

## **“The Mystic Dragon Beyond the Sea”: Ethnographic Fantasy in Marius Barbeau’s Depiction of Northwest Coast Indigeneity**

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*This paper critically examines the work of Marius Barbeau, the preeminent Canadian anthropologist during the first half of the Twentieth Century. Barbeau has been widely honored and famed for his studies of northwest coast Indigenous peoples. Journal articles published by Barbeau during the 1930s and 40s are analyzed from a theoretical framework that acknowledges the many ethical issues of settler, academic discourse in the study of Indigenous peoples. By grounding Barbeau’s work within the context of the Nisga’a’s sophisticated struggle for recognition of their rights, title and sovereignty, it becomes clear that his anthropological theories reflected and supported the State’s aims. Barbeau’s journal articles not only confine the Nisga’a to a vanished past, they also cast doubt on the Nisga’a’s essential claim to Indigeneity. This paper argues that the Indigenous peoples in Barbeau’s publications must be recognized as the constructions of a Euro-educated employee of the Canadian government. Recognizing themes in academia that contribute to a harmful colonial ideology is critical for processes of decolonization.*

Marius Barbeau, the “father of Canadian anthropology,” enjoys an outstanding record of public admiration and academic honors.<sup>2</sup> He became a household name and a recognized

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Wendy Wickwire for her guidance and inspiration with this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Society of Canada’s Lorne Pierce Medal, 1950; Order of Canada, 1967; honorary doctorates from the University of Montreal and the University of Oxford; Marius Barbeau Medal established in 1985 to award excellent research in Canadian folklore and ethnology; many of Barbeau’s papers are kept in the Canadian Museum of History; named a “person of national historic importance” by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 1985; the

authority on Aboriginal peoples of Canada in the mid-twentieth century. This paper analyzes an assortment of Barbeau's many journal articles published between 1930 and 1945, including "Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art of the Northwest Coast of America;"<sup>3</sup> "Asiatic Migrations into America;"<sup>4</sup> "How Asia Used to Drip at the Spout;"<sup>5</sup> "Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade;"<sup>6</sup> and "The Aleutian Route of Migration into America."<sup>7</sup> My investigation of overlapping themes found in such journal articles will provide a window into Barbeau's larger ideological contribution to the formulation of a colonial discourse that has framed the state's relationship with Indigenous peoples of British Columbia's northwest coast. Critical reflection on Barbeau's founding academic narratives, which stretch into our current discourse, is a means of decolonizing the discipline of Anthropology itself.

I argue that the Aboriginal peoples in Barbeau's publications must be recognized as the constructions of a Euro-educated employee of the Canadian government. More pointedly, I see Barbeau's representation as a betrayal of the informants with whom he claimed affinity and friendship. Drawing on Diamond Jenness' remark that the Indigenous peoples adored Barbeau, I argue that such a comment needs to be historicized.<sup>8</sup>

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highest mountain in Nunavut is named "Barbeau Peak" in honor of Marius Barbeau.

<sup>3</sup> Marius Barbeau, "Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America," *The Geographical Review* 20, 2 (1930): 258-272.

<sup>4</sup> Marius Barbeau, "Asiatic Migrations into America," *Canadian Historical Review* 13 (1932): 403-417.

<sup>5</sup> Marius Barbeau, "How Asia Used to Drip at the Spout into America," *Washington Historical Quarterly* 24 (1933): 163-173.

<sup>6</sup> Marius Barbeau, "Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade," *Scientific Monthly* December (1942): 507-514.

<sup>7</sup> Marius Barbeau, "The Aleutian Route of Migration into America," *Geographical Review* 35 (1945): 424-443.

<sup>8</sup> For one, it is well known that Jenness and Barbeau disliked each other.

