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“Glossary Islands” as Sites of the “Abroad” in Post-Colonial Literature: Towards a New Methodology for Language and Knowledge Relations in Keri Hulme’s The Bone People and Melissa Lucashenko’s Mullumbimby

Patrick Leslie West

Reviewing Melissa Lucashenko’s Mullumbimby (2013), Eve Vincent notes that it shares with Keri Hulme’s The Bone People (1994) one significant feature: “a glossary of Maori words” (Lucashenko 2013: 263). The “tidalectics” of her epiphany is telling: the “silence then splintered” (262) and “tidalectics”, meaning “a dynamic and shifting relationship between land and sea that allows both novels present family and love as allegories of post-colonial theory. Specifically, the debate has favoured a binary either/or approach, whereby either the Indigenous language or English has been empowered with authority over the text’s linguistic, historical, cultural and political territory. Given that the significations of “abroad” include a travelling encounter with overseas places and the notion of being widely scattered or dispersed, the term has value for an investigation into how post-colonialism as a historical circumstance is mediated and transformed within both novels.

Keri Hulme’s literature is a response to the “homeland” encounter with a foreign “abroad” that creates particular wide scatterings or dispersals of writing within literary texts.

In 1989, Maryanne Dever wrote that “some critics have viewed [The Bone People’s] glossary as a direct denial of otherness. … It can be argued, however, that the glossary is in fact a further way of asserting that otherness” (24). Dever is responding to Simon During, who wrote in 1985 that “by translating the Maori words into English [the glossary allows] them no otherness within its Europeanising apparatus” (During 374). Dever continues: “The glossary is a literal representation of the very separateness of the Maori language. In this way, the text inverts the conventional sense of privileging, the glossary forming the key into a restricted or privileged form of knowledge” (24). Dever’s language is telling: “direct denial of otherness,” “asserting that otherness,” and “the very separateness of the Maori language,” reinforce a binary way of thinking that is reproduced by Vincent in 2013 (24).

This binary hinders a considered engagement with post-colonial difference because it produces hierarchical outcomes. For Toril Moi, “binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the ‘female’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance” (104). Inspired by Elizabeth, DeLoughrey’s concept of “tidalectics,” my article argues that the neologism “glossary islands” provides a more productive way of thinking about the power relations of the relationship of Indigenous words to Hulme’s and Lucashenko’s mainly English-language, post-colonial novels. Resisting a binary either/or approach, “glossary islands” engages with the inevitable intermingling of languages of post-colonial and multi-cultural nations and holds value for a new methodological approach to the glossary as an element of post-colonial (islandic) literature.

Both The Bone People and Mullumbimby employ female protagonists (Kerewin Holmes and Jo Breen respectively) to explore how family issues resolve into an asserted post-colonial community for people othred by enduring colonial forces. Difficult loves and difficult children advantage of the “dynamic and shifting” interplay between elemental presences of the margin of land and sea that DeLoughrey foregrounds as constitutive of “tidalectics.” My article argues that the terms of this debate have remained static since 1984 and that this creates particular wide scatterings or dispersals of writing within literary texts.

Each text also shows how post-colonial literature always engages with the “abroad” through the post-colonial relationship of the indigenous “homeland” to the colonial “imported abroad.” DeLoughrey characterises this post-colonial relationship to the “abroad” by a post-colonial concept, “tidalectics”, meaning “a dynamic and shifting relationship between land and sea that allows island literatures to be engaged in their spatial and historical complexity” (2-3). The Bone People and Mullumbimby are examples of island literatures for their geographic setting. But DeLoughrey does not compress “tidalectics” to such a reductionist definition. The term itself is as “dynamic and shifting” as what it signifies, and available for diverse post-colonial redeployments (DeLoughrey 2).

