae of knowledge production as a practice that unconsciously reproduces coloniality through iteration. In this article, I would like to show what labour an anti-colonial taxonomy can do to open space in rigid fields of knowledge while also drawing attention to its limits. In the short term, an anti-colonial lexicon allows us to point to the places where power has become sedimented as a norm. The drawback is that anti-colonial neologisms can quickly ossify into blunt and ineffectual tools when they enter the hyper-mobile space of the contemporary academy. Stripped of the nuance of their original contexts, the circulation of these terms, within an institution compromised by a colonial legacy, re-scripts this language into the preceding economy of knowledge production and monetization, enlivening old structures through the influx of new saleable terms. The word “decolonizing” is a good example of a word that has been appropriated by some disciplines to signal settler contrition rather than anti-colonial action as identified by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.”

Modernism continues to be understood as a contact zone between modern and primitive subjects who meet under conditions of aesthetic competition and anthropological difference. Scholars habitually characterize modernism as an exclusively Anglo-Euro-American literature whose tools racialized subjects borrow to address civil society.² Defining modernism in this way inserts racialized subjects into a developmental model of literature whose telos is a white, colonial modernity cast as “universality.” Even as scholars expand the orbit of modernisms in New Modernist Studies, many critics still maintain a definition of the field that preserves colonial modernity as its origin. Take, for instance, the introduction to the recent anthology *Bad Modernisms* (2006):

In its definitional aspect, the new modernist studies has extended the designation ‘modernist’ beyond such familiar figures as Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Woolf . . . and embraced less widely known women, authors of mass cultural fiction, makers of the Harlem Renaissance, artists from outside Great Britain and the United States, and other cultural producers hitherto seen as neglecting or resisting modernist innovation. Some contemporary scholars have even chosen to apply ‘modernist’ yet more globally—to say, all writing published in the first half of the twentieth century—thereby transforming the term from an evaluative and stylistic designation to a neutral and temporal one, and thus economically countering the implication that a

² Usually, modernism describes a small body of writing created between the World Wars. It has also been used to refer to texts as early as Baudelaire (or earlier) and as late as the present day. Astradur Eysteinnsson’s authoritative (and enormous) collection, *Modernism*, is one instance demonstrating how much effort goes into erasing race from modernism; this 1000-page academic anthology from 2007 is, by and large, devoted to a white Euro-American canon though there are moments, which gesture to other possibilities within a global optic. Andreas Huyssen’s chapter in this collection offers global *modernisms* as “alternative modernities with their [own] deep histories and local contingencies” (57). I resist Huyssen’s definition, however, because it seems to reinscribe racialized hierarchies between an original, white, colonial modernity and its forever-belated racial offshoots. For more work in this vein, see Susan S. Friedman’s *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* and Daniel Singal’s “Toward a Definition of American Modernism.” Peter Nicholls offers a far more nuanced account of *modernisms* in his *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*. Nicholls refuses a developmental model of modernism and, instead, understands the array of experimental and avant-garde movements as a modernist plurality responding to shared historical constraints. For careful genealogies within modernism studies, see Daniel Katz’s *American Modernism’s Expatriate Scene: The Labour of Translation*; Andrew Hewitt’s *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism & the Modernist Imaginary*; Walter Benjamin’s essays on Baudelaire and Proust; and Philip Weinstein’s *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*. Though many of these texts restrict their analyses to a Euro-American canon, they provide excellent theoretical accounts of the aesthetic engagement of shared conditions of precarity and political affinity within modernist traditions that could be extended to other bodies of literature with careful research.

few experimental works were somehow the only ones authentically representative of their age (as in the familiar sequence Romantic-Victorian-Modernist-Postmodernist). (1-2)

While this collection seeks earnestly to grapple with modernism and race, it also unconsciously reiterates the parameters of the status-quo. Rather than interrogate the terms keeping the field operative, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz leverage post-colonial, feminist, and queer critiques of modernism only in order to increase its optic by expanding its borders to “include” these others. In the case of both aesthetic distinction and scientific objectivity, coloniality creates an enclave for primitive writing that protects its “unique” claim to sovereignty using modernist discourse as support.

