'What Goes on in the Coffin': Border Knowledges in North American Literature

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In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood laconically notes that 'a whole book could be written exploring the coffin-funeral syndrome in Canadian literature' (Atwood 2012: 232), whose central experience, she argues, is death and whose central mystery is that of 'what goes on in the coffin' (ibid.: 230). The 'Great Canadian Coffin,' as she calls it, bespeaks a silence and inaction, a failure to articulate a conflict or a crisis, to which death is offered as a pragmatic solution. The coffin is thus quite literally dead weight, a box that contains complicated and unresolved (hi)stories; as they are kept encased and hidden from view, these uncomfortable (hi)stories linger beneath the surface of the Canadian cultural landscape. But, as Atwood explains, they occasionally come to the fore in the shape of the archetypal casket '*with the lid off*' (ibid.: 252, emphasis in the original). The open coffin implies knowledge, 'genuine knowledge' even, which one can only gain through the comprehension of the meaning of death (ibid.: 253). In that sense, the coffin encloses fundamental truths, albeit truths that cannot be adequately represented or articulated and that, therefore, remain somewhat of an enigma.

Atwood's thoughts on the 'Great Coffin' as a Canadian literary tradition bring to mind two of the most notable appearances of coffins as containers of unspeakable knowledge in North American literature. In his 1542 account in *La Relación*, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca recounts the peculiar discovery of several boxes holding unknown bodies painted with deerskin, which subsequently were destroyed. In Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* (1855), the narrator, Ishmael, becomes the lone survivor of a shipwreck as he holds on to the coffin of Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner and Ishmael's friend. In both cases, the coffin figures as a symbol for fundamental knowledge about life and death; however, it is knowledge that neither de Vaca nor Ishmael can properly interpret and make sense of. In this essay, we want to re-read de Vaca's account of the boxed bodies and Ishmael's rescue by the coffin as instances of 'border thinking' in order to recover what we call a *cripistemology of the coffin*. We understand the coffin as a metaphor for subjugated knowledges that have been buried deep down in national cultural imaginaries and that resurge as haunting presences. This resurgence constitutes a crisis of knowledge, a *cripistemology* that builds on alternative forms of knowing, which lurks in canonical cultural texts and sits at the heart of cultural self-definition but that is generally disabled by traditional Western paradigms of thought.

A Cripistemology of the Coffin

The colonisation and settlement of the North American continent is a story of cultural imperialism, violence, and destruction. Recent interventions in the field of Native studies have argued that the conquest of Native peoples and the nationalist enterprise that entailed their sexual colonization can be understood as 'terrorizing' acts which produced a 'colonial necropolitics that framed Native peoples as queer populations marked for death' (Morgensen 2010: 106). As Scott L. Morgensen convincingly argues, the European colonizers applied their modern, Western frames of references to the practices and traditions of Native peoples, dismissing them as primitive and savage in order to be able to supplant them with their own, supposedly more 'advanced' cultural practices (ibid.).[1] Feminist and queer interventions in Native studies have theorized the complicity of terror and violence in producing a

biopolitics that frames Natives as subjects of death and settlers as subjects of life; however, by approaching the project of colonialization through the lens of a 'necropolitics', to use Achille Mbembe's (2003) term, one runs the risk of re-enacting those acts of extinction and of perpetuating the silencing of indigenous voices. Rather than focus on the terrorizing acts, we want to shift attention to that which has been supplanted by those acts: what are the indigenous forms of knowledge and frames of reference that the colonizers sought to eradicate?

As Birgit Brander Rasmussen has shown, one of the most crucial dividing lines between colonizer and colonized was writing, a practice that has often been equated with alphabetism and, therefore, excluded indigenous forms of recording (hi)stories and knowledge. Within the logic of the colonial project, literacy signified civilisation and its absence primitivism. Literary inquiry, Brander Rasmussen (2012: 4) argues, needs to acknowledge the 'agency, knowledge, and … existence of indigenous perspectives recorded in non-alphabetic texts' in order to contest 'the monologues of colonial agents' and heighten 'our understanding of the reciprocity of the colonial encounter.' As 'literacy' and 'writing' are part of a colonizing discourse, the 'whole complex of cultural meanings' as well as 'dynamics of dominance' are disrupted if one broadens 'the definition of writing in the Americas beyond a particular semiotic system—the alphabet' (ibid.). The inclusion of non-alphabetic texts in literary analysis transforms indigenous people from mute bystanders into active, literate subjects. Consequently, a vast archive of indigenous knowledge is uncovered that has for the longest time been enclosed and buried in the depths of the cultural imaginary.

