

Introduction to the book

Myth and Memory: Rethinking Stories of Indigenous-European Contact, edited collection, accepted by University of British Columbia Press. Anticipated publication date. Spring 2007.

**Myth Understandings:
First Contact, Over and Over Again**

by John Lutz

First contact.

The words leap off the page into the imagination. Between who? What happened? How do we know what happened?

Whether we are thinking science fiction or historic encounters, such as Columbus and the “Indians,” James Cook and the Hawaiians or Martin Frobisher and the Baffin Island Inuit, the questions are the same, the curiosity intense. The moment of contact between two peoples, two alien societies, marks the opening of an epoch and the joining of histories. What if it had happened differently? Would our world be different today? From our distance, the historic moment of contact seems so pregnant with possibilities, so full of hope and fear, and often, so laden with disappointment for what might have been.

But contact stories are not just about the past and the “might have been.” Contact stories grab our attention because they also explain how things are now and they contain a key to how they might be. For settler peoples they are origin stories, the explanation of how the immigrants got “here,” and they are the opening paragraph of a long rationale for displacing indigenous peoples. For indigenous peoples, the stories are the prologue to their world having been turned over. For both, the stories are the opening act in a play that is still unfolding. Is it a story of progress or a story of dislocation? Is it about bringing the gifts of civilization or robbing the wealth of the land? Depending on one’s viewpoint, the plot of the play and blocking the performance varies dramatically. Each needs its own opening scene.

All over the world settler populations and indigenous peoples are engaged in negotiations over legitimacy, power, and rights. In New Zealand, Australia and Canada this takes the form of litigation and negotiations over treaty and aboriginal rights. In the United States it is manifesting in a struggle over cultural property, archaeological sites and human remains. At root, these are all struggles over what is an accurate recounting of what happened – about history – about what

we believe. The stakes are huge. The legitimacy of the settler nations and indigenous claims to be the rightful owners or caretakers of the land and resources are based on these contact stories.

Comparing indigenous and explorer accounts of the same meetings brings the collision of fundamentally different systems of thought into sharp relief. Europeans and indigenous people had (and in some cases still have,) incommensurable beliefs about what motivated behavior, about fate, about trade, about reality. The juxtaposition of multiple systems of knowing challenges our culturally specific meanings of event, of time, of place, of narrative and of history itself. Immediately, we are asked to evaluate written versus oral traditions and then even more challenging, to decide between explanations based on different notions of what is real and what is imaginary.

First contact *and* the imaginary are, it turns out, closely linked. When we look for that moment of “First Contact” in historical encounters, that moment when two peoples stumbled upon each other unexpectedly – when two cultures were caught off-guard by the novelty and strangeness of “the other” – it retreats into the imagination. What we find instead is that Europeans did not discover the unexpected. They went into new territories full of expectations, ideas and stereotypes and what they found was – in large measure – what they expected to find. It was not the “new” that they encountered so much as what the popular myths of the day suggested they would find. Christopher Columbus found “the Indies” and Indians; Jacques Cartier found the rapids that marked the entrance to “La Chine” – China. Martin Frobisher, who found “gold” on Baffin Island, was one of many whose gold, when smelted, was no more than dross.

We often think of Christopher Columbus’ 1492 landfall as the “real first, first encounter.” Yet we know that Norse had been to North America in the years around 1,000 and that European fisherman had been fishing the Grand Banks off North East America for a long time before Columbus. But even if Columbus had no knowledge of his predecessors, his encounter was the product of expectations, conditioned by imaginary worlds conjured up long before his arrival. Rather than his account being strictly a report of what he saw, Columbian scholar Peter Hulme, argues what Columbus produced was a “compendium of European fantasies about the orient.” Hulme shows that the descriptions in Columbus’ text drew directly from a European discourse of “Orientalism,” drawn from Columbus’ reading of Marco Polo and a discourse of the savagery of “the other” taken from the classical writers Pliny, Homer and Herodotus.¹ The classical accounts, which passed for factual knowledge in their time, of monsters and cannibals, formed the foundation for Columbus’ descriptions of the “West Indies.” Recent work on Marco Polo shows that his eye-witness accounts were ghost-written and were likely fables derived from other jailed travelers.² Columbus’ account, imbued with all these mythological associations, is now studied

1 Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (Methuen: London and New York, 1986) 18, 21; Jonathan Hart, “Images of the Native in Renaissance Encounter Narratives.” *Ariel* (1994) 25(4): 55-76.

