Arctic and Outback--Indigenous Literature at the 'Ends of the Earth.'

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Abstract
Canada and Australia share a colonial history which featured an attempt to eradicate Indigenous spirituality and language and which involved governmental intervention in areas such as health and education. The movement across traditional borders in order to access health and education created a kind of intra-national diasporic condition, which Indigenous peoples in these countries continue to negotiate on a daily basis.

The Inuit writer Alootook Ipellie and Murri writer Sam Watson seek to resist cultural constraints through creating works which are multiply transgressive. Their works cross genre boundaries and use the interstices between Indigenous diaspora, queer theory and maban reality in order to find a way of locating cultural subjectivity in relation to their narratives. They each offer alternatives to normative binaries in literature, especially with regard to cultural and sexual identity. The characters they create are shamanic, and thus able to negotiate the difficulties of being Indigenous diasporans in the contemporary world. Ipellie's narrator in his collection *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* is still most at "home" in the Arctic, where his powers are at their strongest; he is hyper-masculine, pragmatic, and engaged with mainstream cultural iconography. Watson's protagonist is bicultural, promiscuous, and angry at authority figures from both cultures.

In the end this paper seeks to analyse how these authors contest established categories about who belongs and where, and how they have determined the means to tell stories of the Arctic and Queensland which might otherwise have been lost through colonial processes.

Keywords
Canada, Australia, Indigenous literature, shaman, Alootook Ipellie, Sam Watson, Inuit, Murri, maban reality, Indigenous diaspora

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Canada and Australia share many similarities in their colonial histories. Each land mass became the focus of Victorian Britain’s interest in areas outside the Metropolis; these were fantastic spaces which were deemed to be at the ‘ends of the earth.’ Postcolonial analysis has often been used to examine literature from Canada and Australia, but as numerous Indigenous critics have pointed out, postcolonial studies has limited application with regard to Indigenous literature. Furthermore, life-writing has been the subject of much of the critical attention shown to Indigenous texts, leaving some fantastic or supernaturally-themed works virtually devoid of scholarly analysis. By viewing Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia as diasporic, that is, by acknowledging that the policies of forced removal and relocation separated Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and traditions, it is possible to gain insight into how the Canadian Arctic and Australian Outback came to be used as sites of resistance in Indigenous literature. In particular, this survey of British attitudes will be used to provide a background for discussion of how two Indigenous authors, Alootook Ipellie and Sam Watson, have utilised shamanic figures who are both shamanic and queer to address issues of Indigenous Diaspora.

The quest to discover a Northwest Passage across the Arctic took on mythic qualities, and the Australian colonies were figured as the “Antipodes” of legend. These were locations at the “extremity of the British reader’s mind’s eye” (Henderson 297–298), a dangerous realm which they were happy to believe were populated by monsters,
demons, or sorcerers (Henderson 298). More recently, Margaret Atwood has described the colonial mentality in terms of its ability to cause “psychic disturbances” (Atwood, qtd in Brydon and Tiffin 90). Given that Aloomek Ipelle’s Arctic Dreams and Nightmares and Sam Watson’s The Kadaisha Sang are set in Nunavut and rural Queensland, respectively, her comment about the impact of certain spaces on the colonial psyche is particularly pertinent:

the North is to Canada as the Outback is to Australia, and as the sea was to Melville, and as ... Africa is, shall we say, to Heart of Darkness. It’s the place where you go to find something out. It’s the place of the unconscious. It’s the place of the journey or the quest (Atwood, qtd in Brydon and Tiffin 90).

The use of maban reality in modern Indigenous Diasporic literature as a radical means of addressing binaries, it would seem, is an ironic reworking of a commonly-held and rarely-challenged colonial belief: that the colonies at the ends of the earth were populated by uncivilised, pagan and primitive beings that had access to supernatural powers.