Had the peoples Barbeau studied been privy to the contents of Barbeau’s work and his childlike depictions of their elders, they would not have adored him. While Barbeau worked among the Nisga’a, they were fighting a sophisticated political battle against a colonial government. Yet, Barbeau’s ethnographic work powerfully undermined the Nisga’a and their efforts to assert their sovereign rights. Indeed, the public’s perception of Nisga’a strength and sovereignty was compromised by a leading academic who confines authentic Indigenous culture within a vanished past. In questioning the autonomy and historical longevity of Nisga’a culture and presence in North America, Barbeau casts doubt on the essential Indigeneity of the Nisga’a.

Throughout his extensive work on the Tsimshian, Barbeau consolidated rather than challenged the dominant view by neglecting to mention that the Nisga’a were powerful leaders in the Indigenous resistance movement.<sup>9</sup> In British Columbia, settlement, resource extraction, and industrialization occurred before Aboriginal land rights had been effectively recognized by the colonial government. First Nations suffered from a “loss of access to resources, economic marginalization and institutionalized racism.”<sup>10</sup> Less than ten years after the first Indian Reserve Commission, the Nisga’a mounted government protests concerning the land question. In 1910, the Nisga’a Land Committee barred settler access to their land and formed a legal case that drew on the legislative basis for Aboriginal title in Canada.<sup>11</sup> The Nisga’a sent petitions, asserting their land rights, to various colonial authorities.<sup>12</sup> To oppose the McKenna-

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Galois, “The Indian Rights Association, Native Protest Activity and the Land Question in British Columbia, 1903-1916,” *Native Studies Review* 8 (1992): 21.

<sup>10</sup> Galois, “The Indian Rights Association,” 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

McBride Royal Commission (1913-15), Nisga'a delegations travelled to Ottawa to lobby the federal government and meet with D.C. Scott.<sup>13</sup> While the Nisga'a Land Committee maintained a traditional structure, their active resistance was designed as "something White politicians and the White public could readily understand and would take more seriously than they had been taking traditional chiefs in traditional roles."<sup>14</sup> Although First Nations, such as the Nisga'a, collectively adapted to colonial culture by utilizing forms of 'white' protest and understood their land rights within the imperial regime, the provincial and federal government's determination to eliminate the inconvenience of Indigenous occupation on resource-rich land paralyzed the resolution of Aboriginal title in British Columbia. Barbeau never acknowledged the land struggle of the Tsimshian, nor their groundbreaking protest activity in the white political world. Although he claimed to be the close confidant and friend of prominent chiefs, in particular Chief Tetlanitsa, Barbeau manipulated this relationship for self-promotion and thereby expressed little empathy for the Aboriginal fight against the government.<sup>15</sup> In failing to acknowledge the innovative political dimensions of Nisga'a life, Barbeau denied the agency and vitality of peoples he purported to represent.

Barbeau's oeuvre also aligns with the Canadian government's policy of Aboriginal assimilation. As the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs (the equivalent of Deputy Minister today), Duncan Campbell Scott consistently placed First Nations in a vanished past. Scott's policy of banning potlatches, dancing, and drumming was an indication of how he saw the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Wickwire, Personal Communications, March 10, 2015.

place of traditional First Nations culture in the modern world.<sup>16</sup> He perceived the sacred traditions of First Nations as “meaningless and irrelevant rituals, which had persisted from an earlier age of ‘savage’ glory.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, through Salem-Wiseman’s study of Scott, it becomes apparent that Scott shamelessly sought to erase First Nations as a distinct population within the country. Scott justified the imposition of “compulsory enfranchisement” as a “necessary step toward the end of the ‘Indian problem.’”<sup>18</sup> Such state policies were born out of powerful colonial assumptions about Anglo-racial superiority and the decaying of Indigenous peoples. Similarly, salvage anthropologists<sup>19</sup> like Barbeau believed, and even perpetuated, a harmful narrative that cast First Nations as a vanishing race, conveniently removing them as obstacles to colonial ambitions. Barbeau repeatedly portrayed the villages, totems, and tribal customs of the Tsimshian as in decay.<sup>20</sup> The images selected to accompany his journal articles reinforced this narrative, whether the images were of clothing, totems, village scenes, people or artifacts, all appear to be tired and rotting with age.<sup>21</sup> They are the relics of a bygone era. Thus, both Scott and Barbeau, the

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa Salem-Wiseman, “Verily, The White Man’s Ways Were the Best”: Duncan Campbell Scott, Native Culture, and Assimilation,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 21, No (1996): 124.