2 The three “monstrous races” most prominent in Columbus’ journal are first mentioned in Homer (amazons, Iliad, 3.189, 6.186) and Herodotus (anthropophagi, IV, 128; Cynocephali, IV,

as a factual record of the contact moment. So, the first, “first contact story” is also, in Hulme’s words, “the first fable of European beginnings in America.”³

The inability to see the new world with fresh eyes is also evident from the illustrations which were attached to Columbus’ writings and those that followed him. In the engravings, the people, the flora and fauna and geography, all look European. The visual references are to the classical era of the ancient Greeks rather than the new “Americans”.⁴ Europeans did not see their “new worlds” with fresh eyes; they saw them through the lenses of their ancient stories.

Nor was the experience any more novel to the peoples of the Americas or the South Seas. For the indigenous people, whose old worlds became new to Europeans, even the very first of the documented voyages were not their first encounters with strangers. Five hundred years before Columbus, Northern Europeans – Vikings – had built one and probably more settlements on the eastern shores of America. Possibly other undocumented strangers had come from the east. Almost certainly indigenous Americans had intermittent visitors from the west.⁵

Yet, even these visitors were not new, for the indigenous peoples of the Americas and the Antipodes had extensive experience with visitors from a spirit world, from where they imagined many of the early Europeans had come. Moreover, many had prophets who had foretold the arrival of these unusual visitors. Rather than being something new, these strangers were usually seen as being something old – the dead returned, ancient people or spirits revisiting.⁶ Like the Europeans, indigenous people drew their new encounters from, and into, their old mythologies.

So for both parties, there was always an element to first contact that was not new as much as it was a performance pantomimed on the beaches, riverbanks, or decks around the globe,

191; Amazons, IV, 110-17,) quoting Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*, 271; for an introduction to Polo bibliography see John Critchley, *Marco Polo’s Book*, (Aldershot, G.B.: Variorum, 1992).

3 It is not likely that the blind poet Homer saw the Amazons ‘with his own eyes’.

4 Rachel Dogget, *New World of Wonders: European Images of the Americas, 1492-1900*, (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1992); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, (Chicago, University of Chicago 1991); E. H. Gombrich, *Art and illusion : a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, (London, Phaldon, 1972).

5 From the west see: R. T. Callaghan, “The Use of Simulation Models to Estimate Frequency and Location of Japanese Edo Period Wrecks Along the Canadian Pacific Coast,” *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* (2003) 27: 74-94; From the east see the intriguing DNA evidence in Theodore G. Schurr, “Mitochondrial DNA and the Peopling of the New World,” *American Scientist* v. 88 (May-June 2000), 246-253.

6 See for example, the anthology of contact stories by Julia Blackburn, *The White Men, The First Responses of Aboriginal Peoples to the White Man*, (London: Orbis, 1979).

contact played itself out following ancient scripts as each side drew the other into its own imaginative world.

To call first contact an “event” then, is partially misleading, for several reasons. Although, using European records, we can date many encounters to a chronological moment, the meaning of that moment, depended on the long sweep of the centuries-old stories that the participants brought with them. And very clearly, from the earliest encounters, stories spread among European seafarers and throughout Europe so that subsequent voyagers already “knew” what to expect. The latter-day voyagers sailed with the stories of Columbus and his successors as cargo, setting the stage for the next series of first encounters, over and over again. Similarly, the stories traveled vast distances along the coast and inland among indigenous peoples. As Europeans moved along the coasts, or up rivers, and as indigenous people ventured down, there were succeeding sets of first encounters; each, in some measure, a product of the last.

Oral narratives will often unsettle the European notion of event which is usually thought of as a discrete and bounded incident. Indigenous people may frame the event differently with different causality and temporality, and oral narratives sometimes consider a series of related happenings, (in terms of their world view) into a single story.⁷

Instead of thinking of a “first contact” as an event, Mary Louise Pratt offers the more useful idea of a “contact zone.” We can think of the contact zone as first, a space across which one could map a moving wave of first contacts, and second, a temporal zone – an extended period over which the encounters happened. We could also expand the notion to include the zone of discourse where stories of first contact play out.⁸

Temporally, we can often clock the opening of various contact zones. But when did they close? If a contact zone is a period in which two cultures were meeting each other for the first time, in America this spans the period from the Viking encounter around 1000, or if you prefer, the Columbian encounter 1492, into the mid-Twentieth Century when all the Arctic and Amazon peoples had finally met a European. If we think of the contact zone as the period in which two cultures are still struggling to figure the other out, a zone in which mis-communication and conflicting mythologies govern interrelationships as much as shared understandings, these zones lasted even longer. The essays in this book argue that we are still in that contact zone.