The colonies were representative of promise for many in Victorian Britain. Members of the British Royal Navy began to arrive in the Arctic in the early 1800s and continued to have a presence throughout the nineteenth century. Between 1818 and 1828, the Admiralty undertook twelve Arctic expeditions, with varying degrees of success. Two aimed to reach the North Pole, another four sought to discover the North West Passage, and four others were sent to survey the northern mainland coast of North America. Of these expeditions, all but two were abject failures. Despite this, the publication of explorers’ diaries was greeted with “romantic enthusiasm” by the British public (Parry in Robinson 50). Indeed, Admiral William Parry led four failed expeditions, yet was treated as a conquering hero in Europe, and was knighted in 1827 (Parry in Robinson 50). He and George Lyon were the first white people to overwinter in the Igloolik region. In 1824 both published books about their voyages, which were illustrated with Lyon’s pen-and-ink drawings. Consequently the Inuit of the Central Canadian Arctic became the “Eskimo of our imagination” (Brody 128). The reported good humour and stoicism of the Inuit were seen as desirable, and as something to which factory workers in the newly industrial world should aspire (Brody 129).

Given European interest romanticised imaginings of the Arctic at the time, it is perhaps no surprise that Mary Shelley set her 1818 Gothic novel Frankenstein on board a ship in Arctic waters. As Hugh Brody has argued in The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers and the Shaping of the World:

Mary Shelley needed a place of mythic dimensions for the launch of her terrifying tale. She herself had been to northern Canada—along with many English readers who shared in the armchair search for a Northwest Passage and an abundance of bowhead whales—only in her imagination (Brody 127).

Indeed, as Brian Johnson argues, Shelley’s work was a “wyrd metafictional nod to Samuel Taylor Coleridge” (Johnson 84) because of her entangling of Coleridge’s tale of a nightmare journey to the South pole within the imaginative geography of specifically northern gothic tradition. The allusion could hardly be more apt. As John Livingston Lowes points out, Coleridge’s extensive reading of northern exploration narratives meant that even though [the Mariner’s icefields swim in Antarctic seas […] the ice itself is good Arctic ice, seen, heard and felt in the ‘infernal bitter cold’ of Parent’s Sea, and in the ‘stinking fogge’ of Hudson’s Bay, and off the ‘snowy Cliffs’ of Greenland and Spitzbergen (Lowes 1927, 139). For this reason, Mary Shelley’s tongue-in-cheek reinvention of the Ancient Mariner as … northern explorer Robert Warton is less an instance of cartographic alchemy, than a “South is
North, where the albatross is shot' (Lowes 1927, 139) and an explicit reappropriation of Coleridge's poem for the psychic geography of an Arctic sublime in which ice-choked landscapes provide the backdrop for daemonic encounters between the Romantic self and its monstrous doubles (Johnson 84).

The Canadian Arctic, then, became a space literally at the end of the earth, on the edges of maps and presumably, of civilisation—a space which was at once both terrifying and which offered limitless possibilities.

The Australian situation offered a similar canvas for the imagination. Coleridge's aforementioned tale of a nightmare journey to the South was a manifestation of Britain's long-held fascination with the possibility of a Great Southern Land. According to Ian Henderson, cartography prior to the Enlightenment did not only show those lands which had been charted but also those which were 'known' to exist for philosophical or religious reasons. One recurrent belief was in 'a spherical world with symmetrical hemispheres and a great southern landmass that counterbalanced the known world' (Fausett 10, qtd in Henderson 295), and confirmed prevalent ideas about balance and order. The 'discovery' of Australia, complete with its Indigenous inhabitants who looked different from Europeans and did not conform to the same standards of so-called 'civilisation,' seemed to confirm, on some level, the long-held romantic visions of the Great Southern Land as an outpost and a space wherein anything was possible. The establishment of penal colonies throughout the region established Australia as a place of terror and punishment, but the availability of land for settlement and farming also meant that it was a space where there were opportunities for the hardy, or perhaps the foolhardy. It was, in Henderson's words, a place where "unintended meaning was realised, an unruly imaginative space accessible anywhere and everywhere" (Henderson 296). Life in the colonies was presumed to be strange, exotic and "primitive" (Harris 133), unfettered by the constraints of 'civilisation.' Like Canada, then, Australia was a place of potential and also one of fear, distanced from the laws and constraints of Britain.