<sup>17</sup> Salem-Wiseman, “Verily, The White Man’s Ways Were the Best,” 124.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>19</sup> Salvage anthropology refers to the removal of cultural artifacts and human remains from their Indigenous owners. This is justified by a colonial belief that the Indigenous race is disappearing, and so anthropologists must obtain and preserve artifacts.

<sup>20</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” 261; Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade,” 510, 507.

<sup>21</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade,” 510; Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 441, 440, 430-35; Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” 261, 263, 265-269.

politician and the social scientist, perpetuated “the message of a noble doomed race.”<sup>22</sup>

Further, in writing as a salvage anthropologist, Barbeau empowered himself to determine which aspects of Aboriginal culture could be considered ‘authentic,’ and which could not. Any aspect of culture that he perceived as influenced by European contact was discarded,<sup>23</sup> thereby denying First Nations the right to evolve and presenting them, as Barbeau phrases it: as the “decrepit survivors of a past age.”<sup>24</sup> He viewed any sign of European influence on First Nations as “cultural displacement” contributing to “Aboriginal cultural demise.”<sup>25</sup> Barbeau imagined the potlatch and totemic culture he studied in the northwest to be part of a larger social system headed for collapse.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, he characterized his fieldwork as a “race against time” and prioritized “efficiently collecting culture traits.”<sup>27</sup> He sought to “preserve the remnants of rapidly vanishing cultures to reconstruct authentic ‘prehistoric’ native cultures.”<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the end goal of such activities was to fill the archives and museum collections of Euro-Canadians.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, he ignored the negative impact of salvage

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<sup>22</sup> Laurence Nowry, *Man of Mana: Marius Barbeau* (Toronto: NC Press Limited, 1995), 302.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada, 1911-1951” in Julia Harrison and Regna Darnell, eds., *Historicizing Canadian Anthropology* (UBC Press, 2006): 53.

<sup>24</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 52.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Nurse, “Tradition and Modernity: The Cultural Work of Marius Barbeau” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 1997), 112.

<sup>27</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 55.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Nurse, “But Now Things Have Changed: Marius Barbeau and the Politics of Amerindian Identity,” *Ethnohistory* 48, 2 (2001): 444.

<sup>29</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 55.

anthropology on First Nations communities. Under occasionally questionable moral circumstances,<sup>30</sup> Barbeau impatiently acquired totem poles, masks, etc., through the pretense of saving them from perishing along with their vanishing creators. He redistributed his acquisitions to museums throughout the world, thereby increasing his personal fame and prestige.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Barbeau purposefully selected informants who confirmed his preconceived notions of pure Indigenous culture. According to Andrew Nurse, Barbeau advised his students against working with educated informants as “an educated Indian has neglected to understand his heritage.”<sup>32</sup> Barbeau sought out elderly people of the lower classes, believing they could offer the most unaffected information.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, Barbeau compromised the objectivity of his research by an adherence to the salvage methodology. Under the salvage paradigm, Euro-Canadian ethnographers surpass First Nations themselves as Indigenous cultural authorities and promote the notion that Aboriginal peoples are disappearing.