Shifting the analytical focus towards non-alphabetic texts constitutes a metaphorical opening of the coffin in which indigenous knowledges are encased. The subjugated knowledges, that thus come to the fore as images, affects, gestures and other embodied practices, are 'genuine' records, to invoke Atwood once again, which cannot be integrated into traditional patterns of articulation and meaning-making. Following their own logics and traditions, these non-alphabetic texts require their own explanatory framework to be deciphered. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter Mignolo call these forms of knowledge 'alternative literacies', which, as Brander Rasmussen (ibid.: 10) explains, have 'the potential to radically disrupt a colonial legacy maintained by narrow definitions of writing and literacy.'

We suggest that the crisis of Western knowledge brought about by the resurgence of subjugated knowledges produces a cripistemology of the coffin. A cripistemology draws on disability and queer epistemologies, which encourage us to question what we think we know about identity categories and how we make sense of our environs around and through them. 'Crip,' as we understand it, is a critical positionality akin to 'queer,' which as such is marked by radical disorientation and disalignment from normative discourses and practices. While 'crip' is an offspring of disability studies (just as 'queer' is a child of gender and sexuality studies), it can be used powerfully to analyse critically the quick dismissal of a wide range of bodily expressions, gestures, and practices as unusable and defective. As Johnson and McRuer explain, their coinage of the concept 'cripistemology' was inspired by a discussion centred on questions of 'knowing and unknowing disability, making and unmaking disability epistemologies, and the importance of challenging subjects who confidently "know" about "disability", as though it could be a thoroughly comprehended object of knowledge' (Johnson and McRuer 2014: 130). Johnson and McRuer's take on disability is similar to Atwood's conception of death: the genuine knowledge both disability and death bear is nearly impossible to comprehend, unless one sheds dominant conventions and tries to find meaning in the practices and gestures that are so readily dismissed.

As it emerges in that liminal space between knowing and unknowing, between meaning and enigma, cripistemology evokes Walter Mignolo's notion of border thinking as 'thinking from another place, imagining an other language, arguing from another logic' (Mignolo 2000: 313). Even though Mignolo does not call for a replacement of existing epistemologies, his suggestion that 'border thinking' refers to an 'epistemology of and from the border' requires the acknowledgment that such a border epistemology necessarily entails disorientation, disalignment, and a thinking beyond Western paradigms (Mignolo 2000: 52). Border thinking presupposes a divorcing from hegemonic epistemology, that is, from the idea of 'absolute knowledge,' and thus serves as the paradigmatic reading strategy for non-alphabetic texts. A cripistemology of the coffin thus tries to merge the critical stances of border thinking and crip theory with provocative interventions in Native studies to invoke the coffin as a metaphor for an alternative literacy that is not only prevalent in Canadian literature but in North American literature at large. The coffin contains uncomfortable knowledges and (hi)stories that have continuously been repressed and dismissed as idolatrous or

insignificant but that also continue to resurface and haunt the cultural imaginary. A cripistemological framework allows us to analyse the resurgence of indigenous knowledges from a liminal position and to recognize the confusion and disorientation they generate as an important critical inquiry which calls dominant, Western paradigms of knowledge fundamentally into question.