Another notable similarity between the two nations is that they each have histories of troubled relations with their Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia have experienced significant government intervention in their daily lives over the last two hundred years. In each country, the interventions have included but not been limited to the creation of permanent settlements, forced relocations for the purposes of medical treatment and schooling, and the removal of children from their traditional lands and families to live with Anglo-European families. These movements across traditional borders have created intra-national diasporic conditions, which Indigenous peoples in these countries continue to negotiate daily, and which are reflected in the contemporary works of Aloopook Ipellie and Sam Watson, to be discussed later in this paper.

William Safran, one of the pioneers of Diaspora Studies, outlined six criteria for a diasporic community: they were displaced from their original location to two or more peripheral regions; they retain a collective memory; they feel partly isolated and insulated from their host community; they regard their ancestral home as their 'true' home or country and a place to which they, or their descendants would like to return; they are committed to the maintenance and restoration of their homeland; and finally, they continue to relate personally or vicariously to their homeland. (Safran 1991, 2) Whilst Safran was largely concerned with delineating the field, others have adopted a more pluralist view (Chartandy 7).

David Chartandy argues convincingly that postcolonial diasporic discourse is "something self-consciously 'figurative' or 'metaphorical'" and is thus a "special agent for social change" (Chartandy 8). As with the term "postcolonial," there are a number of questions which have been raised over the definition of "Diaspora," including whether certain ethnic groups are automatically diasporic; what differences
generational changes make on the imagining of Diaspora; whether an extant culture must have been developed independently before dispersal or whether it can develop retrospectively; whether the dispersal has been caused by traumatic exile, or can be voluntary; and whether the desire to return to a homeland is a mandatory feature and, if so, must this be physical, or can it be symbolic? (Chariandy 8).

It is apparent that the features which Safran originally identified as being ‘diasporic’—in terms of a collective memory, insulation from the broader community, a desire to return to country and a commitment to that return—also apply to Indigenous people who have been forcibly removed from their traditional lands. As mentioned earlier, government policies of forced removal and location were applied to Indigenous peoples in both Canada and Australia and consequently, many Indigenous groups within these countries have problematic relationships in terms of national belonging.

Fred Riggs concurs that “ethnonational” or internal migration does occur in Indigenous populations:

Ethnonational Diasporas often settle within the state where their homeland is located—Indigenous Americans in the US, Chechens in Russia, Scots in the UK, aboriginals in Australia, Maories [sic] in New Zealand, etc. Being in Diaspora, therefore, does not require crossing state boundaries for many ethnonations (Riggs 5).

In her unpublished doctoral thesis, “Leaving Country Without Leaving the Country,” Noeline Brasche also asserts that Indigenous Diasporas do exist and examines the Indigenous Diaspora which was created on and around the Cherbourg mission in South Eastern Queensland—an important site in Sam Watson’s novel—throughout the twentieth century. Brasche argues convincingly that William Safran’s key identifying features of Diaspora are evident in the policies and impacts of the forced dispersal of Indigenous peoples from their homelands as a consequence of colonialist practices.

In Canada, as in Australia, Indigenous peoples were removed from their traditional lands and housed in settlements away from the rest of the population. According to Brasche, the forced displacements of Indigenous peoples clearly infringed traditional boundaries … Territorial or national groups who previously had little or nothing in common now shared experiences of dispersal and loss of sovereignty, as well as physical displacement from traditional country (Brasche 49).

Diaspora theory, however, has only been applied to Indigenous writing in the last few years. A common perception remains within mainstream Australia, for example, that “Aboriginal” people have remained on “Australian soil” and therefore have not been displaced. As Sonia Kurtzer argues, however, the very term “Aboriginal” is a product of the diasporic function of colonialism, since

[]The concept of Aboriginality did not even exist before the coming of the European. Rather, Indigenous Australians identified themselves and others according to kinship groups, skin groups, or on the basis of their relationship to totems, the Dreaming or particular tracts of land … it has been the oppressor who has sought to define Aboriginality (Kurtzer 182).