The margin of land and sea that DeLoughrey foregrounds as constitutive of “tidalectics” is imaginatively re-expressed in both The Bone People and Mullumbimby. Lucashenko’s novel is set in the Byron Bay hinterland, and the text is replete with teasing references to “tidalectics.” For example, “Jo knew that the water she watched was endlessly cycling upriver and down, travelling constantly between the saltwater and the fresh” (Lucashenko 260-61). The writing, however, frequently exceeds a literal “tidalectics.” “Everything in the world was shape-shifting around her, every moment of every day. Nothing remained as it was” (Lucashenko 261).

Significantly, Jo is no passive figure at the centre of such “shapeshifting.” She actively takes advantage of the “dynamic and shifting” interplay between elemental presences of her geographical circumstances (DeLoughrey 2). It is while “resting her back against the granite and bronze directional marker that was the last material evidence of humanity between Ocean Shores and New Zealand,” that Jo achieves her major epiphany as a character (Lucashenko 261). “Her eyelids sagged wearily. … Jo groaned aloud, exhausted by her ignorance and the unending demands being made on her to exceed it. The temptation to fall asleep in the sun, and leave these demands far behind, began to take her over. … No. We need answers” (Lucashenko 263).

The “tidalectics” of her epiphany is telling: the “silence then splintered” (262) and “momentarily the winds became, not birds, but mere dark movement” (263). The effect is dramatic: “The hairs on Jo’s arms goose pimpled. Her breathing grew fast” (263). “With an unspoken curse for her own obtuseness”, Jo becomes freshly decisive (264). Thus, a “tidalectics” is not a mere geographic backdrop. Rather, a “dynamic and shifting” landscape—a metamorphosis—energizes Jo’s identity in Mullumbimby. In the “homeland”/“abroad” flux of “tidalectics”, post-colonial community germinates.

The geography of The Bone People is also a “tidalectics”, as demonstrated, for instance, by chapter five’s title: “Spring Tide, Neap Tide, Ebb Tide, Flood” (Hulme 202). Hulme’s novel...
contains literally hundreds of such passages that dramatise the margin of land and sea as “dynamic and shifting” (DeLoughrey 2). Again: “She’s standing on the orangegroind shingle, arms akimbo, drinking the beach in, absorbing sea and spindrift, breathing it into her dusty memory. It’s all here, alive and salt and roaring and real. The vast cold ocean and the surf breaking five yards away and the warm knowledge of home just up the shore” (163). Like the protagonist of Mullumbimbay, Kerewin Holmes is an energised figure on the margin of land and sea. Geography as “tidalectics” is activated in the construction of character identity. Kerewin involves her surroundings with her sense of self, as constituted through memory, in a fashion that enfolds the literal with the metaphorical: memory is “dusty” in the midst of “vast” waters (163).

Thus, at least three senses of “abroad” filter through these novels. Firstly, the “abroad” exists in the sense of an aboard-colonizing power retaining influence even in post-colonial times, as elaborated in Simon During’s distinction between the “post-colonised” and the “post-colonizers” (Simon 460). Secondly, the “abroad” reveals itself in DeLoughrey’s related conceptualisation of “tidalectics” as a specific expression of the “abroad”/”homeland” relationship: to speak the “abroad” is present by virtue of the more general definition it shares with “tidalectics”; for “abroad”, like “tidalectics”, also signifies being widely scattered, at large, ranging freely. There is both denotation and connotation in “tidalectics”, which Lucashenko expresses here: “the world was nothing but water in the air and water in the streams” (82). That is, beyond any “literal littoral” geography, “abroad” is linked to “tidalectics” in this more general sense of being widely scattered, dispersed, ranging freely.

The “tidalectics” of Lucashenko’s and Hulme’s novels is also shared across their form because each novel is a complex interweaving of English and the Indigenous language. Here, we encounter a clear difference between the two novels, which seems related to the predominant genres of the respective texts. In Lucashenko’s largely realist mode of writing, the use of Indigenous words is more transparent to a monolingual English speaker than is Hulme’s use of Maori in her novel, which tends more towards magic realism. A monolingual English speaker can often transfer Lucashenko almost automatically, through context, or through an in-text translation of the words worked into the prose. With Hulme, context usually withholds adequate clues to the meaning of the Maori words, nor are any in-text translations of the Maori commonly offered.