Not only are settler populations and indigenous people still meeting in zones of mutual incomprehension, a case ably made by Edward (Ted) Chamberlin’s lead essay, they are also still

7 Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXXV(3) (1994) 412 ; John Lutz, “What Connected at Contact? Comparing Aboriginal and European Contact Narratives from the Pacific Coast,” Paper Presented to the Canadian Historical Association Conference, Quebec City, May 2001.

8 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

creating and telling new contact stories and challenging the old ones, as the chapters by Michael Harkin, Wendy Wickwire, Judith Binney, Patrick Moore, Ian MacLaren and Keith Carlson all demonstrate.

This book takes a critical look at how contact stories have been, and are being told and used. In spite of a few anthologies of contact stories, and some excellent examinations of historical encounters informed by contact stories, there has been little scholarship that has examined first contact stories as a genre or an ongoing “contact zone.” In the 1940s R.G. Collingwood wrote that each generation of historians re-writes history in the light of the concerns of the day.⁹ Today, what is most important to a new generation and a much more inclusive range of story-tellers is the contact stories themselves, and the currency these stories have.

Natalie Zemon Davis identified four strategies that the current generation of scholars are using to move the European from the centre of contact stories: 1) describing the ‘gaze: focussing on European attitudes and images of non-European peoples as “projections of anxieties” or elaborations of European categories. 2) Privileging both indigenous people and Europeans as actors and reactors, primarily in terms of domination and resistance. 3) A focus on what Richard White has called ‘the middle ground’ a space of shared and contested meaning focused around exchange and mixture and, 4) to look at cultures in contact with each other in “terms of absolute simultaneity, radical contemporaneity...seeking signs of the common human experience” but “insisting at the same time on the existence of strong and concrete cultural difference and the importance of divergent context.” The essays in this volume draw particularly on the last three strategies but offer another possibility: identifying the mythology and the history embedded in stories that emerge from both indigenous and European contact stories, treating both as equally credible and incredible. Several chapters in this volume develop yet another strategy: focusing primarily on how indigenous people have recorded, verified and used contact stories within their own oral and written literatures.¹⁰

This book stems from a meeting of ten diverse scholars, a mix of historians, anthropologists, linguists and literary scholars. It is an attempt to bring them into a dialogue with each other as well as the stories, and to create a critical mass of commentary.¹¹ The scope is

9 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956).

10 Natalie Zemon Davis, “Polarities, Hybridities: What Strategies for Decentreing?” in Germaine Warkentin and Carolyn Podruchney, eds. *Decentring the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multidisciplinary Perspective, 1500-1700* (University of Toronto, 2001). 21-31. She notes these strategies are not mutually exclusive.

11 The meeting was the centre piece of a larger colloquium called “Worlds in Collision: Critically Re-Evaluating Contact Narratives,” hosted by the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria, at a retreat centre north of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada in February 2002. The chapters here were much enriched by the other presentations and questions from the colloquium.

international: the stories come from New Zealand, the Eastern and Western Seaboards of the United States, subarctic Canada and the Kalahari . As a reflection of the active scholarship in the area, several examine the Northeast Pacific. Each focuses on a particular time and place, and all reflect on the larger issues raised by first encounters. Four themes run through the book, each an avenue to understanding the contact zone: Currency, Performance, Ambiguity and Power.

Currency

Ted Chamberlin's opening chapter invites us to think about the notion of "currency". Currency speaks of time and of belief. As he says, "currency," the kind minted and printed by governments, only has value if people believe in it. Like the coin of the realm, stories have currency only if people believe in them. Chamberlin highlights *the* key question, because all the essays in the book ask us to re-examine what we believe, and why we believe some stories and not others. Several of the essays here focus on this kind of currency, the question of belief.

John Lutz develops this line of inquiry by examining both the contact events and the ensuing stories. He contrasts the so-called "realist tales" told by the settler societies with the myth-linked stories that have been passed down, or arrive in a dream to the current generation of indigenous people in the Northeast Pacific. Contact stories are all about belief, and Lutz argues that the "rational European stories" that pass for realist accounts, are in fact as rooted in a European mythology as others are in an indigenous "myth world".