Indeed, Mao and Walkowitz depoliticize the shift from New Criticism’s emphasis on aesthetic value to today’s temporal markers of literary difference. This shift is political, as many scholars of colour know, because temporality is never a “neutral” category. We (primitives) are always late to the party.³ In *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Mark Rifkin argues that settler-colonial temporality shapes the conditions of the present in such a way as to continuously exclude or deny Indigenous presence in modernity. To be recognized within settler-colonialism requires the translation of Indigenous understandings of the world into another temporal idiom, one which normalizes “non-native presence, privilege, and power” through neutralizing Indigenous difference (13). Belatedness is a feature of this discourse on modernity as temporality “generates a prism through which any evidence of [Indigenous] survival [is] interpreted as either vestigial (and thus on the way to imminent extinction) or hopelessly contaminated” (5). Likewise, scholarly accounts of the “late” entry of Indigenous writers into the field of modernism plays into this narrative of the vestigial, belated, and, therefore, inauthentic native subject. Delving into the archive, this account is easily disabused by thinking about writers like Joseph Johnson, George Copway, E. Pauline Johnson, Edward Ahenakew, Ethel Brant Monture, Bernice Loft Winslow, Mourning Dove, etc.

To read literature is to participate in a temporal orientation towards the archive, as Rifkin’s research suggests: one which can allow the reader to transform absences into presences (and vice versa) through the reading process. Rifkin pulls heavily from subaltern studies in this text. However, tacitly, he shifts away from the terminology of that field because of how it has been used to establish an “absolute distinction between Natives and non-natives” in postcolonial studies whereby Indigenous life is “utterly incommensurable and

³ See Robert Warrior’s discussion of temporality in *Tribal Secrets*.

hermetically sealed” against other “forms of experience” (3). The language of temporality affords Rifkin the ability to posit that “discrepant temporalities. . . can be understood as affecting each other” even if the cross-talk (or cross-contamination) between life-worlds cannot necessarily lead to political recognition as such (3). In this way, Rifkin retains the facility to read messages trafficked between incommensurate life worlds while indicating a limit point at which communication between them is possible. What is intelligible across temporalities is not given but dependent on a mutable and fragile set of conditions for legibility. The tenuous “dialogue” between colonial and Indigenous life-worlds affects reading practices in the academy as it creates a threshold for shared understanding which might be breached if one can focus on the spaces between these sites where “non-meaning” seems to proliferate.

Periodization, however, points emphatically to a shift in the humanities towards empiricism as a method, one that binds literature to a normative temporality by appealing to scientific objectivity to fix its meanings to a master narrative of history. It seems almost trite to remind scholars that periodization in literary studies has been determined wholesale by colonial historiography. Despite this critique, it remains a powerful ideological tool in the humanities as a vestige of British imperial education. In practice, periodization tends to sequester literature written by people of colour into racial enclaves within a “broader” white territory. The “Harlem Renaissance” is a good example of how a taxonomy can transform writing written by people of colour into a supplemental set of texts. The term “renaissance” takes a set of texts written by Black writers, contemporaneous with what is often called “high” modernism, and reframes them as evidence of an entry into modernity through a cultural “revival” or “rebirth.”

While offering a critique of this term is certainly not new, it seems nevertheless important to mark how this term scripts Black writing into a history of the primitive whose modernity is always yet to arrive. Periodicity becomes an issue for reading African American slave narratives in Lindon Barrett’s wonderful polemic “The Experiences of Slave Narratives: Reading against Authenticity” (1999). In this essay, Barrett observes that his students are primed to read this work as a form of testimony because of empiricism’s ubiquity. In doing so, Barrett argues that readers tend to limit the text’s capacity for speculative thinking by understanding these texts as proof of Black life and histories of racial violence:

Often students facing the task of having to read and consider African American slave narratives make a notable misstep. They look at slave narratives so intently as experiential records that they virtually neglect them as discursive artifacts. They expect to engage through their experiences of reading the narratives singularly

representative or authentic experiences of “blackness” and “enslavement,” and these expectations are problematic because they diminish intriguing textual negotiations undertaken by the narrators as well as the powerful sociopolitical imperatives overdetermining racial categorization. . . . If the cultural regime underwriting U.S. slavery is one that ‘cast[s] social practices as biological essences,’ then its analog in these instances is the casting of social practices as experiential essences. The result is that the textual artifacts before the students are dismissed as transparencies, and the notion of race underpinning enduring U.S. cultural formations is hypostasized. *Racialization is reconfirmed and reiterated as obdurate and monolithic.* It is imagined as the untroubled and authentic bedrock of social and historical experience, even as the narratives both produce and question the effect of race in their efforts to document and alter a social and cultural landscape. (My emphasis, 48)

Barrett identifies reading as a practice in which race is reified in the present. Read “transparently” as testimony, these texts become conscripted into a particular narrative of the Black subject as an anthropological object within the history of American letters. To position slave narratives merely as support for the historical record expunges the thinking these texts do. Readers, however, never expect “modern” subjects to verify their existence; they are always already the subjects granted the power to question their placement in a historical and cultural moment.

