

**“I must be different when I am out there”  
(B)order in First Nations Canadian Lee Maracle’s Novel *Ravensong***

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### *(B)order in First Nations Canadian Lee Maracle’s Novel Ravensong*

*There is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers.*  
(Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* 123)

Colonial contacts bring together people and cultures of utter difference. Contacts, Michel de Certeau reminds us, paradoxically create frontiers (127), and difference builds barriers both as a means of protecting one’s self and subjectivity from the unfamiliar Otherness and as a means of securing order and avoiding undesired influence. Inscribing borderlines, demarcating and segmenting space are part of what David Sibley calls “spatial purification,” the process he sees inherent in the creation of social space (26, 77). In the colonial situation, this process further entails “territorializing of ethnicity,” as New would have it (13). Delimiting space for themselves and for ethnic Others allows colonizers to establish ethnic hierarchies and stage contacts with colonized people on their own terms.

In this paper I discuss Salish/Métis Lee Maracle’s novel *Ravensong* (1993) which depicts two “racial solitudes” (Hoy 137), a white town and indigenous reserve, separated by a river. I am interested to see how relationships developing along the borderline transform it into a specific type of lived space: a limit, an obstacle, a protective shelter or a choice. The border here is, as New puts it, “less a place, a ribbon, a line, than a process [...]. It is also a set of questions” (28).

### **Encounters**

At the beginning of *Ravensong*, a small Native girl Celia has a vision of the past in which she sees an encounter between her people and white newcomers:

Approaching the village from the sea was a tall ship, sails billowing in the wind. All activity in the village halted. The ship sent a small skiff out to greet the growing number of people gathering at the shoreline. There were no women in the boat. No women on the ship. The men scurried about, dragged out their largest feast bowls – huge carved containers, shaped much like their canoes. Young women were sent aboard the ship – fifty in all.

The child’s body seized up, twisted itself into fetal position. The women were returned to the village. They became the first untouchable victims of disease. A new moral sensibility was required and the old culture died just a little after that. What had been the customary gratification of human need had brought death among the villagers. Never again would wolf women serve men in quite the same way. (10)

The *mis-en-scène* staged in this passage foregrounds the difference in each ethnic group's response to the contact with the unfamiliar and demonstrates how the first encounter immediately constructs a racial border between the two cultures. The scene highlights the indigenous villagers' openness to contact, which contrasts with the white sailors' choice to remain protected behind the (cultural) screen of their ship. The arrival of the ship is thus a highly performative moment in the text. Together, the two ethnic groups become engaged in representing and negotiating their differences, and this engagement rearranges the existent spatial order of the village to transform it into a different kind of space, a border.

The border is initially introduced by the white men who stay on the boat and thereby demonstrate their intent to initiate the interaction with the village's people on their own terms. When they receive the fifty indigenous women on board and inferiorize them, the white men assert their racial and gender dominance. The women are trapped within an alien spatiality and disempowered, for, as W. H. New notes, "to be exiled is to find oneself not only away from home but also outside of power" (*Borderlands* 14). An ellipsis in the text conceals the details of the women's contact with the white newcomers; through this omission the passage suggests rape and, by implication, a violation of Native cultural borders, constructed as permeable and open to contact.<sup>1</sup> A violent initial contact precludes further interaction and reinstates the racial border. For the women who crossed this border by stepping on board, this action has transformative power. "Untouchable victims of disease," they return to the village literally contaminated by the contact and inevitably impact their community, which now has to find ways to accommodate this unexpected and disruptive change.

The encounter between the white sailors and indigenous villagers that Celia sees in her vision presents two participants in creating a new space, rifted by a rigid racial border. Despite the white newcomers' powerful and destructive dominance, which works to delimit a space for them in the indigenous territory, Maracle's novel asserts a strong presence of the indigenous side of the border in the creation and living of the new space. This early scene is central to *Ravensong*, as it introduces the major motifs which govern the narrative. It predicts the destructiveness of the contact between indigenous people and white settlers, epitomized in the novel through the theme of a disease, which devastates the Native village. It highlights the disastrous effect that the contact with white patriarchal culture has on indigenous women. Finally, it sketches the spatial order, which controls the action of the novel. *Ravensong* is set in 1954, a century after the events described in Celia's vision, and centers on a flu epidemic as it devastates a small Native reserve on Canada's Northwest Coast. The protagonist Stacey, a seventeen-year-old

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<sup>1</sup> Rape of a Native woman is a recurrent motif in First Nations literature, where it metaphorically stands for the colonisation and violation of Native land. See e.g. Tomson Highway's play *The Rez Sisters*, his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Beatrice Culleton's novel *In Search of April Raintree*.

indigenous girl, is about to graduate from school in Maillardville, a white town situated across the river from her home reserve. As she helps her community fight the epidemic, Stacey insistently compares the two spaces and the laws governing them. Like the fifty young women sent to the white boat in Celia's vision, Stacey serves as an agent of contact with the white culture. Similarly to them, she asserts her difference in the white town and brings the white world to the reserve. Unlike them, she is aware of the hazards of interaction with white culture – especially its men – and carefully protects the border that separates her from white people.