One of the great reservations about engaging indigenous contact stories is their connection to the world of story-telling. In an oral culture, can one tell truth from fiction, and if so, how? Keith Carlson's chapter looks at the importation of contact stories and other oral histories into the contemporary world of the courts and considers the dilemma of two competing oral histories. We have established criteria for evaluating competing written texts in a western tradition but we are ill-equipped to evaluate indigenous stories. Through a decade of research with the Stō:lo [pronounced Stah-lo] First Nation near Vancouver, Canada, Carlson describes their criteria for accepting or rejecting oral histories. When the Stō:lo want to use the courts or the court of public opinion, how should the different oral accounts be judged as more or less true?

Carlson's essay identifies Stō:lo tests for historical accuracy. The Stō:lo criteria are not based on probability or corroborating evidence in the sense that most non-indigenous historians or courts would use. For them the corroborating evidence is the reputation of the story teller and the genealogy of the story as traced through previous story tellers. The cultural and physical risks of mis-telling a story are high among the Stō:lo and this has served to preserve the culturally relevant information in stories over long time spans. Both Carlson and Wendy Wickwire point out that in the indigenous traditions they study, there is no notion of fiction. Like scholarly writing, these oral cultures have clear rules that govern where embellishment is allowed and where it is not.

Wendy Wickwire's chapter also focuses on the question of belief. Her chapter maps out the historiography of a brilliant indigenous historian from the Okanagan Nation in British

Columbia. After over a decade of work with story teller Harry Robinson, she returned after his death to stories she had set aside as not fitting into the ethnographic mode. These stories offer an indigenous exploration of why white colonists are dominant (they have no regard for the truth), a validation of an indigenous world view and a prophecy for a more balanced future relationship. In so doing she asks us to reinterpret Boasian anthropology, and to reconsider the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous views of our own history.

Stories have another kind of “currency” in the sense that they are all of our time. When we retell, or even re-read contact stories, we bring them into our time and place. The very act of bringing the stories to us, transports us into the contact zone. As E.H. Carr noted a long time ago, “History is not the past: it is the consciousness of the past used for present purposes.” The stakes tied up in contact stories are very much about today.¹² As historians and the courts have moved towards understanding and giving more credibility to oral narratives the question of how we deal with conflicting stories within the oral tradition becomes more urgent. Wickwire, Chamberlin and Carlson all raise the issue of whether we can develop the listening skills to evaluate them.

Patrick Moore invites us to take a closer look at how indigenous people, in this case the Kaska of the subarctic, classify stories. He finds that linguistic clues separate “true” historical stories from those that are told more to entertain or poke fun. Moore notes how place and time, (what Mikhail Bakhtin called “chronotope”) are characterized differently in the different genres of stories. From his essay we discover the range of acceptable renderings of the past in a Kaska world view.¹³

Contact performances fall into patterns of genres. This is true in European traditions where we have a range of storytelling techniques from the scientific to the epic, from the novel to the comic book. Both Carlson and Moore point out that indigenous traditions also have their range of genres. Moore develops in a Kaska context the notion suggested by Lutz that each culture only has access to certain cultural forms in which to place novel experiences. Moore and Judith Binney focus on intertextuality – the relationship of stories or texts to each other. Moore finds that several contact stories relating the novel appearances of Europeans are transposed onto longstanding vision quest narratives or pre-existing formulas for humorous stories. He also draws our attention to the different understanding and importance of time in indigenous and immigrant stories. So stories also have another kind of currency, they flow over time and across space. How they flow is through the magic of performance.

Performance

12 Dening, *Performances*, 72 quoting E.H. Carr.

13 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1996).

Something was always exchanged on first contact. Often the exchange included goods, but it always included attempts at communication, usually very deliberately contrived. Even indigenous people, who often had less time to prepare for the encounters, were quick to assemble their chiefs or ceremonial speakers, don their regalia, and marshal their symbols of wealth and power. Both sides to the encounter had much at stake: trying to suggest they were powerful but not threatening, interested in exchange, but that they would not be bested.

Typically, the parties would speak to each other without any comprehension, then they would turn to gesture. Often the contact events themselves were elaborately staged, intensely theatrical, performances. The performances were pantomimed, they were sung and danced, they were spoken and they were enacted. Symbols such as flags and masks, uniforms and effigies were invoked and exchanged. As Stephen Greenblatt observed, these first contacts were “very often contact between representatives bearing representations.”¹⁴

Not only were the first contact events themselves performances, a focus of the Lutz chapter, the retellings of these stories are also performances. Indigenous historical performance has given priority to the spoken form, to song, and dance and art. Although some groups, like the Aztecs have been writing their history for centuries, most have adopted writing as a mode of performance in the last century. Wendy Wickwire, Keith Carlson, Patrick Moore and Judith Binney all stress the performative aspect of indigenous story-telling in their essays.