Leaving aside for now any consideration of their glossaries, each novel presents a different representation of the post-colonial/a broad relationship of an Indigenous language to English. Mullumbimbay is the more conservative text in this respect. The note prefacing Mullumbimbay’s Glossary reads: “In this novel, Jo speaks a mixture of Bundjalung and Yugambeh languages, interspersed with a variety of Aboriginal English terms” (283). However, the Indigenous words often shade quite seamlessly into their English translation and the “Aboriginal English” Jo speaks is actually not that different from standard English dialogue as found in many contemporary Australian novels. If anything, there is only a slight, distinguishing American flavour to Jo’s dialogue. In Mullumbimbay, the Indigenous tongue tends to disappear into the text’s dominant language: English.

By contrast, The Bone People contains many instances where Maori presents in all its bold strangeness to a monolingual English speaker. My reading experience consisted in running my eyes over the words but not really taking them in, except insofar as they represented a portion of Maori of unknown meaning. I could look up the recondite English words (of which there were many) in my dictionary or online, but it was much harder to conveniently source definitions of the Maori words, especially when they formed larger syntactic units.

The situation is reversed, however, when one considers the two glossaries. Mullumbimbay’s glossary accepts the difference of the Indigenous language(s) by having no pages alongside its Indigenous words (contrast The Bone People’s glossary) and because, despite being titled Glossary as a self-sufficient part of the book, it is not mentioned in any Contents page. One comes across Lucashenko’s glossary, at the end of her novel, quite unexpectedly. Conversely, Hulme’s glossary is clearly referenced on its Contents page, where it is directly described as a “Translation of Maori Words and Phrases” commencing on page 446. Hulme’s Glossary appears predictable, and contains page references to all its Maori words or phrases. This contrasts with Lucashenko’s glossary, which follows alphabetical order, rather than the novel’s order. Mullumbimbay’s glossary is thus a more assertive textual element than The Bone People’s glossary, which from the Contents page on is more homogenised with the prevailing English text.

Surely the various complexities of these two glossaries show the need for a better way of critically engaging with them that does not lead to the re-accentuation of the binary terms in which the scholarly discussion about their genre has been couched so far. Such a methodology needs to be adapted to the different forms of these glossaries and of others like them in other texts. But some terminological minesweeping is required in order to develop this methodology, for a novel and a glossary are different textual forms and should not be compared like for like. A novel is a work of the imagination in fictional form whereas a glossary is a meta-text that according to The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, comprises “a list with explanations, often accompanied by a text, of abstruse, obsolete, dialectal, or technical terms.” The failure to take this difference substantially into account explains why the debate around Hulme’s and Lucashenko’s glossaries as instruments of post-colonial language relationships has defaulted, thus far, to a binary approach insensitive to the complexities of linguistic relations in post-colonial and multi-cultural nations. Ignoring the formal difference between novel and glossary patronises a reading that proceeds by binary opposition, and thus hierarchy.

By contrast, my approach is to read these glossaries as texts that can be read and interpreted as one might read and interpret the novels they adjourn, and also with close attention to the architecture of their relationship to the novels they accompany. This close reading methodology enables critical attention to the differences amongst glossaries, as much as to the differences between them and the texts they gloss. One consequence of this is that, as I have shown above, a text might be conservative so far as its novel segment is concerned, yet radical so far as its glossary is concerned (Mullumbimbay), or vice versa (The Bone People).