Reading mimetically, reading as if literature represents a particular predetermined reality, can delay any institutional reckoning with the ethical problems posed by the literature in the contemporary moment. Reading, in this way, is also a form of interpellation as readers address texts as “representatives” of predetermined racial identities. This problem is not limited to an American academy struggling to account for African American literatures. Indigenous literatures in Canada are also endlessly reduced to a “representation” of colonial history or “representative” of anthropological difference. How frequently do we see Richard Wagamese’s work held up as an authentic account of “the residential school experience,” for example? Or, comparatively, how often is Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* touted as a historical representation of the Métis experience of colonialism? Of course, Wagamese’s work does make an account of residential school experience, as Campbell’s *Halfbreed* does offer a historical representation of the Métis experience of colonialism. I wish to ask, however, how the acts of survivance we see “represented” in the literature become scripted into the nation’s anthropological archive of primitive speech.

Partly, there may be some miscommunication in literary studies between Indigenous scholars, seeking to demonstrate the expression of Indigenous sovereignty in literature,

and settler-scholars, reading the literature as a historical or empirical correlate for Indigenous epistemologies understood as inflexible systems of knowledge. There may also be friction between settler-scholars seeking to account for textual ambiguity and play and Indigenous scholars asserting cultural dogma. Indigenous sovereignty is grounded in the sacred relationship First Peoples hold with the land, a relationship dictating responsibilities to ensure good relations amongst themselves and other sovereign beings existing in nature. This includes ancestors, helper-beings, as well as other non-human kin. An open question, however, is what counts as Indigenous expressions of sovereignty? Do Indigenous people need to signal their duty to these kin exclusively through mimetic images of these relationships or can we expand our understanding of how Indigenous writers and artists may be articulating sovereignty to include more formal, experimental or, perhaps, genre-based work? These questions raise another tricky subject: is there a taboo against reading texts as texts (instead of cultural artifacts) for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars? What politics does this taboo serve? Who is routinely excluded from this staging of cultural authenticity?

In “Not Primitive Enough to Be Considered Modern: Ethnographers, Editors, and the Indigenous Poets of the American Indian Magazine,” Michael Taylor argues that settler desire for authentic ethnographic subjects has, historically, engendered the erasure of speculative Indigenous writing. There is an eerie parity, Taylor explains, between modernists at the turn-of-the-century “playing Indian” in poetry collections and the absence of experimental early twentieth century writing by Indigenous authors in the critical anthologies being published today (45). In the early American poetry anthologies, modernists erased Indigenous presence by appropriating their stories, rewriting and representing them in their collections as work produced by “authentic Indians.” Today, Indigenous (and writers of colour) are being included in greater numbers in poetry anthologies. However, the issue, Taylor explains, is that most editors continue to favour “ethnographic works over ‘modern’ Indigenous poets” (45). The desire for a “representative” historical and anthropological subject actively shapes the production of a “canon” which insists that Indigenous people be present only as primitive signs of a lost past.

Likewise, in a recent exhibition on Kwakwaka’wakw artist Chief Henry Speck (also known as Udzi’stalis), Marcia Crosby (art historian and curator for the show) suggests that, when Indigenous artists were entering the gallery space for the first time in the late 1960s and 1970s, curators struggled to register Indigenous art as “contemporary.” Crosby explains that, in Speck’s case, it is not as if his work never ever “slipped away” but that curators have consistently been unable to read his work as participating in the same (or

similar) kinds of conversations about modernity usually reserved for white artists (n.pg.). Instead, curators account for Speck as they do other modern Indigenous artists by placing Native “masterworks” alongside “other ‘great’ historical works” (n.pg.). In both cases, the inability to engage Indigenous art on its own merit, as speculative, experimental, and critical, derives from a demand (and desire) to reproduce an anthropological subject within the colonial record.