Salvage anthropology, as a discipline, was justified as an “interpretive science,” yet it entailed a “process of cultural disempowerment” that vested white colonizers with the authority to assess a nation’s claim to Indigeneity.<sup>34</sup> In “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” Barbeau subtly denied Aboriginal peoples the ability to accurately preserve their own oral history by assuring readers that “human memory cannot persist indefinitely.”<sup>35</sup> Ethnography, as practiced by Barbeau,

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<sup>30</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 235.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>32</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 56.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 430.

sought to actively exclude the cultural and political views of its subjects, particularly those which related to the contemporary moment.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the research objectives of the anthropologist took precedence over the immediate wishes of living Aboriginal peoples. This turned up in Barbeau's reports when he noted the Tsimshian community ritual from which he had been barred access.<sup>37</sup> On finding himself unwelcome in Kitwankool, Barbeau, presumably without permission, photographed thirty totem poles while the people were asleep.<sup>38</sup> He did not seek the consent of Indigenous communities as a prerequisite to his studies and publications. Barbeau was contributing to a larger colonial project of repression: the remaking of an Amerindian identity purposefully disassociated from the cultural and political context of contemporary Indigenous nations.<sup>39</sup>

The underlying concepts of salvage anthropology surfaced in the federal government political sphere in 1919, when Barbeau secretly created a report for Duncan Campbell Scott, advising that the Lorette reserve, a Huron and Wyandot reserve, be abolished, as the Indigenous peoples occupying it could no longer be classified as Aboriginal.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Barbeau went further and recommended that this policy be extended to reserves throughout the country.<sup>41</sup> Through salvage anthropology, Barbeau created a "standard of cultural authenticity" that was impossible for any First Nations group to meet in the contemporary era.<sup>42</sup> With this, he declared genuine Aboriginal

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<sup>36</sup> Nurse, "Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada," 63.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 221.

<sup>39</sup> Nurse, "But Now Things Have Changed," 433.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.



culture extinct.<sup>43</sup> In his opinion an Indigenous person with the ability to successfully adopt European culture could no longer be defined as Indigenous.<sup>44</sup> However, as the Nisga’a donned suits and entered the white political world to fight for their land rights, did they simultaneously forfeit their Indigeneity? Within Barbeau’s theoretical framework, any First Nation who stepped outside of the ethnographer’s narrow box of authenticity was in danger of losing his or her Indigeneity in the eyes of the public and the state.

Barbeau further undermined Nisga’a Indigeneity, and Nisga’a land claims, by denying the Tsimshian full cultural autonomy. In “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art of the Northwest Coast of America,” he described Aboriginal peoples as “highly amenable to foreign influence.”<sup>45</sup> Barbeau’s tendency to present the more ‘advanced’ or ‘complex’ aspects of Tsimshian culture as recently developed imitations of European cultures was a demeaning interpretation of the process of transculturation. Rather than appreciating the complexities of the contact zone,<sup>46</sup> he presented First Nations as passive receivers of European culture. He attributed the origins of certain Tsimshian crests to European influence. He assumed the Thunderbird crest to be an imitation of the double-headed Tsarist eagle of the Russian-American Company, and the beaver derived from the symbol of British traders.<sup>47</sup> In speaking of how the Tlingit

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<sup>43</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 55.

<sup>44</sup> Nurse, “But Now Things Have Changed,” 448.

<sup>45</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” 270.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Louis Pratt, “Introduction: Criticism in the Contact Zone,” in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992), 8.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” *Anthropologica* 6, 1 (1964): 71.

leaders ‘coveted’ the crest of the Russian Tsar,<sup>48</sup> Barbeau made a strong statement about the value of European versus Aboriginal culture. His description of First Nations being so impressed with white settlement that they adopted the dog, the palisade, and the broad wagon road as emblems of their own further enforced the theoretical framework of white racial superiority.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, in finding reference to a Haida two story house in early contact journals, Barbeau declares that First Nations had “already begun to imitate European architecture! [*sic*]”<sup>50</sup> As an anthropologist, Barbeau felt he held the intellectual authority to design timelines of the socio-cultural development of the peoples he studied.<sup>51</sup> In attributing significant Tsimshian cultural development to European influence, Barbeau created an inherent inequity between Aboriginals and Euro-Canadians by minimizing Aboriginal cultural longevity and autonomy. As the Nisga’a fight for recognition of their Indigenous rights, Barbeau denied them status as a distinct and culturally sovereign nation.