Storytellers in the modern European tradition wrote their narratives down. We have been accustomed to treating these exploration accounts as first-hand eye-witness accounts, and we often accord them more weight than the mediated stories told by oral transmission. The “I/eye was there” nature of these accounts is what accords them so much credibility. Yet, Ian MacLaren’s chapter probes one of these “I saw” European stories, a well known account by the famous ‘Indian painter’ Paul Kane, and points out that neither Kane nor most of the explorers we rely upon, actually wrote the texts published under their name. Moreover, some the accounts in Kane’s journal were borrowed from other writers, and some were exaggerated or fabricated to place Kane near or at the centre of the events. This and his other work – so called realistic accounts – casts exploration accounts as performances for an audience, often written by a team of creators.¹⁵

A good comparison of an indigenous oral narrative and its European counterpart is not the first recording of the story by an explorer, but the retelling of the story. In Euro-American traditions we perform our history in pageants, grand commemorative events like the American bicentennial or Olympic opening games, opening of Parliaments, or in religious events like an Easter service. We sing them in our national anthems and our pop music; we dance them in our

14 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 119; Denning, *Performances*; Thomas, *Entangled Objects*.

15 See especially I. S. MacLaren, "Exploration/Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Author." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* (Spring 1992) 5: 39-68.

ballets as well as in street Rap. We also perform them in writing, in plays, in poems, in historical novels and in academic monographs; we perform them in art and we print them on our currency. We perform for ourselves and we perform for the others. Looking at contact stories as performance in the context of settler-indigenous relations, is essential “to thinking about identity, both individual and collective.”¹⁶

The “arrival of Europeans” in the Arctic or the Pacific, the founding of this state or that city, which we find in history books, travel guides, poems, plays and songs are good examples. Michael Harkin’s essay focuses specifically on how one contact event, the establishment and disappearance of the Roanoke Colony on the eastern seaboard of the United States has been shaped and reshaped to give legitimacy to the settler population. These story-telling performances self-consciously retell the encounter, compressing and sometimes re-ordering time lines, shifting or conflating places and transposing people, in effect – telescoping time and space into a poetic unity. They are, in Chamberlin’s words “ceremonies of belief as well as chronicles of events”. These are the so-called charter myths that nations, ethnic and social groups use to justify their presence, their occupation of land, their inheritances denied, their rights to dispossess and oppress others who have a less legitimate story. Harkin’s chapter shows how even a colony that disappeared without a trace can be used to legitimate a subsequent settler population.

Obviously, performance requires artifice. By definition it cannot be true, since it is meant to be a representation, yet its power rests in its ability to make us believe. Performance is the creation of meaning, recreating and referring to events that are now distant. To invoke the past we have to resort to art. In theatre it is through costumes and set. In text it is through descriptive recreations, and by speaking through the voice of a witness from the past, or the appropriation of another language. This is not just to deceive, as Chamberlin reminds us, but to deceive to tell the truth. We are all familiar with the notion that fiction can sometimes be truer than a recitation of facts. This preference goes back at least to Aristotle who preferred poetry to history because the former was the “vehicle of universal and essential truths to the latter which merely trafficked in the contingent, specific, unique, superficial facts.”¹⁷

Ambiguity

The most piquant of ethnographic moments are those of first contact, writes Greg Dening in his book *Performances*, because of their “extravagant ambiguity.” Each side was left to guess what message the other was trying to exchange. Each side continually revised its attempt to

16 L. G. Moses, “Performative traditions in American Indian History” in *A Companion to American Indian History*, Philip Deloria and Neil Salisbury, eds. (Blackwell, 2002), 194.

17 Quoted in Terence Turner, “Ethno-Ethnohistory: Myth and History in Native South American Representation of Contact with Western Society,” *Rethinking History and Myth: Indigenous South American Perspectives on the Past*, Jonathan D. Hill, ed. (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988) 253.

communicate looking for signs of recognition from the other. These were “real” ethnographic moments in the sense that each side was looking for cross-cultural clues about meaning and motivation, though often through very narrow lenses. Of course, misunderstanding was communicated as often as meaning. Sometimes these could cause offence, but so often, the extravagant ambiguity of the moment allowed each side to make what they pleased of the messages coming from the other.¹⁸

Inevitably, communication means translation. Even gesture and gesticulation requires translation, as travelers well know. Anyone who has waved “bye-bye” in China to have the departing party return, or as anyone who has tried to make the affirmative North American ‘OK’ sign (by bringing the thumb and the forefinger together) in a South American country, will have experienced the cultural specificity of gesture.