Even recent attempts by Indigenous peoples to label themselves according to regions bear traces of colonial influence. The term “Murr”, for example, used to identify Indigenous people from Central and Southern Queensland and the north of New South Wales, has its roots in colonial policies of forced relocation and displacement. The term is said to have originated in the Diaspora space of the Cherbourg (formerly Barambah) Aboriginal Reserve in south-eastern Queensland (Brasche 8 and 37). From 1905, Indigenous Australians from forty-four different language groups were incarcerated on this reserve, leading to the formation of a common, regional identity through shared circumstance. Gerard Guthrie completed fieldwork in the area
in the early 1970s, and noted Cherbourg was created by “bringing together Aborigines from the remnants of a number of large tribes in southern Queensland into a quite artificial grouping” (Guthrie in Brasche 1977). The Cherbourg site plays an important role in Sam Watson’s 1990 novel *The Kadiatsha Sung*.

In the context of the parallel Canadian and Australian situation in terms of land and diasporas, therefore, this paper surveys two authors whose lives and works exemplify the Indigenous Diasporic experience, and who both use the figure of the shaman as a trope to examine this complex cultural phenomenon. As figures able to exist in two environments, and mediators with trickster tendencies, the shaman-characters in the texts are posited as useful symbols for relaying the complexities of being Indigenous peoples within the settler-invader colonies of Canada and Australia.

Sam Watson grew up in the suburbs of Brisbane. His mother was of the Mullenjarli and his father of the Birri Gubba nation. Although Watson considers himself very fortunate because he was allowed to remain with his nuclear family and attend local state schools, he was still very aware of the policies of removal and location which affected many Aboriginal families in the first two centuries of white colonisation. His grandfather, also named Sam Watson, a senior man of the Birri Gubba tribe in the Bowen Basin, was sold into bondage at the age of five (Fletcher 1). According to Watson, his grandfather was “chained up like a dog under the station house and fed on a tin plate” (Fletcher 1) after his day’s work. The elder Watson fled this treatment and worked in ring-barking camps until he could afford to employ a lawyer “who had him freed from the Aboriginal Protection Act, one of the first Aboriginal people to do so” (Fletcher 1).

Later, Watson’s father would also petition the courts arguing that he “didn’t need to be brought up in a reserve as he was quite capable of working and running his life” (Stewart 2). The younger Sam Watson, therefore, lived his childhood exempted from the protectionist acts which generally dictated how Aboriginal Australians lived, but was aware that “protected” Murris were not permitted to walk the street, own a house, or enter into financial contracts without the signed permission of the Minister for Native Affairs.

As Watson has stated in an interview, his marriage to a non-Indigenous Australian has made him very aware of the bicultural backgrounds of most young Indigenous Australians, including his own children, and so he deliberately creates young protagonists who need to embrace both cultures in order to move forward; as he puts it: “We all have to draw strength and positives and lessons and knowledge from different Dreaming pathways” (McMahon-Coleman 2009, 318). Even the name of his protagonist, Tommy Gubby, designates his hybrid status, for his surname, Gubba, is a common colloquial insult for white people, derived from the Aboriginal-English ‘gubba-ment’ (Gelder and Jacobs 110). Tommy works as a translator and mediator for the British-based Australian legal system, of which he remains suspicious, arguably paralleling Watson’s own employment as an advocate in the legal system and with Murri Watch, an organisation which aims to protect young offenders and to minimise the disturbing number of deaths in custody.

Allootook Ipellie’s work was also informed by his personal experiences as well as those of his people. He was a poet, author, artist, cartoonist, journalist and editor. In a thirty-five year career, he experienced times of great productivity and periods of extreme hardship. In many ways, his life experiences, political views and art were influenced by the dramatic cultural upheaval he experienced as a child in the Arctic. At the age of four, his family were forced to abandon their semi-nomadic lifestyle and move into pre-fabricated houses in the township of Iqaluit. The following year, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and taken to Hamilton, Ontario, for treatment. By the time he returned to Iqaluit, he could no longer speak Inuktitut, which he had to relearn in order to communicate with his family (McMahon-Coleman 2005, 92–93).