Bodies in Boxes and Undecipherable Marks

In North American literature, subjugated knowledges may resurge as tangible objects, such as coffins and boxes, which emblematize the presence of the non-alphabetic, indigenous text in Early America. At first glance, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's exploration narrative entitled *La Relación* (1542), for instance, may reflect the inability of many early texts to recognize indigenous forms of knowledge and the failure to acknowledge their validity as an alternative textual medium. Upon closer look, however, one can see that the text taps deeply into the archive of indigenous knowledge, engaging in what Brander Rasmussen (2012:10) has termed 'colonial dialogization.'[2] In fact, several scholars have commented on Cabeza de Vaca's hybrid self — the coming together of his Spanish heritage and his acquisition of Native American culture — and many have been fascinated by the text's careful representation of New World alterities.[3] In this first-hand account of his odyssey through North America, Cabeza de Vaca relates his experiences of shipwreck and captivity, opening up a narrative space in which Native epistemology and alternative literacies coexist with Western cultural and narrative forms. His numerous identitarian changes from conquistador to captive to missionary and his transformation into a Spaniard who has gone Native, wandering 'lost and naked' (de Vaca 1993: 28) through North America, give rise to a dialogic text that is organized around cultural encounters between different groups of people, voicing 'a conflict between ideas of empire and an epistemic conflict between two ideas of knowledge as they arose in the geopolitical dialectic between European expansionism and centralizing monarchy' (Bauer 2003: 33–34).

One instance is particularly interesting. In Chapter 4, Cabeza de Vaca recounts the peculiar discovery of several boxes containing unknown bodies covered with painted deerskin. This is how he writes about the incident:

There we found many merchandise boxes from Castile, each containing the body of a dead man. The bodies were covered with painted deerskins. This seemed to the Commissary to be a type of idolatry, and he burned the boxes with the bodies. We also found pieces of linen and cloth and feather headdresses which seemed to be from New Spain. We also found samples of gold (de Vaca 1993: 35).

Upon the commissary's request, Cabeza de Vaca and his comrades burned the boxes and destroyed the local knowledge the bodies bore. Considering the bodies to be evidence of primitive idolatry, the Spaniards deemed the knowledge they embodied threatening and sacrilegious at most, but certainly not relevant and worth preserving. These boxes, which apparently were merchandise boxes from Castile but whose meaning is impossible to comprehend, emblematize the presence of Native knowledge in the text. Cabeza de Vaca mentions these coffins, but he fails to provide an interpretation, choosing not to go into more details concerning this act of destruction of local knowledge. The assemblage of these bodies in boxes therefore constitutes a form of cripistemology, representing the 'non-alphabethic, indigenous text in the colonial world, as well as the possibility for recovery and resurgence of subaltern literacies, texts and knowledges' (Brander Rasmussen 2012: 15–16). We cannot decipher the content, because it is divorced from its original environment. As a result, as Bruce-Novoa (2011: 28) has stated:

The denunciation Cabeza de Vaca cannot speak, that resounds in its silence — and like Antigone, cries for redress — is the destruction, not just of the bodies, but of the entire assemblage. It was the Indians' manipulation of bodies, boxes, deerskins and the materials used to draw on them — paint, dies, beads, blood, we do not know — this fusion of elements, European and Native, focused on the ultimate question of life everywhere: Death, or at least the effort to render significant death's presence in the form of bodies turned cadavers … it was all this and more that vanished before given a chance to "speak," a chance to be appreciated as a sign within its own code of signification.

Cabeza de Vaca's act of self-fashioning in his account almost obliges him to leave out details concerning the spectacle of the boxed bodies (Fellner 2009: 51). His reference to this enigmatic assemblage of bodies, however, gives the painted deerskins the status of undeciphered writing. Serving as markers of alterity, these containers of

indigenous knowledge represent an alternative system of meaning, which despite never being fully reconstructable remain present in American literature. Figuring prominently in the archive of Early American literature, boxes and coffins therefore point to the 'possibility of coeval commensurability' (Brander Rasmussen 2012: 138) between alphabetic and indigenous forms of writing.

Probably the most famous coffin in American literature is Queequeg's coffin. The appearance of this coffin in Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* is peculiar, as it becomes a symbol of life and rebirth in the course of the story and sheds more obvious associations with vanishing and death. *Moby-Dick* ends with the shipwreck of the *Pequod* and its crew of which the novel's narrator, Ishmael, is the lone survivor. As the *Pequod* sinks, Ishmael is drawn into the vortex, when suddenly the 'vital center' of the 'black bubble' bursts upward and disgorges a coffin, which Ishmael clings to until he is rescued (Melville 1992: 625). The coffin that becomes Ishmael's lifebuoy is the strange casket Queequeg, a Polynesian harpooner, had built when he thought that he was dying of fever and that he used as a chest for his belongings after his recovery. The casket seems strange to Ishmael and the rest of the crew because of the 'hieroglyphic marks' carved onto it, which none of them are able to decipher.