Critics fetishize biopolitical inscription when “the experience of race” becomes the defining feature of the literature. It is the violent marking of the racialized body that is held up as meaningful. Contra to this formulation, it makes sense to explicitly foreground the problem of biopolitics in constellating another field of literary investment. Michel Foucault uses biopolitics to describe “the reappearance within a single race, of the past of that race” or “the obverse and the underside of the race” that “reappears” within itself (61). To Foucault, this term captures the hallucinatory quality of race. Race, understood as an “internal” difference within a “homogenous” community, engenders genocidal drives as it becomes a sign of the fragmentation of the social body. Indigenous modernism, in light of this, can be defined as a body of literature investigating the production of the Indigenous subject after colonization, a “racial production” that happens coevally with the production of other raced bodies transnationally. Akin to Dina Al-Kassim’s delineation of modernism in *On Pain of Speech*, this essay understands Indigenous modernism to be a body of speculative literature that is responding to, and being produced by, biopolitical pressure; it is a field concerned with thinking through a new dispensation of power wherein race designates a “biopolitical limit” that subjects people differentially according to a racial terminology (Al-Kassim 19).

Rather than fetishize the spectacle of racial inscription, when scholars foreground the literature as the “vexed product of social interactions” (Barrett 48) they can recuperate (without redeeming) both the literature’s contestation of racial terms as well as its thinking about the instability of race as a historical category. It may help to underscore, also, that colonizing processes of subjectivization are in tension, and co-emergent, with tribal subjectivities, which means that this literature is riven with the violence of these encounters, as divergent processes of interpellation and individuation overlap. That is to say, if colonial law produces subjects then Indigenous law also produces “subjects.”⁴ In this way, Indigenous modernism is a contradiction in terms because it professes to account for

4 For more on the subject, see Sarah’s Hunt’s doctoral dissertation *Witnessing the Colonialscape: Lighting the Intimate Fires of Indigenous Legal Pluralism*.

its constitutive exclusion (the primitive figure who is outside modern discourse) through the very terms and language producing its erasure.

Oswalde de Andrade is a good example of what I am describing. In his “Cannibalist Manifesto” (1928),⁵ de Andrade posits new “origins” for modernity. The manifesto begins with an announcement: “Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically” (38). For de Andrade, cannibalism names an aesthetic project predicated on the consumption, digestion, and triumphant excretion (reinvention) of European epistemologies and art practices. Appropriating aesthetic traditions and eating the enemy become synonymous anticolonial actions bringing a community of “primitives” together. Proclaiming that “without us, Europe wouldn’t even have its meager declaration of the rights of man” (39), de Andrade plays with idea that “the Enlightenment discourse of natural rights” had its “origins in [Michel de] Montaigne’s ‘noble savage,’ based on the first reports from Brazil of ‘cannibalism’ among members of the Tupinamba tribal aggregate” (Neil Larsen qtd. in Bary 45). Cannibals created modernity by providing the model for man, which gave rise to the revolution and created the modern political state. Incidentally, this is also the colonial state.

The “rebirth” of man, however, is only a plot engineered by these cannibals. The “Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes. Routes” (40) that Europe makes to colonize the Americas *root* modernity there. For de Andrade, these pathways exist only to take “modern man” back to the place where he will be eaten. In one of the more famous lines from the manifesto, de Andrade asks rhetorically: “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question” (38).⁶ In place of Hamlet appears a primitive figure related to, but not, Caliban himself, who ventriloquizes the colonizer only in order to kill him. The primitive’s self-identification, through a Shakespearean posturing, marks the death of the modern subject who is suddenly swallowed up by this “cannibal” Other in speech. The manifesto veers back and forth between Indigenous “cannibals” and Europe’s “fugitives” to mime the writing of modernity as a boundary posited between modern man and his Other. The “fugitive beauté” from Baudelaire’s crying, Parisian street traverses the Atlantic to become a criminal slaver, or a Jesuit priest, who is, in turn, eaten by Brazilian natives. De Andrade asserts that modernism is a global phenomenon, one whose aesthetic project concerns, either explicitly or implicitly, the paired figures of the modern and the primitive, and a tradition of appropriation wherein “foreign” aesthetics are reconstituted in the service of

⁵ Also translated as the “Anthropophagous Manifesto.”

⁶ Leslie Bary indicates that this was written in English in the original and that “*Tupi* is the popular, generic name for the Native Americans of Brazil and also for their language, *nheengatu*” (44).

anticolonial (and colonial) work. In Canada, there are many examples of writers working in a similar “tradition”. Marie Annharte Baker’s “Succinct Savage Syntax” from *Indigena Awry* might be one example. Jordan Abel’s reworking of the anthropological writing of Marius Barbeau in *Place of Scraps* might be another.