Barbeau’s extensive discussions of totem poles clearly demonstrate this process of denying the cultural Indigeneity of the northwest coast peoples. Significantly, he described the totemic system, an iconic symbol of Indigenous culture in the popular consciousness, as a “foster-child of European heraldry.”<sup>52</sup> Readers of Barbeau’s hugely popular piece, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” are assured that “the art of carving and erecting memorial columns is not really as ancient on the northwest coast as is

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<sup>48</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 440.

<sup>49</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade,” 508.

<sup>50</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 89.

<sup>51</sup> Nurse, “Tradition and Modernity,” 102.

<sup>52</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 253.

generally believed.”<sup>53</sup> At times, Barbeau even denied the existence of clan totems in the pre-contact era.<sup>54</sup> He placed their “peak efflorescence” between the 1830 and 1890 as “better tools and early fruits of trading became available.”<sup>55</sup> Problematically, Barbeau selectively interpreted first contact reports to conclude that upon the arrival of Europeans, Tsimshian did not display elaborate totem poles. Wilson Duff however, showed that these early reports did in fact include descriptions of elaborate totem poles. Even when forced to accept that “some types of carved poles were in existence at the time the first traders visited the coast,” he was reluctant to define them as “bona fide aboriginal accomplishment, considering them instead as an earlier response to indirect influences of the fur trade.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the emergence of clan totems and detached totems is contingent upon trading relationships with Europeans, which provided the tools necessary to develop such advanced techniques and styles.<sup>57</sup> Readers are told that “even the simple poles of the Nootkas as described by Cook” are not “purely aboriginal” art.<sup>58</sup> Through Barbeau’s work, a quintessentially Indigenous art form becomes credited as a by-product of European innovation.

Barbeau further undermined the Indigeneity of northwest coast culture by his constant attribution of cultural characteristics to Asiatic origins. In searching for cultural overlap, Barbeau found the essence of northwest coast totem art to be conclusively Asiatic in style:

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<sup>53</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” 262.

<sup>54</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 71.

<sup>55</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 252.

<sup>56</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 92.

<sup>57</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 432; Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A By-Product of the Fur Trade,” 510.

<sup>58</sup> Barbeau, “Totem Poles: A Recent Native Art on the Northwest Coast of America,” 269.

With their bold profiles reminiscent of Asiatic divinities and monsters, they conjure impressions strangely un-American in their surroundings of luxuriant dark-green vegetation under skies of bluish mist.<sup>59</sup>

Barbeau finds another example of Asiatic cultural borrowing in stories of Chief Stone-Cliff, head chief of the Tsimshyan during the 1830s. He attributes Stone-Cliff's political tactic of maintaining his power through founding secret societies to "sophisticated Oriental ancestors."<sup>60</sup> Rather than crediting advanced crafting skills to Indigenous innovation, Barbeau traced their source to "prehistoric aptitudes and manual dexterity due to an Asiatic heredity, and intrusive influences from the activities of the white man."<sup>61</sup> For Barbeau, complex skills such as engraving argillite and weaving cannot be defined as authentically Indigenous. Further, he provides evidence of Asiatic cultural borrowing in his assertion that "a learned Chinese authority on songs and rituals" confirmed an uncanny similarity between Tsimshian dirges and Buddhist funeral chants.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Barbeau claims that linguists had classified Athapaskan as an Asiatic language, specifically a Mongolian variation, as opposed to an American language.<sup>63</sup> So sure is Barbeau of the Asiatic origin of certain aspects of northwest culture, that he labels a picture of a totem "Thunderbird with Mongolian hat."<sup>64</sup> Such labeling conveyed a scientific certainty to readers. As the people of the northwest coast fought to assert their Indigenous land

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<sup>59</sup> Barbeau, "Asiatic Migrations into America," 258.

<sup>60</sup> Barbeau, "The Aleutian Route of Migration into America," 443.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>63</sup> Barbeau, "Asiatic Migrations into America," 404.

<sup>64</sup> Barbeau, "The Aleutian Route of Migration into America," 431.

claim, Barbeau emphasized an Asiatic “cultural endowment,”<sup>65</sup> thereby creating the image of an essentially Asian ethnicity.