The marks on Queequeg's coffin remind us of the marks on the skin of the white whale, which Ishmael compares to 'ancient hieroglyphs' one would find on the 'walls of pyramids,' mysterious and unintelligible, and to Native forms of writing inscribed on the American landscape along the Upper Mississippi. In other words, Melville likens Polynesian, Egyptian, and Native American scripts as heritage of civilized cultures and implicitly criticizes the colonization and the disappearance of Native knowledge.[4] Both the coffin and the whale are thus sites of inscription, bearers of non-alphabetic texts that Ishmael desperately seeks to decipher, as he is haunted by thoughts about the seemingly lost knowledge. As Ishmael tells his readers, the inscription on Queequeg's coffin is an exact copy of the 'twisted tattooing on his [Queequeg's] body,' which, he learns, actually comprise 'a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth' (ibid.: 524). Queequeg's tattoos, like the markings on the whale's skin, are 'a riddle to unfold,' a fundamental truth whose meaning continues to elude Ishmael.

Ishmael's attempt to comprehend the mystery of Queequeg is centred on the mark with which he signed onto the *Pequod* and which is carved onto the lid of the coffin. Queequeg's signature mark is the only non-alphabetic sign included in Ishmael's narrative, that is, in the printed text of *Moby-Dick*, which resembles a heraldic cross. As Matthew Frankel has argued, the mark symbolizes the 'cultural misapprehension' Queequeg is subject to, as it signifies Queequeg's very own unintelligibility (Frankel 2007: 135). Brander Rasmussen similarly suggests that Ishmael's assertion that even Queequeg cannot read his own marks and tattoos ascribes illiteracy to Queequeg and emphasizes Ishmael's failure to imagine that what he is looking at might be an indigenous system of writing (Brander Rasmussen 2012). At the same time, however, Melville lets Queequeg's hieroglyphic markings stand as signifiers of 'alterity and anteriority,' as testament to the presence of other, earlier literary cultures that are not pressed 'into the service of a nationalist narrative' (ibid.: 112) but recognized as 'a different but equally legitimate literary heritage' (ibid.: 113). We thus read *Moby-Dick* as a meditation on legitimate cultural and literary heritage, as Ishmael struggles to accept his inability to make sense of Queequeg's hieroglyphic marks and constantly searches for ways to attain the truths inscribed on the harpooner's skin and coffin. The hieroglyphs on the coffin 'encode Queequeg's interpretation of the whiteness of the whale,' and if Ishmael learns to read those signs, he will understand not only Queequeg, but also the whale and finally himself (Powell 2000: 176).

As he reveals at one point in his narrative, Ishmael's own skin is covered with tattoos. For lack of any other medium on which he could record the 'valuable statistics' of the measurements of the Sperm Whale's skeleton, Ishmael had them tattooed onto his right arm (Melville 1992: 492). Similar to Queequeg's body, Ishmael's body is turned into a text, albeit a decisively *Western* text, as his skin is inscribed with Western measurements and thus Western systems of knowledge. When he covers his right arm with the statistics of the whale, Ishmael remarks that he wants the other parts of his body to remain blank for a poem he is still composing. Frankel suggests that the prospect for further and more extensive tattoos relates to Ishmael's admiration of Queequeg's whole-body ornaments, 'thereby revealing a desire to revisit in corporeal terms the "living contour" of his departed friend' (Frankel 2007: 138). Ishmael seeks to compensate the impossibility of accessing the knowledge Queequeg's body contains 'by approximating as best he can what it would be like to live in Queequeg's skin' (ibid., 139). As Queequeg is likened to the white whale in Ishmael's narrative, his approximation to Queequeg's body would, inevitably, also entail an approximation to the

whale's body. All three of them would bear strange markings and tattoos representing systems of knowledge that complement and challenge one other at the same time.