Shifting focus to the terms of biopolitical subjection allows us to ask how writers respond to their subjectivation, a problematic that is shared by the multitude but through which various manifestations carry different degrees of political urgency. It also allows us, very simply, to expand the focus of our scholastic net without reifying the claims to universality implicit in modernist discourse, and it permits us to begin our studies by focusing on non-white writers. Up until very recently, the term Indigenous modernism had been completely absent from the critical lexicon. Recently, it has been circulated within art history and, even then, only in a very limited scope and never accompanied by the definition I have delineated above.⁷ In a recent special issue of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: “Modernism and Native America”* dedicated to the subject, James Cox explicitly states that he is not interested in creating a new term, presumably to side-step some of the problems I have outlined. He writes, “Yet we chose not to call this special issue ‘Native American Modernism’ or ‘Indigenous Modernism.’ Instead, ‘Modernism and Native America’ leaves these terms in productive tension and resists the implication that designating Native American literary productions as modernist amplifies their literary value” (270). The conjunction of terms performs enough labour for Cox to designate an absence but very little else. Similarly, Canadian anthologies curated by Indigenous scholars on Indigenous literature have, so far, not been interested in claiming modernism or any other colonial categories as its terms, instead intent on building up the field by using the broad frames of Indigeneity and place as

⁷ See Ruth B. Philips’ “Aesthetic Primitivism Revisited: The Global Diaspora of ‘Primitive Art’ and the Rise of Indigenous Modernism.” This paper appears to have come out of a conference on Indigenous modernism but the collective which support the conference appears defunct and it has been difficult finding sources related to its project. Attention to the issue of categorization and Indigenous art within art history has been drawn in Ian McLean’s *Double Desire*. Recently, there was a panel on Indigenous Modernism held at the Modernist Studies Association, which was organized by Stephen Ross and Michael Tavel Clarke with papers by Robert Dale Parker, Alan Sayers, Deena Rymhs, and Jonathan Radocay. Dale Parker is editor of a new and significant American anthology of early Indigenous writing titled *Changing Is Not Vanishing: A Collection of Early American Indian Poetry, 1678-1930*. Comparatively, Indigenous studies in Canada is growing exponentially. For recent anthologies on historical Indigenous writings see Warren Cariou’s *First Voices, First Texts* series out of Wilfred Laurier Press; *kisiskâciwan: Indigenous Voices From Where the River Flows Swiftly* edited by Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber; *Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water* edited by Niihaanwewidam James Sinclair and Warren Cariou; and *Tekahionwake: E. Pauline Johnson’s Writing on Native North America* edited by Margery Fee and Dory Nason.

organizing categories. While the importance of these anthologies for centering Indigenous perspectives, epistemologies, and territories cannot be overstated, the disavowal of the academy's disciplinary knowledge involuntarily keeps its terms operative. Not engaging the fraught categories of the discipline does not disabuse us of the problems that Indigenous scholars inherit when we practice inside the academy. Indeed, our reading practices may unintentionally be distorted by these frameworks.

Modernism affects multiple fields and its problems are not limited to literary studies. If one function of the term “modernism” is to separate out racialized literature from other literary works —i.e. to purify a canon and make it white by establishing provincial offshoots— then the critical tools that allow us to establish a counter-field such as Indigenous literature remain circumscribed by this colonial legacy. Keeping things separate is a feature of the racial ideology that founds modernism. The perversity of Indigenous modernism allows us to disrupt habituated accounts of Indigenous writing within the critical literature, a disruption that effects adjacent fields and asks us to reconsider how we read these texts. Why is such a disruption necessary? I offer two examples. The first example concerns the reception history of Jean Toomer's 1923 novel *Cane*, and the second concerns D'Arcy McNickle's 1936 novel *The Surrounded*.

Cane, a text composed as a series of vignettes dealing with race relations in the United States, “has long been considered the harbinger of New Negro literature” (159), as Emily Lutenski notes in “‘A Small Man in Big Spaces’: The New Negro, the Mestizo, and Jean Toomer's Southwest”. *Cane* founds the Black Nationalist tradition and is usually described as the urtext of the Afro-modernist canon that begins as the Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro canon.⁸ It has been cast, by writers and critics alike, “as the moment in African American literary history when an experimental, modernist, New Negro