A century after the initial encounter of the white and Native people on the Northwest Coast, an indigenous elder Dominic asks Stacey, who has expressed her doubts about going to university in Vancouver: “How else are we to learn how we are to live with them?” (154). Two decades prior to implementing Canada's politics of multiculturalism (1971) and a decade to the country's indigenous people's gaining citizenship (1960), the white-indigenous border of the 1950s in Canada is a border of strict binaries, hierarchies and what Homi Bhabha calls “fixed” differences (2). Lee Maracle's choice to “displace” the narrative into the early 1950s thus serves to highlight racial tensions inherent in the situation where the border “territorializes ethnicity” (New 23), and precludes active borderline engagements. Instead, the border which separates Stacey's reserve from the white town of Maillardville is now indeed constructed of an endless set of questions, as New puts it (28). The questions concern seemingly insurmountable differences between the two ethnic communities, and bewilderment is the dominant reaction in both sides' attempts to tackle them. Stacey, who daily leaves her home reserve to attend school in the white town, and whose visible Otherness there further reinforces the barrier between white and indigenous people, struggles to find out how this border came into being and what continues to necessitate it. Stacey's repeated border crossing is thus a quest for answers, which, if found, could possibly undo the rigid line separating the two communities.

## **Preserving the Border**

When Michel de Certeau theorizes place as a rigid positioning of elements in which neither overlapping nor movement is possible, which is neither alive nor vibrant (117), his description is very close to the spatial arrangement of the reserve and the town in the narrative as two adjacent segments, neatly demarcated by the river. Reminiscent of the lines of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's tracing map which fixes and controls elements in space (12-13), this demarcation, predicted in the early scene of the encounter between indigenous people and white settlers, constitutes an “order [...] in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence,” which “excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location” and “implies an indication of stability” (de Certeau 117). Stacey's ethnicity as an indigenous person in the Canada of

the early 1950s (b)orders and confines her to the reserve, marked by poverty, seclusion and marginalization.

These communities are caught up in the power politics of the colonizer-colonized binary, which positions them in stark contrast to one another and precludes interaction. “I must be different when I am out there,” realizes Stacey (134). She has unawares internalized the precept to alter and comply with the order of the white town’s space and its socializing role as long as she wants to be allowed entrance to the other side of the bridge. Stacey’s deduction thus foregrounds the transformative power of space, but also establishes her as an outsider and an observer as opposed to an active participant in the white town. Admitted to a white school as a student, Stacey, the only Native person there, soon experiences how her white schoolmates immediately space her out through “the insults, the loneliness, the silence of others who preferred the pretence of her non-existence” and “the derisive laughter” (26, 28). Nor does she herself seek to be involved in youthful deeds and conspiracies of her classmates: “[n]othing to do with me,” she shrugs away an empathic desire to stand for one of them, Polly, who is being laughed at and condemned by other girls for a sexual indiscretion she has committed with her boyfriend (29). The dictum of rejecting the Other – “she’s white so she don’t count” (135) – followed by both sides of the border governs the rigid spatial order, constructed in the novel through Stacey as a major focalizer.

Thus, seen by her community as an agent of contact and change, Stacey nevertheless avoids contacts and active involvement, limiting her experience of the white town to school and books. Stacey’s behavior, typical also of the majority of people from the reserve, shows that the racial border is lived as a restrictive limit. It is a representational space of division and difference. Lived this way, unlike borders theorized by Homi Bhabha as spaces of interactions and transformations (2-3), this border reinforces the fixity of representations of difference which lies on the other side, engenders stereotypes, and precludes change. *Ravensong* demonstrates that lived as a dividing line the border entails predisposition, judgment and categorization. It does not tolerate contact and interaction because they are seen as threatening to both cultural and personal identity.