As long as Queequeg's tattoos and the markings on the coffin cannot be decoded, his narrative, the text that he has composed on his skin and the coffin's surface, remains true and cannot be adequately translated and articulated in Ishmael's narrative. Queequeg's tattooed body will never resurface 'whole and complete to allow its codex to be deciphered in its entirety, glorious and direct' (Bruce-Novoa 2011: 39). It turns out that Ishmael's limited memory is the only source of information of Queequeg's narrative that the reader has, even though his mark and the strange engravings on his coffin, which would in all likelihood produce a more accurate picture, are right in front of his eyes. Untranslatable as they are, however, they prove to be enduring, yet obscure, evidence of an indigenous presence without which Ishmael — and, by extrapolation, an Anglo-American tradition[5] — would quite literally not exist.

Conclusion

As the coffin stands for Queequeg's absence, 'the body no longer present,' the Polynesian seems to readily represent the 'vanishing primitive' who falls victim to colonial enterprise (Bruce-Novoa 2011: 39). However, even though he perishes in the shipwreck, he remains a haunting presence in American culture. His coffin weathers all storms and enables Ishmael's survival, which implicitly places Queequeg's narrative right at the centre not only of *Moby-Dick* but of American literature at large. Queequeg's coffin serves as a reminder of 'a sense of shared destiny,' a reminder that Western/alphabetic and indigenous/non-alphabetic systems of knowledge are 'mutually interconnected and enabling' (Brander Rasmussen 2012: 138). The indigenous knowledge inscribed on the coffin remains obscure, but the coffin's resurgence and transformation into a lifebuoy promises the survival of Queequeg's narrative. Perhaps his inscriptions will never be deciphered, never translated into alphabetic text, but Queequeg's knowledge of the 'heavens and the earth' has been recorded and remains intact with the coffin serving as proof of an indigenous presence that cannot be compromised.

The central mystery in Canadian literature and culture, as Margaret Atwood has noted, is 'what goes on in the coffin' (Atwood 2012: 252). As a container of unspeakable knowledge, the coffin does not only figure prominently in Canadian texts but also in the United States-American imaginary, as our contribution has shown. This is not to challenge Atwood's claim that the question as to what goes on in the coffin dominates particularly Canadian literature, but to suggest that more consideration should be paid to the significance of coffins, burial grounds, and bone ashes in North American literature at large, as the repression and resurgence of indigenous knowledges is frequently negotiated through these motifs. From William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1606–1646) and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) the residue of the indigenous population haunts Anglo-American writers and constitutes an unspeakable presence in 'classic' literature. Our analysis of Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* has shown that indigenous knowledges prove to be incommensurate with Western systems of meaning making and thus remain inaccessible to European colonizers. Most importantly though, both texts testify to the fact that indigenous knowledges are a central, constitutive pillar of the North American imaginary. They exhibit the presence of alternative forms of writing in the archive, yet they also highlight the violence and the processes of exclusion which have made indigenous knowledges invisible to North American literary studies.

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Notes

[1] Morgensen (2010) specifically focuses on the colonizers' regulation of indigenous gender and sexuality, arguing that the project of colonization produced a 'settler sexuality,' by which he means a white national heteronormativity that forms the pinnacle of sexual modernity. However, a similar observation can be made regarding the

supplementing of indigenous conceptions of disability by a modern understanding of healthy and anomalous bodies, as Kim Nielsen (2013) has shown, which is why Morgensen's argument can be expanded beyond the dimension of gender and sexuality.

[2] Michael Holquist has explained the dialogization process in the glossary to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* as 'A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute' (Holquist 1981: 427).

[3] See, for instance, Molloy (1987) and Bruce-Novoa (1993).

[4] On this point, see also Brander Rasmussen, who suggests that Melville insinuates 'that Native American petroglyphs represent an equally ancient and important writing system awaiting recognition and decipherment' as Egyptian hieroglyphs (Brander Rasmussen 2012: 122).

[5] Particularly in Cold-War-receptions of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael has been stylized as the '*canonical* (idealized) essence of the American nation', that is, as a cultural figure that seems to embody something quintessentially 'American' (Spanos 1995: 34). In Ishmael, this interpretation suggests, Anglo-America finds a representative type, an ideal form that seems to articulate a coherent national narrative. Even though more recent readings of *Moby-Dick* discuss Ishmael's manifold ambiguities, he has remained somewhat of a stock-character in American cultural productions (Hamscha 2013).

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