Also inevitably, there is some exchange of language, and over time specialized interpreters of language begin to mediate and funnel the exchange. Often, as the Dauenhauers’ chapter suggests, translators were people already “in between.” Sometimes captives on one side or the other, other times the offspring of sexual contacts that so rapidly became part of the wider intercourse. It might seem that the presence of a translator, especially as they gained fluency in each language, would reduce the ambiguity. In writing of the quintessential /archetypical translator, Cortes’ Doña Marina, Stephen Greenblatt writes that language is the companion of empire, and of course, to some extent he is right. But the translators also have their own part to play in creating spaces of misunderstanding and undermining the European project.¹⁹

Translators became the bottleneck through which communication between whole societies began to flow, and so often a single person had enormous influence on the outcome of contact encounters. The translator was always, by definition, something of a hybrid. Translators, as Lewis Hyde notes, may earn their pay from one side or another, but some of it always comes from existing in the “in-between.” The translators always had an agenda of their own, and this filter or perhaps more accurately, this muddiness injected into the process, was part and parcel of the contact encounters. Hyde points to an old Italian pun– “‘traduttore, traditore/ translator, traitor’ to remind us that the translator who connects two people always stands between them.”²⁰

The Dauenhauers’ essay is unique in the North American context and rare elsewhere. Its focus is the translators themselves: the three translators which connected Russia to the Tlingit

18 Greg Denning, Performances, [citation]; Richard White calls these “creative and expedient misunderstandings” in *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) x.

19 Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 145.

20 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World, Mischief, Myth and Art*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 264, 300; Eric Hinderaker, “Translation and Cultural Brokerage,” in *A Companion to American Indian History*, Phillip Deloria and Neil Salisbury, eds. (Blackwell, 2002): 357-375.

inhabitants of America over 30 years of the contact zone. In one case a captive, and in another a rescued hostage, all the children of Tlingit mothers, it was always a question for both sides: where does their loyalty lie? Should we believe them? How should we interpret what the interpreters are saying?

The issues of translation and ambivalence are still with us now in the contact zone. When we deal with indigenous accounts, and even with many of the European accounts, we do so through translations from one language to our own. But even texts originally written in our own language need translation from the language of the time they were written to our own. Over many lifetimes words come and go from circulation, their meanings shift, and the references that were once common knowledge become obscure. We perform the role of translators when we enter the contact zone. As the essays in this book show us, translators are transformers, transforming not only words but ideas and even whole cosmologies into something that “makes sense” to us. In western and many indigenous mythologies, this kind of linguistic transformation work has been seen as the work of the trickster, since misunderstanding is so often injected. As Hyde says: “Translation from one language to another is Eshu-work, Legba-work, Hermes-neutics,” and we may add, Coyote- and Raven-work. When we translate, we perform the trickster/transformer.

The trickster figures prominently in most non-Christian traditions. On North America's Northwest Coast, the Nuxalk People tell us the creator thought one language would be enough for all peoples, but Raven, the *Trickster*, made many languages, to have more sport in the spaces of misunderstanding.²¹ The chapters by Wickwire, Chamberlin and Lutz, engage the role of tricksters in contact encounters.

If extravagant ambiguity was present at the first encounter, it has only grown with each retelling of the stories:

Native and Stranger each possessed the other in their interpretations of the other. They possessed one another in an ethnographic moment that was transcribed into text and symbol.They entertained themselves with their histories of their encounter.²²

Michael Harkin's chapter looks at how the story of the “Lost Colony of Roanoke” has become entertainment and symbol, at how the ambiguity has been stretched to engage settler audiences while it tells them a story that they need to hear. Chamberlin's chapter is very much focused on: “how the uncertainties of representation (whether something is there or not) and of communication (whether we believe the teller or the tale) generate the very certainties – the truths and beauties and goodnesses – to which we give assent in the oral and written texts of religion, law, science and the arts.”

21 Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*, 299; there is also a Lushootseed story like this told in 1923 by Chief William Shelton at Tulalip in Vi Hilbert, *Haboo : native American stories from Puget Sound* (Seattle : University of Washington Press, c1985).