Just as the border is not a space of interaction in *Ravensong*, its opposite side, whiteness, is never an admired and desired quality either – the motif that marks numerous texts by indigenous writers, from Beatrice Culleton-Mossionier’s novel *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) to Floyd Favel’s more contemporary play *Lady of Silences* (1998), which demonstrate how whiteness has been internalized as a normative value, which guarantees both personal and social success. In *Ravensong* however, through Stacey’s focalization, whiteness is predominantly described as situated “out there” (134) and is Othered as incompatible and threatening. In a study of what she calls “outsider discourses,” a cognitive linguist Melinda Yuen-ching Chen argues that a “moment of speech in which an ‘other’ group is defined by myself, or ‘us,’ by its inclusion, exclusion, and division,

constitutes an act of identity” (91). By insisting, in her discourse and behavior, on the gulf between her own Native community and the white townspeople, Stacey thus seeks to retain her identity, as she knows it, intact. Or, according to Stuart Hall’s definition of identity as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (6), Stacey tries to hold onto the familiar points of attachment to assert her subjectivity to resist the influence her excursions into the white space might have on her. Which they do, as is obvious from the verdict Stacey’s mother makes after Stacey performs an indiscretion by spending a day in the mountains unchaperoned with lesbians Rena and white German Judy: “The law is simple, Stacey, and this family lives within it. If your schooling persuades you otherwise, don’t come back.”(124) Ostracism and expelling her into the white space would specifically imply the loss of points of attachment and thus of the basis of who she is. For this reason, in her own terms Stacey makes “no family and no place [...] synonymous” (184).

Melinda Yuen-ching Chen links the concept of identity to perspective from which we define others and, consequently, ourselves (91) and thus to a position in space (93). She then comments on how frequently identity groups in society are described in terms of a “region in space,” which, if it has borders, is perceived and construed as a “container” (97). While Chen’s observation recalls W. H. New’s discussion of “territorializing of ethnicity” (*Borderlands* 13), where territorializing is not a physical, but a metaphorical process, Chen proposes to consider the surface of such spatial containers and, specifically, its inevitable opacity. In this case, she suggests, “the image available to an observer from the outside is only the surface itself, rather than the inside of the container” (97), and the greater the distance from the surface, the more of it is accessible to the viewer (99). The model described by Chen helps capture the ambiguity of Stacey’s spatial position and perspective. While she, the community’s agent of contact, crosses the border into the white town on a regular basis and even feels at times that she brings the white world into her reserve (106), Stacey never fully accesses the white container space, being limited to observing its surface: “Stacey alone moved about in the others’ world. She moved about in it somewhat catatonically, as though she could not see through its façade of polite hierarchy. She seemed unable to get under it to expose it enough to find the key to its transformation.” (44) Even if she is physically and legitimately present in the white town, she refuses to leave the borders of the metaphorical container – the Native community – and from this perspective is limited to seeing only the surface of the white space, the “façade” of its spatial order. Nor is she welcomed to cross it, of which fact she is reminded by the letter of acceptance to the University of British Columbia, concluding with “We aren’t sure how your status as an Indian affects your enrolment in this particular faculty” (91). Stacey reads this sentence as a “snag” (92) as she intuits how it is still another instance of confining her to the “territory” of her ethnicity, to “where she belongs.”

Chen contends that even when distanced from the “exclusionary container,” a viewer can still benefit from an “overview, a vista, a command of description that gives her perceptual access to a greater portion of the container’s surface. This constitutes novel or privileged knowledge.” (99) Stacey’s “almost anthropological gaze” directed at the white town (Leggatt 171) similarly grants her specific knowledge, even if it reveals more about Stacey herself and her community than it does about white people’s space. At the same time, the opacity of the surface of the alien container-space does not encourage attentive observation or analysis. “Why compare us to them?” reacts Rena to Stacey’s explanation, expressing her refusal to grant white society normative value (115). Thus Stacey’s continuous border crossing back and forth does not animate the space constructed in the novel, but traps her along the axis drawn between the reserve and the white town, and in the endless “grocery list of the differences between white town houses, buildings, and our own,” as Stacey puts it (115). Therefore, the bridge connecting the two communities does not have the aura of temptation that characterizes “half-open” spaces (Bachelard 24). In *Ravensong*, the bridge is a reminder of the proximity to the racial Other, and is charged with tension.

### **Destabilizing the Border**

In an article on the major motif of the novel, the Hong Kong flu epidemic that devastates the indigenous reserve, Judith Leggatt discusses pollution taboos obeyed by each community in order to protect themselves from contamination, understood in both physical terms and as a negative cultural influence (163-78). Leggatt shows how the pollution taboos serve to reinstate the (b)order governing the two communities as they prevent cross-cultural contacts, and how the epidemic, caused by Native trickster Raven, is Raven’s attempt to animate the stasis of the existent (b)order by making a “creative mess, which can force a society to re-evaluate its norms” by fostering communication (166-67).