His childhood was marked by a problematic relationship with his alcoholic and abusive stepfather, Alivuktak. When he was about nine years old, he ran away from home and was essentially homeless for a
period of some eighteen months before being taken in by relatives. During this period, he had a brief but important opportunity to live on the land, using traditional hunting practices (see Kennedy, 348; McMahon-Coleman 2009, 293). As a thirteen-year-old he was again separated from his family when he was enrolled in a secondary school in Ottawa. He remained here for two years, boarding with an Anglo-Canadian family. Although he achieved good grades at school, Ipellie became a selective mute, refusing to speak with his teachers, classmates, guidance counsellor or finally, psychologist, during this time (Ipellie 1996, 1; Ipellie 1992, 26).

He returned to Iqaluit briefly as a young man, but spent most of his adult life in Ottawa, where he began to work for the Inuit lobby group ITK and for the Inuit publications Inuit Today and Imutittut. He was prolific in his output for these publications. Perhaps his best-known work, however, remains the 1993 publication Arctic Dreams and Nightmares, a self-illustrated series of sequential short stories featuring a shaman-narrator who travels through time and across cultures. His work reflects his personal experiences, often dealing with issues of home and homelessness, speaking and silence.

Both Ipellie's Arctic Dreams and Nightmares (1993) and Watson's The Kadaicha Sung (1990) use figures with supernatural powers and sorcery in order to tell their stories. Both works centre on the actions of shamanic hybrid figures, and not only 'queer' or question accepted representations of Aboriginality, but also deal with queer expressions of sexuality. As examples of Indigenous Diasporic literature, both authors' works operate in the interstices between maban reality and queer theory.

In The Indigenous Literature of Australia: Milli Milli Wangka, Australian critic Mudrooroo uses the term "maban reality" to describe the fantastic Indigenous genre, concerning works which he points out could also reasonably be classified as magic realist novels (Mudrooroo 101). Maban realist texts, he argues, bring to the foreground Indigenous spiritual realities which had been marginalised as "primal, pagan and savage" by early settlers, missionaries and educators (Mudrooroo 90). Mudrooroo cites Watson's The Kadaicha Sung as being the novel which first broke the ground of this "new realm of reality" (Mudrooroo 46) in Australia. He defines maban reality as being "characterised by a firm grounding in the reality of the earth or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (Mudrooroo 98). He also argues that it is inherently political because "it seeks to establish an Indigenous reality which is counter to the dominant natural reality of the invaders" (Mudrooroo 100).

Mabans or shamans are naturally "queer" or unstable figures who undermine accepted social norms. Doty argues that

[h]omosexuals as well as heterosexuals can operate or mediate from within straight cultural spaces and positions—after all, most of us grew up learning the rules of straight culture—but we have paid less attention to the proposition that basically heterocentric texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments. And these people should be encouraged to examine and express these moments as queer ... the cultural 'queer space' recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever anyone produces or responds to culture (Doty 3).

In other words, as Buchbinder asserts, readers experience queer moments when "reading texts or understanding situations from a reading position which one would not normally occupy" (Buchbinder 166). Buchbinder asserts that 'queerness' "seeks to defy and thence to destabilise" (152), and that queer readings undermine ideological boundaries and blur the boundaries between them; they also advocate a spectrum of subject positions in relation to performances of sex, gender and sexuality. Each of these texts introduces a protagonist who is culturally "Othered" through his Indigeneity; who is able to seek the familiar in unfamiliar environments, and who has
atypical relationships with the people around him. These characters continually undermine often-accepted binaries about black and white, straight and queer, thereby forcing non-marginalised members of the reading audience into a more marginalised reading position.