22 Denning, *Performances*, 45, 167.

Judith Binney's focuses on how Ngai Tuhoe and Ngati Whare, two New Zealand Maori tribes living deep in the interior of the North Island, interpreted their encounters with Europeans through their own historical/prophetic ideas of 'shelter'. One narrative tells of the "mythical" white kawau (cormorant); others draw on biblical constructs. She shows how these narratives are continually redeployed to suit new situations. She calls this kind of history, which interweaves Maori narrative forms (including prophecies and story frameworks from mythologies) with those heard, and often read about Maori and European cultures (the bible, anthropological accounts, white histories), "plereomatic history".

Plereomatic history is easily recognizable in oral history but the concept applies to European contact stories as well where it is sometimes called 'inter-textuality'. When Columbus left Europe with writings of Pliny and Marco Polo as cargo or when James Cook sailed the South Pacific with Frances Drake in his library and other accounts partially remembered in his head, each produced contact stories that were plereomatic. Within Columbus' "first-hand" inscriptions were European mythological patterns and stories read at second hand. In the same vein, the plays that Harkin discusses are plereomatic. These histories of Roanoke interweave myth-forms, eye-witness recollections, and second-hand interpretations.

The notion that all contact narratives are a mix of eye-witness observations and remembered prior accounts and myth-forms helps us understand why, even in the verbatim records of the European explorers, we can find ambivalence. The ambivalence is the space between what they saw and what their cultures permitted them to see. This is the hybridity of the text where Homi Bhabha has argued that we can seek a reflection of the native voice. In the cracks in the European logic within these texts is the space of the "out-of power-language." Here there is also a recognition that even as Europe is imposing its own stereotypes and myths on the "native," that there was a dialogue going on.²³ As the European world begins to alter the indigenous, something, including fragments of the indigenous myth-world, is being transmitted to Europe, becomes re-interpreted, and starts to act on the Europeans.²⁴

Power

The ambiguity in the performance of contact stories opens a gap in which one can sometimes discern what is at the heart of these stories: the workings of power within and between cultural groups. This is true from several aspects. At a literal level, it is evident when

23 The classic statement is: Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817" *Europe and its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference of the Sociology of Literature*, Francis Barker et al., eds, (Colchester, 1985) 89-106; Roland Barthes quoted in D. Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 6-7.

24 Bernard Smith, *European vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850 : a study in the history of art and ideas*, (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1960);

we think of the balance of power in those contact moments the stories describe. On the one hand, as Harkin shows, the story of Roanoke is told to suggest the longevity and legitimacy of European settlement in Virginia. It can also be read against the grain, so to speak, as a story about indigenous power, and the inability of Europeans to survive in their “new world” without help from indigenous people who remained comfortable and powerful in their “old world”. Although it is seldom explicit in the contact stories, between the lines it is apparent that in North America, at least well into the sixteenth century, indigenous people had the power to determine success or failure of new European settlements.²⁵

Power is also at the heart of contemporary re-tellings. If contact stories are kept alive it is because they have continuing importance – a role to play in each of the respective performing communities. Binney, Moore, and Wickwire describe how stories function to redress power relations between the native and newcomer. They offer insight into how history is generated and understood by a people and look at how some indigenous people respond to political and economic domination in story. Indigenous story tellers may challenge the legitimacy of the arrival of Europeans or explain it as the working out of a supernatural process that belongs in their own mythology, as in the case of the Robinson stories in Wickwire’s chapter. The stories may poke fun at the Europeans, leveling the playing field so to speak, as the Kaska stories in Moore’s chapter do. Humour and irony are common strategies to challenge and reorder hierarchies of power.²⁶

Contact stories are re-performed in the context of settler nations to naturalize the presence of Europeans in former indigenous spaces but they also have a more fundamental role to play in supporting European ways of knowing. Mary Pratt has written about how exploration is tied to the expansion of science in the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment. Pratt shows how science provided Europeans with a way of knowing the world. Since then, Europeans have attempted to universalize a specifically-European world view which they call “scientific” or “rational”.