In the narrative, the epidemic Raven brings to the Northwest Coast – another in a row of illnesses devastating Native reserves – parallels the colonial contact as described in young Celia’s vision in the opening pages of the novel. Both turn out to have been part of trickster Raven’s plan to cure white people by exposing them to the diversity of world cultures and teaching them to share. Both have slipped out of Raven’s control and become destructive to indigenous communities, obviously because of the white newcomers’ inability to interpret the lesson.

By constructing white colonization as a trickster project primarily directed at white people, the novel unhesitatingly deprives them of agency and subverts the colonial power-hierarchy. Even the absence of communication is insistently suggested to be the choice of the colonized indigenous inhabitants before it is a result of white discrimination. Nevertheless, the parallel between colonization and a physical illness

allows the narrative to construe the two ethnic groups as sick patients, who have to learn to accommodate the change in their situation and the customary reality (see also Leggatt 166-67). Thus, while the novel's emphasis on the ethnic segmentation foregrounds how (dis)eased the rigid (b)order governing the two communities is, Raven expects that the physical epidemic she inflicts will disturb its stagnate sterility, and bring about a necessary, if catastrophic, as Leggatt notes, change, able to introduce a different and potentially more "beneficial" social order (167).

Raven's plans to bring white and Native people into a beneficial contact fail on the larger scale. The thick silence transforms the bridge from a space lived as a contact zone into a protective demarcation line. However, the destructive change the epidemic introduces does trigger some transformations that destabilize the racial border. Stacey, usually spaced out in the white town and rendered invisible as she prefers to keep distance between herself and the "container" of white society in Melinda Yuen-ching Chen's terms (97), suddenly disturbs the sterility of the white space. When she bluntly disobeys the teacher's order to serve a detention for being late to school after a sleepless night tending the sick, Stacey manifestly asserts her difference and initiates a renegotiation of the existent power relations in the colonizer-colonized binary. She engages into an argument with the school principal during which she openly refuses to follow the rules – Henri Lefebvre's "socializing role" (191) – that govern the school space and white society in general (65-68).

This moment in the narrative marks Stacey's decisive rift with her usual compliance to the transformative power of the white space. Before that, however visibly different, she plays the role of what Daniel Francis calls "a white man's Indian," a tamed and acculturated Other (114, 117). One of the best students in her class, Stacey embodies the ideal of white assimilation politics. Her formal compliance with the order of the white space thus reinforces the racial (b)order and, simultaneously, reduces her to an exotic spectacle in the eyes of white people. "The Indian girl from across the river is here to see you" (66): the terms in which the school secretary Mrs. Cramer informs the principal about Stacey's visit depersonalize her by labeling her and by defining her as a region in space. Acts of (mis)naming are manifestations of power as they include or exclude, allow or deny access. The secretary's words thus explicitly reinstate the demarcation line between Stacey's Nativeness and her own whiteness (cf. Leggatt's discussion of pollution taboos and cross-cultural contamination) and deny her membership to the space to which Stacey has legal access. However acculturated and compliant with the white order, Stacey is thus reduced to potentially contaminating physicality: she is a body, an exotic shape and thus an empty signifier which white viewers can fill with a chosen meaning.

Kaja Silverman argues that the body "is always an image in the eyes of the Other" (11-12). Similarly to cognitivist Melinda Yuen-ching Chen, Silverman attributes this tendency to perspective, "the place of the Other," and foregrounds violence usually

implicit in the process (12). The body seen this way is thus devoid of its individual reality as it is insistently reduced to representation. As long as, while on the white side, Stacey behaves according to the expectations of the racial Other, it construes her specifically in terms of representation. As soon as she breaks the prescribed order – trickster-like, as the novel repeatedly suggests – the chaos and the (dis)ease she creates allows Stacey to become an assertive performative presence, in full control of her subjectivity. After “all hell br[eaks] loose” in the classroom following her retort to the teacher (66), Stacey is no longer an emblem easy to categorize, “transparent” and predictable; she is now a reality which has power to influence her interactions with the Other and its constructions of her: “The students looked at her differently now. Actually, it was more like they saw her for the first time. [...] Now her invisibility at school was greatly disturbed by her resistance” (69). Steve, the class intellectual who falls in love with her, also attempts to initiate a relationship with Stacey only after she has become “visible” by articulating her opinion and Otherness, even at the risk of being expelled from school and prevented from pursuing her dream to enter university and become a teacher. In doing this, she is no longer a “white man’s Indian,” but “the little town’s personal challenge” (69). In doing this, she – trickster-like – destabilizes the rigid racial (b)order by creating a new kind of space, an actual performative “contact zone” in Marie Louise Pratt’s terms, interactive and improvisational (6-7), not on the bridge, but right in the white city.

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