In theorizing on ‘recent’ migrations, Barbeau further threatens to delegitimize the Nisga’a claim to American Indigeneity. Indeed, his theories seem to place certain groups alongside Euro-Canadians in the category of foreign newcomers. Rather than imagining the growth of a genuinely Indigenous civilization in America, Barbeau asserted that the northwest coast was populated through “successive waves of coast and island populations from eastern Asia.”<sup>66</sup> If, as Barbeau asserts in “The Aleutian Route of Migration to America,” migrations via the Aleutian Islands continued “under the eyes of the white man,” how could the Aboriginal peoples of the northwest coast hold a stronger claim to the land than European migrants?<sup>67</sup> Concerning the Tsimshian, Barbeau wrote of a “complete change in population and in culture” within the previous two centuries<sup>68</sup> and placed the Wolf and Eagle phatries among the most recent migrants.<sup>69</sup> Barbeau imagined a “wave of newcomers” bringing “manual arts, a clear-cut social organization, and secret societies” to the northwest coast thus overwhelming any truly Indigenous culture that might have existed previously.<sup>70</sup> The creation of a settlement history in which some Aboriginal peoples arrived in the territory not long before Europeans would certainly harm a land claim founded on ‘time immemorial’ occupation. Barbeau attributed a quality of cultural impurity to the Tsimshian due to what he imagined as a relatively recent and constant influx of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>67</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 425.

<sup>68</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 70.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>70</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 441.

northerners.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Barbeau separated northwest coast peoples from interior First Nations peoples by framing them as Asiatic colonizers, or “mongoloid brothers,” as opposed to Native Americans.<sup>72</sup> He wrote that the Aboriginal peoples of his studies had the blood of “Tamerlan and Gengis Khan.”<sup>73</sup> Through the use of imaginative geographies and cross-cultural comparisons, he presented the entire coast as fundamentally “un-American,”<sup>74</sup> stating:

At other moments I had reminiscences of the orient, of Asia. Fleecy clouds surrounded mountain peaks that were covered with snow, as they are depicted in Japanese water-colors.<sup>75</sup>

Indian women squatted on platforms in front of the village, facing the sea, their shawls drawn around their foreheads. They were sullen and motionless, like stone idols before a Chinese temple.<sup>76</sup>

There was something of the grizzly-bear in him – the grizzly-bear of his mountains which he must have hunted many times. Yet he was distinctly a Mongolian. He was thick and squatty. I thought of Buddha.<sup>77</sup>

I could hear my fellow-visitors say: ‘but these

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<sup>71</sup> Barbeau, “How Asia Used to Drip at the Spout into America,” 169-70.

<sup>72</sup> Barbeau, “Asiatic Migrations into America,” 408.

<sup>73</sup> Barbeau, “How Asia Used to Drip at the Spout into America,” 172.

<sup>74</sup> Barbeau, “Asiatic Migrations into America,” 404.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

people are not American Indians—they are Asiatics.’ More than ever it seemed that we had already gone over the border from America into the realm of the mystic dragon beyond the sea.<sup>78</sup>

Here, in particular, Barbeau’s prose veered toward the intuitive and imaginative associations of fantasy. He used this descriptive language to frame an assertion that migrations from Asia did not end thousands of years ago, but rather continued into the modern era.<sup>79</sup> As discussed above, Barbeau found evidence of Asiatic descent in the cultural similarities between Asiatic ethnic groups and northwest coast peoples. Barbeau exploited this cultural overlap, to declare that certain groups “belong more distinctively to Asia than they do to America.”<sup>80</sup> Barbeau even went as far as questioning whether Indigeneity could be accurately attributed to any Native American race.<sup>81</sup> Given that he was writing as a government-sanctioned anthropologist and esteemed academic, Barbeau’s doubts about the Indigeneity of First Nations people must be recognized as consequential in shaping the cultural and political landscape from which the Euro-Canadian polity approached the BC land question.