8 See Arthur Paul Davis and Michael W. Peplow's introduction to *The New Negro Anthology* (1975) in which they emphasize the limitations of the term “Harlem Renaissance” as a classificatory apparatus: “[...] it has become more fashionable to talk about the ‘Harlem Renaissance’...without wishing to deny the importance of Harlem, we have not used the term...for our title because it implies certain limitations (literature written only in or about Harlem; literature only by Harlemites)... [this broader term] allows us to include representative selections from the South, for example, or from black metropolises other than Harlem” (xx). Early on, Davis and Peplow sought to reconstitute the field using the term “New Negro,” a term that had been part of the political and literary conversations post-WWI amongst the Black intelligentsia. This term never gained much traction in literary studies. The Harlem Renaissance seems to remain the preferred term. Likewise, Indigenous critics have also levelled resistance to the term “Native Renaissance.” See Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essay* and Craig Womack's introduction to *Reasoning Together*.

aesthetic was born” (Lutenski 159). However, Toomer himself was ambivalent about his involvement in the “New Negro” movement. By all accounts, Toomer clashed with critics regarding his intentions in writing the book and the significance of his race in regards to its contents. Following its publication, Toomer split with his best friend, Waldo Frank, for “outing” Toomer as a “negro” in his introduction to the book, and he fought with his publisher's decision to advertise the book as authored by a Black man.⁹ Later, Toomer would react badly to the inclusion of selections of *Cane* in Alain Locke's seminal anthology of Black writing, *The New Negro*, despite Locke's longstanding support of Toomer throughout the writing process.

The narrative of Toomer's resistance to being characterized as a “negro” writer has continued to inform the book's reception. In her article, Lutenski very cannily unpacks how the tradition of Black Nationalisms in Black studies has foreclosed Toomer's post-*Cane* writing. For instance, Lutenski recognizes that Toomer's racialization within the criticism, concurrent with the formation of a particular canon of Black Nationalist writing, has meant that his writing post-*Cane* has been demoted to “lesser” writing or has not been considered writing at all. Critics “lament that *Cane* was both Toomer's first and last published piece of avant-garde creative writing —and, many have argued, his first and last piece of New Negro writing” (Lutenski 159). Thus, Toomer's founding of what is understood as a Black Nationalist body of writing and —at the same time— his refusal to be determined as a particular race has been understood as abandoning “younger Black writers” and is “depicted as increasingly reactionary” not only repudiating “New Negro writing” but also “rejecting an empowered, transnational Black identity politics on the rise during his historical moment” (Lutenski 159). Therefore, as the scholarly accounts of Toomer move from a picture of a “politically engaged, racially conscious, and aesthetically experimental” poet and writer to a deluded amateur “psychologist or a philosopher . . . under the spell of his spiritual mentor, George Gurdjieff” (Lutenski 159), Toomer's post-*Cane* writing is erased. Specifically, Lutenski notes, the history of Toomer's non-Black aesthetic projects —his writing on New Mexico, the influence of the *mestizaje* literature (racial mixing) on his post-*Cane* work, and, I add, the undercurrents of a modernist Latin American tradition, *indigenismo*— fall away.¹⁰

9 There was also friction here due to Toomer's subsequent affair with Frank's wife —however, more critical emphasis has been placed on Frank's introduction as a source of tension.

10 *Indigenismo* is modernist aesthetic and political discourse explicitly centered around the Indigenous figure in Latin America. This literature was primarily written by *mestizaje* scholars, artists, and writers and broke from a tradition of 19th century writing on a romanticized version of the *indio* in taking up forms of Indigeneity as a critique of the state in Mexico and many other Latin

I bring in Jean Toomer as an example not to colonize his work under a new field by subsuming his writing under an “Indigenous” category, but to note that the construction of Black literary studies, to some degree, required the disavowal of this writing that is both ambivalent towards Toomer’s blackness and also in dialogue with other racial identities. A term like Indigenous modernism enables me to point to the ways in which this disavowal functions to produce a field, its self-image and identifying characteristics, while also questioning the “enclosure” of that same field. Lutenski’s paper shows how the pressure on racialized subjects to conform to a specific racial category is operative but obscured through habituated modes of critical reading that efface aesthetic projects of inter-racial affinity by limiting their frameworks to a racial and nationalist mode of reading. Missing in her article is a discussion of where this foreclosure might stem from; it is not just a problem that has emerged from within Black studies but is, in fact, shared amongst many fields bridged by the term “modernism.”