To recap, “tidalectics” provides a way of engaging with the post-colonial/abroad (linguistic) complexities of island nations and literatures. It denotes “a dynamic and shifting relationship between land and sea that allows island literatures to be engaged in their spatial and historical complexity” (DeLoughrey 2-3). The methodological challenge for my article is to show how “tidalectics” is useful to a consideration of that sub-genre of post-colonial novels containing glossaries. Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey’s unpacking of “tidalectics” considers not just islands but also the colonial relationships of (archetypally mainland European) colonial forces to islands. Referring to the popularity of “desert-island stories” (12), DeLoughrey notes how “Since the colonial expansion of Europe, its literature has increasingly inscribed the island as a reflection of various political, sociological, and colonial practices” (13). Further, “European inscriptions of island space” have been unfolding imperial logic and must be recognised as ideological tools that helped make colonial expansion possible” (13). DeLoughrey also underscores the characteristics of such “desert-island stories” (12), including how accidental colonization of “a desert isle has been adorned by a romanticised trip of empire building and of British literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (13). Shipwrecks are the most common narrative device of such “accidents”.

Drawing on the broad continuum of the several significations of “abroad”, one can draw a parallel between the novel-glossary relationship and the mainland-island relationship DeLoughrey outlines. I recall here Stephen Sleigh’s suggestion that “the real social relations of post-colonial cultures appear, through the mediation of the text’s language of narration, in the
thematic dimension of the post-colonial magic realist work” (12). Adapting Slemon’s approach, one might read the formal (as opposed to thematic) dimension of the glossary in a post-colonial narrative like *The Bone People* or *Mullumbimby* as another literary appearance of “the real social relations of post-colonial cultures” (Slemon 12). What’s appearing is the figure of the island in the form of the glossary: hence, my neologism “glossary islands”. These novels are thus not only examples of island novels to be read via “tidalectics”, but of novels with their own islands appended to them, as glossaries, in the “abroad” of their textuality.

Thus, rather than seeing a glossary in a binary either/or way as a sign of the (artificial) supremacy of either English or the Indigenous language, one could use the notion of “glossary islands” to more fully engage with the complexities of post-colonialism as expressed in literature. Seen in this light, a glossary (as to *The Bone People* or *Mullumbimby*) can be read as an “abroad” through which the novel circulates its own ideas or inventions of post-colonial community. In this view, islands and glossaries are linked through being intensified sites of knowledge, as described by DeLoughrey. Crucially, the entire, complex, novel-glossary relationship needs to be analysed, and it is possible (though space considerations mediate against pursuing this here) that a post-colonial novel’s glossary expresses the (Freudian) unconscious knowledge of the novel itself.

Clearly then, there is a deep irony in how what Simon During calls the “Europeanising apparatus” of the glossary itself becomes, in Mullumbimby, an object of colonisation (During 374). (Recall how one comes across the glossary at the end of Lucashenko’s novel unexpectedly—accidentally—as a European might be cast up upon a desert island.) I hazard the suggestion that a post-colonial novel is more radical in its post-colonial politics the more “island-like” its glossary is, because this implies that the “glossary island” is being used to better work out the nature of post-colonial community as expressed and proposed in the novel itself. Here then, again, the seemingly more radical novel linguistically, *The Bone People*, seems in fact to be less radical than *Mullumbimby*, given the latter’s more “island-like” glossary. Certainly their prospects for post-colonial community are being worked out on different levels.

Working with the various significations of “abroad” that span the macro level of historical circumstances and the micro levels of post-colonial literature, this article has introduced a new methodological approach to engaging with Indigenous language glossaries at the end of post-colonial texts written largely in English. This methodology responds to the need to go beyond the binary either/or approach that has characterised the debate in this patch of post-colonial studies so far. From a post-colonial view of language relations, I suggest, is debilitating to prospects for post-colonial community in post-colonial, multi-cultural and island nations like Australia and New Zealand, where language flows are multiformar and complex. My proposed methodology, as highlighted in the neologism “glossary islands”, seems to show promise for the (re-) interpretation of *Mullumbimby* and *The Bone People* as texts that deal, albeit in different ways, with similar issues of language relations and of community. An “abroad” methodology provides a powerful infrastructure for engagement with domains such as post-colonialism that, as Stephen Siemon indicates, involve the intensive intermingling of the largest geo-historical circumstances with the detail, even minutiae, of the textual expression of those circumstances, as in literature.

References

Keywords
Glossary; Post-Colonial; Language; English; Indigenous; Australia; New Zealand

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