Ian MacLaren’s chapter gives a concrete example of how contact narratives, themselves performances and imaginary productions, were used in the nineteenth century by Herbert Spencer as part of the foundation for the modern, scientific discipline of sociology. Like Linneaus, who a century before used travelers’ accounts of Patagonian giants, Amazons and other mythological creatures to build his taxonomy of animals, Spencer avidly combed the exploration accounts of his day to create a science of society that would distinguish Europeans

25 We can see this in the determinants of success or failure in the French settlements along the St. Lawrence, the British settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia and the Spanish settlements along the Florida coast: J. E. Kicza, “First Contacts,” *A Companion to American Indian History*, P. Deloria and N. Salisbury, (Blackwell, 2002) 27-45.

26 Jonathan Hill, “Myth and History” in Hill ed., *Rethinking History and Myth*, 6; M. Holden, “Making all the Crooked Ways Straight: The Satirical Portrait of Whites in Coast Salish Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 89 (1976).

from more primitive cultures. Spencer's description of so-called primitive societies was the foundation on which he based his idea of Europe's progress. One of the groups he chose to make his 'scientific comparison' with was the Chinook people of what is now the Oregon-Washington border in the United States. As MacLaren shows, Spencer's main source was the eye-witness narrative of Paul Kane. Only Paul Kane did not write the section in his book on the Chinook people. Kane's published narrative actively exaggerated his encounters with the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest, and his ghost writer(s) freely plagiarized from other travelers, whose own accounts bordered on the apocryphal. The birth of sociology, like science and the other social sciences more generally, drew from the outset on the mythologized interpretations of Europe's contact with the other. Then, "scientific knowledge" was used as a marker of European superiority over indigenous mythology and superstition, and part of the larger rationale for colonization.

Conclusion

Contact – the moment when a match hits the striker, sparks fire the tinder, a flash of light illuminates an encounter. It is the moment when stories begin and we seem to be drawn to the moment – the story – like moths to a flame.

All the writing in this book, ironically, is about listening. Collectively the chapters offer an introduction to the range of acceptable renderings of the past, in some indigenous and European cultures. Ian MacLaren, Michael Harkin and John Lutz, all remind us that the European contact accounts are stories too. Wendy Wickwire, Judith Binney, Keith Carlson and Patrick Moore show that indigenous stories are history. The Dauenhauers invite us to look at the people who were themselves the point of contact between cultures while J.E. Chamberlin writes about the difference between hearing and listening. Listening is the stage of comprehension, of paying attention, which follows acknowledging sounds. If we know how, we can listen to written stories too, hearing old stories in new ways and unsettling our familiar notions of first contact and all the history that follows.

Contact stories (especially European) are sometimes taken as history and sometimes as myth (especially indigenous ones). They are sometimes taken as works of literature or science. In fact, these are not separate categories. Myth and history, science and fiction are not exclusive but complementary and inseparable ways of knowing. Contact stories were and are all of these things.

The encounter moments, so full of misunderstandings, were worked into both science and myth. In each culture, the stories are now part of education, history, folklore, and "common-sense" knowledge that guides our understanding of current events. Such stories, as the great indigenous story teller, Thomas King, reminds us, "assert tremendous control over our lives, informing who we are and how we treat one another as friends, family, and citizens."²⁷

²⁷ Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, (Toronto: Anansi, 2003) 9.

Critically reading/hearing contact stories means engaging “myth understandings”. Rethinking contact stories means rethinking the relationship between history and myth and this, as Jonathan Hill has argued, should not just be an activity for scholars. It is a road to understanding our “own modes of mythic and historical consciousness” and how they differ from those in other societies. And this is what it takes, writes Michel Foucault, to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.”²⁸

When we read or listen to contact stories, we are immediately spirited into the contact zone where different cultures are meeting. We become the translators. And as the Dauenhauers show, translators inevitably change meanings. We cannot help but put our own spin on the stories, which have themselves been spun by someone else. This is discouraging news if we are looking for absolute truth about the past, but if our goal is understanding past and present, there is something very encouraging in this knowledge.

The hopeful part is that, for us, like those we read about, in spite of all the transformation and misunderstanding, something is communicated at contact. In spite of all that is lost in translation, something of the encounter between strangers, something about the other, is transmitted. Something of the contact moment is absorbed and each of the parties is changed, sometimes profoundly, sometimes only by the addition of a story. Either way, contact stories show us that we have the capacity to get glimpses of a world beyond the horizon of our own cultures, beyond the fences of our minds. Every story we read or hear, changes us. The contact zone is a place of hope.

28 Jonathon Hill, “Myth and History,” in *Rethinking History and Myth*, 14-5; Michel Foucault, *Uses of Pleasure*, (History of Sexuality vol. 2, New York: Vintage, 1977) 9.