D’Arcy McNickle’s (Salish Kootenai) *The Surrounded* provides another instance of this kind of erasure in the scholarship. In her article, “‘You can’t run away nowadays’: Redefining Modernity in D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded*,” Alicia Kent positions herself as critical of the Euro-American canon and characterizes McNickle’s work as firmly within the modernist aesthetic. Despite positioning herself in this fashion, Kent rigorously maintains the field’s boundaries against the intrusion of Indigeneity. Kent defines “modernism” as a “specific early-twentieth century literary and artistic movement that focused on formalist experimentalism in response to modernity” (40). Notwithstanding all the details Kent provides that might confirm McNickle’s credentials as a modernist—his journey to Europe to participate in a modernist scene, his subsequent residence in New York, his explicit allusions to other modernists writers and their work, and his use of similar narrative styles and techniques—he remains mysteriously outside a circle (Stein, H.D, Eliot, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Pound) whose grouping Kent maintains without much justification.¹¹ Critical

American countries. This discourse often put tribal peoples under erasure; however, it also heavily influenced governmental policy, paving the way for Indigenous peoples to enter into state-solicited political dialogues. Diego Rivera is a notable figure in *indigenismo*. See these relevant critics and their works: Jorge Coronados, James Cox, Alexander Dawson, David Luis-Brown, Emily Lutenski, and Analisa Taylor.

¹¹ Kent’s essay is not very clear about the details regarding McNickle’s non-contact with the “modernists” in Paris (and New York) and his writing interlocutors in general though it provides useful insights on the sociohistorical conditions of McNickle’s writing. As well, I should add that an implied distinction between “modernisms” appears when Kent notes that the Euro-American modernists had “chosen exile” while Indigenous dispossession was not a choice (27). However, Kent does not nuance this distinction and her reticence to start a conversation about literary classification

accounts such as these do not do enough to disturb accounts of either Indigenous or “Western” narratives. Instead, these readings position Indigenous literature as a lower form of writing by way of an implicitly racial comparative project.

Habituated accounts of Black and Native literature and its authors enforce and sediment racialized boundaries between “high” and “low” literatures while decontextualizing their histories of production. Despite Kent’s best intentions, her article symptomatizes how disavowal maintains the operation of the category; modernism appears to be inviolable to critique and impervious to racial contamination even when we bring race to bear on the field. Lutenski, comparatively, shows us how the construction of modernism as a racially pure field reverberates in Critical Race studies as the symptomatic intolerance towards particular contestations of race such as discourses of “inauthenticity” or “mixing.” Thus, the demand for representative literature is fraught in both fields because of how modernism as a discourse of mastery, race, and sovereignty has constrained our practices of reading. This leads critics to minimize cross-cultural exchange between writers of colour and other modernist movements, to read these exchanges as one-sided relationships or frame them as exotic imports, and to ignore select texts within writers’ collected works.

Examining trajectories of failed or frustrated reading allows us to trace moments that belie this politics by emphasizing a productive disjunction between the text and reader. Modernism has, notoriously, been trailed by vexed and unsatisfied readers. Readers have accused modernist texts of being too difficult (James Joyce), of being written in poor taste (Jean Genet), of containing obscenity (Chester Himes), of racial essentialism or race betrayal (Paula Gunn Allen; Jean Toomer), of plagiarism (N. Scott Momaday)¹². . . the list of accusations is endless.¹³ We might add to this list Indigenous writers who were prevented from publishing by publishers who stymied their publication prospects or systemic barriers, such as intense poverty, that made a writing practice impossible (Charles A. Cooke (Thawennensere); Edward Ahenakew), or editors who compromised the integrity of an Indigenous author’s work

seems to be an excuse to retain old and racialized categories of differentiation.

¹² Arnold Krupat levels plagiarism and sexism as charges against Momaday’s work in *The Voices Against the Margin*.

¹³ These reading trajectories must be understood in relation to colonial optics; see Fanon on the hermeneutics of Blackness in the chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” from *Black Skin, White Masks* and Derrida’s discussion of the “autopsic” gaze of the sovereign from the twelfth lecture from the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*. For an exhaustive account of the history of reviews describing “difficulty” within modernism, see Leonard Diepeveen’s *The Difficulties of Modernism*. Detailed surveys of censorship have been compiled by Nicholas Harrison, William Olmsted, Adam Parkes, Rachel Potter, Elizabeth English, and Celia Marshik; detailed bibliographic information on these materials can be found in my bibliography.

(Mourning Dove). *Ulysses* is a key example whose initial publication brought both “charge[s] of incomprehensibility” (qtd. Joyce xii) and legal charges and attempts at suppression. The fact that codes for reading had to be developed to encounter works such as these —sometimes by the authors themselves (in the case of Joyce) or by other readers (Woolf’s defense of Hall; Cocteau’s defense of Genet)¹⁴— suggests literature’s capacity for incremental, if not radical, disturbance of “politics” and its partition of the sensible. Literature’s capacity to decenter these logics means that the critical histories of these literatures need to be interrogated as modes of recentralization or of the reconsolidation of systems of signification.