In “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” Wilson Duff demonstrates that the evidence behind Barbeau’s migration theories lacked credibility. Barbeau applied degrees of personal intuition and interpretation to Tsimshian myths in order to support his hypothesis of recent migrations. While Barbeau presented his theory of recent migrations through the Aleutian Islands as widely supported by Tsimshian culture,<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 237.

<sup>80</sup> Barbeau, “Asiatic Migrations into America,” 416.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 403-4.

<sup>82</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 76.

he based his theory largely on a manipulated version of the ‘Salmon-Eater’ story.<sup>83</sup> Among other inconsistencies, although the Haida and the Tsimshian do not distinguish between frogs and toads, and in speaking English use the term ‘frog’ for both, Barbeau assumed that the presence of a ‘frog’ in the ‘Salmon-Eater’ revealed Asiatic origins; as frogs in the English sense were not native to the Northwest Coast.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, the conclusions Barbeau drew from the story are largely discordant with the First Nations’ understanding.<sup>85</sup>

The effect of Barbeau’s theories on the public and political consciousness was magnified by his success in asserting himself as the leading Canadian authority on Aboriginal peoples. Barbeau completed a senior thesis at Oxford on the ‘totemic’ cultures of Canada before ever visiting the Northwest Coast.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, his introduction to Tsimshian people was through second-hand accounts of colonial Europeans. Throughout Barbeau’s career, he expected Euro-Canada to accept his fieldwork as an unequivocal source of knowledge on Aboriginal peoples. Laurence Nowry lauded his studies as “the most thorough recording and analysis of a North Pacific Coast culture that we shall ever have.” Indeed, Nowry considered Barbeau’s work as “crucial to modern understanding of the whole unique North Pacific Coast complex of cultures.”<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the authoritative value of Barbeau’s work must be reassessed with the understanding that Barbeau made liberal use of his intuition to find authenticity in the stories of his Aboriginal informants. Indeed, as an anthropologist, Barbeau rejected what he felt was

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>86</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 54.

<sup>87</sup> Nowry, *Man of Mana*, 156.



inauthentic and altered field notes to suit his imagination of its authentic original form.<sup>88</sup> In “The Aleutian Route of Migration to America,” Barbeau informed readers that although the ‘Salmon-Eater’ story was “colored with native interpretation,” he was able to “strip it of its imagery or mysticism” to create a reliable archeological source.<sup>89</sup> Barbeau produced a massive amount of work, and published with the goal of reaching the greatest possible number of people.<sup>90</sup> He became not only a renowned scholar but also a well-known public figure.<sup>91</sup> Andrew Nurse emphasized the power of anthropology in influencing the state’s treatment of Aboriginal peoples in the early twentieth century.<sup>92</sup> Barbeau’s knowledge was considered so absolute that Duncan Campbell Scott looked to Barbeau for policy recommendations.<sup>93</sup>

I have argued that through his authority as a celebrated academic, Barbeau deprived Aboriginal cultures of their dynamic autonomy and stripped northwest coast Aboriginal peoples of their Indigeneity. Consequently, as the Nisga’a led the BC land title fight, their political position was weakened by Barbeau’s prolific publications. Not only did Barbeau neglect to acknowledge the political engagement of the Nisga’a, he also helped to shape a political and cultural discourse that facilitated the continued rejection of Indigenous rights. Here, we can see ‘objective’ academia both entrenching and conforming to the larger socio-political climate. Ultimately, Barbeau’s academic authority became an agent of colonial domination.

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<sup>88</sup> Nurse, “Marius Barbeau and the Methodology of Salvage Ethnography in Canada,” 61.

<sup>89</sup> Barbeau, “The Aleutian Route of Migration into America,” 429.

<sup>90</sup> Duff, “Contributions of Marius Barbeau to West Coast Ethnology,” 63.

<sup>91</sup> Nurse, “Tradition and Modernity,” 69.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 464.

<sup>93</sup> Nurse, “But Now Things Have Changed,” 455.

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