In Ipellie’s *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* the shaman-narrator appears to be celibate, yet provides quite detailed commentary on the sexuality of others. He meets a hyper-masculine shaman (in “Super Stud”), a polygamist shaman (in “The Five Shy Wives of the Shaman”) and a hermaphrodite shaman (in “Public Execution of the Hermaphrodite Shaman”) during his travels, but uses a proxy when Sedna attempts to seduce him (in “Summit with Sedna, the Mother of the Sea Beasts.”)

In one of the more amusing stories in the collection, “When God Sings the Blues,” the shaman-narrator enters a trance and begins his annual pilgrimage to meet with God. The narrator finds these visits “intellectually stimulating” because of the “opportunity to try [his] hand at outwitting this particular God” (45). We learn that God has a sense of humour, for he likes to call himself “Sattanasseee,” the Inuktitut word for Satan. The narrator is unsure whether this is God’s real name since He has a “way of convincing you that He [is] always telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth” (46). On this occasion God is depressed, however, as declining numbers of followers has had a negative effect on his business empire. In this story Ipellie subverts generally accepted notions about Christianity and the Western legal system—all of which were introduced through colonisation—through his use of satire.

One of the more surprising aspects of this story, however, is the quiet boasting of the narrator that he is the only person in the history of humanity to have these intimate audaces with God, and that they have “one of the most private relationships that two spirits could hope for” (46). The suggestion of intimacy and privacy in the relationship between the two spiritual figures is a queer moment in the text, for the comment about the “private” friendship with God is the only moment throughout the stories when the narrator appears to show any real affection for another character. There are no further other clues, however, as to whether this should be interpreted as a homosocial relationship, or whether the narrator’s apparent celibacy is actually a function of a non-heteronormative sexual orientation.

*The Kadaitcha Sung* is graphic in its depictions of sexual activity, and the book opens with a harrowing recount of the repeated rape of an Aboriginal woman by police officers. Tommy himself is anally and orally raped by his uncle and nemesis, Booka, early in the novel, and notes that this is socially taboo (51–52). Elsewhere, however, consensual homosexual sex is used to create a moment of narrative disruption which destabilises heteronormativity (Sullivan 191). The scene in question certainly disrupts the progression of the narrative at this stage of the novel (207). Tommy has consummated his relationship with Jelda, conceived a child who will carry his legacy; and is searching a panel van for enemies, since he can feel that the time of final conflict is near. Thus the high indignation of the interrupted couple is unexpected, confronting and comic. The reader already knows that one of the participants, Tommy’s cousin, Boonger, rejects homosexuality as an identity, but rather, self-identifies as straight and has recently moved in with his long-term girlfriend. Boonger’s changeable sexual preferences undermine the heteronormative binaries of hetero- and homosexuality. In this way, his fluid identity acts as a foil to Tommy, who symbolically undermines racial binaries of black/white through his mixed race parentage.

The works of Watson and Ipellie, then, are transgressive and negotiate numerous cultural borders. They each offer alternatives to normative binaries in literature, especially with regard to colonial representations of cultural and sexual identity. The characters the authors create are shamanic, and thus able to negotiate the difficulties of being Indigenous Diasporans in the contemporary world. Ipellie’s narrator in his collection *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* is still most at “home” in the Arctic, where his powers are at their strongest; he is hyper-masculine, pragmatic, and engaged with mainstream cultural iconography. Watson’s protagonist in *The Kadaitcha Sung* is bicultural,
promiscuous, and angry at authority figures from both cultures. Their works cross genre boundaries and use the interstices between Indigenous Diaspora, queer theory and maban reality in order to find a space—albeit at the ends of the earth—in which to locate cultural subjectivity in relation to their narratives.

**Works cited**


Notes

1The mission began at the “Blacks’ Flat” site in the Durundur/Woodford region of Queensland as “a philanthropic effort” of The Salvation Army (Braache) but the Queensland government took control in 1905, when the mission was moved to the present Barambah site. It was renamed Cherbourg in 1931. In March of 2005, ABC–TV’s Message Stick chronicled the centenary of Cherbourg, suggesting that its inhabitants continue to mark the mission’s start date as 1905.