In conclusion, Indigenous modernism insists that the category of Indigeneity is an *ongoing* and *historical* construction of tribal reality that has occurred in relation to coloniality expressed as modernist speech: the primitive/modern differentiation remains embedded in terms like Indigenous, Native American, Black, et cetera, and must be put under pressure in future analyses. Questioning the absence of a term understood by many to be a contradiction in terms, a “primitive” modernism, allows me to demonstrate a set of ongoing problems with how Indigenous literature is taken up in multiple fields —namely the perpetuation of a set of interpretative practices that have been inherited from imperialist and colonial legacies that are exemplified by taxonomy and categorization. In Indigenous contexts, there are serious historical, political, and social differences among Native communities across the Americas. Indigeneity as a racial construct has not been evenly produced in all of these sites and, so, there remain psychic, cultural, juridical and spiritual differences that should not be conflated in our work. For instance, the juridical definition of Indian Status in Canada has no correlate in the United States, which identifies “Indianness” on the basis of blood quantum and band rolls. To use terms like “Indigenous” helps underline these differences as constitutive to the literature in a global register. That being said, one must use “Indigenous” with care and specificity. Afro-pessimists maintain that this term, while seeking to link global, racialized peoples with histories of dispossession, has neglected the specificity of the transatlantic slave trade and erased the figure of the slave as a distinct category of subject linked to capitalism.¹⁵

While a conversation around the multiplicities of Indigenous subjectivity and the problem of differential subjection for Indigenous solidarity across the Americas is still to

14 Excerpts of Woolf’s defense of Hall can be found in Joanne Winning’s “Writing by the Light of *The Well*: Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Modernists” and an account of Hall’s trial can be found in Leigh Gilmore’s “Obscenity, Modernity, Identity: Legalizing ‘The Well of Loneliness; and ‘Nigh-twood’”. For an account of Cocteau’s defense of Genet see Edmund White’s *Genet: A Biography*.

15 See Jared Sexton’s remarks on Indigenous studies in the collection *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*.

come, experimental taxonomies are instrumental for exploring the problems that a scholar faces in decolonizing literary studies. As per Bonita Lawrence’s argument in *‘Real’ Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, I underline that we cannot simply affirm the tribal without an account of the category of Indigeneity as a colonial inheritance and, as per Gayatri Spivak, we must rigorously attend to the crucial difference between representation as persuasion (what becomes the political function of “standing in for someone”) and representation as trope (a scene of writing) in order to consider the double resistance of literature to colonial normativity.

I imagine that others who might posit a term like “Indigenous modernism” might want to determine exactly *what* and *which* literature would constitute this body. I have already provided some examples. However, this patchwork term does not offer us a new canon of literature. It only offers us a temporary break from colonial logics by letting us gesture to a genealogy of writing that interrogates the disciplining of racialized bodies. I suspect that banding behind “Indigenous modernism” as a new foundation would only reinscribe the racialized parameters of literary studies around a new margin/center, rather than dismantle them, and so I present this taxonomic experiment to you as a pedagogical failure, reminding us of the necessity for continuously critiquing our methodological parameters. Temporarily, however, the term helps me trace historical, aesthetic, and political affinities beyond the immediate sphere of what is understood to be North American Indigenous literature. As a conceptual tool, it challenges disciplinary formations within Indigenous studies and English Literature —disciplines whose dominant reading practices, specific to their field formations, foreclose an array of racial subjectivities, already emergent within modernism. This foreclosure restricts the current possibilities available for Indigenous political emancipation within the collective imaginary, limiting advocacy to either representative justice or distributive justice.

The problem I am identifying is an issue that is shared by multiple fields and is more easily registered when one is not rigidly demarcating thought on the basis of national distinctions. The legacy of British Loyalty and Imperialism on the Canadian education system has produced the silo-ing of Canadian literature. Asking questions about practices shared between institutions across disciplinary borders allows us to think about the political stakes of nationalist dogma within a biopolitical dispensation of power. To reify the Canadian imaginary is to relegate Indigenous imaginaries to a foreclosed past. Thinking of Turtle Island as a constellation of histories, cultural, races, sexualities, and peoples whose interrelation transcends the specific formulation of “nation” and, yet, cannot do seem to do without this category, this paper worries the spot between a critical nationalist approach to Indigenous literature and a transnational one.

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