

# 1. Remembering the spirit of the Beothuk: *The Beothuk Saga* by Bernard Assiniwi

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## Abstract

Bernard Assiniwi wrote a complete novel on the history of the Beothuk based on ethnographic works. He paid tribute to the nation of the Beothuk with the novel illustrating a counter-narrative on this history, taking the point of view of the natives. The narrator is presented as a voice of ‘living memory’ pursuing the goals of the founder of the nation, Anin. The novel does not begin with contact with colonisers, the major part is about the precolonial history of the Beothuk. The spirit and the imaginary of the Beothuk are presented in the actions, the representations and the dreams of some of important characters for the Beothuk. Moreover, the specific gender relations of the Beothuk are underlined in the novel. By analysing the characteristics of how Assiniwi remembers the history of the Beothuk, the chapter shows how the author deplores the absence of deep contact between the Beothuk and the colonisers. Finally, the chapter explains the originality of the novel compared to ethnographic studies that were made on the Beothuk. The analysis of the novel reveals the self-perception of the history of the natives as the destiny of the Beothuk is highly representative of the devastating effects of colonialism on Native populations, even to the present day.

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Native studies, Beothuk, Remembering processes, nation-building, gender.

## Introduction

Bernard Assiniwi was a well-known First Nations writer whose masterpiece was the historical novel, written in French in 1996, *The Beothuk Saga* (Assiniwi, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Divided into three parts (The Initiate, The Invaders and The Genocide), Assiniwi incorporates oral stories in the written genre of historical novels. The aim of the novel is both ethnological and cultural as the author presents the history of a nation that was destroyed by colonisers with the help of rival clans.<sup>2</sup> By introducing a chronology on the history of this nation, Assiniwi puts emphasis on the cultural specificity of the Beothuk. Some researchers in native studies focused on the role of ethnopoetics (Feld, 1982) in order to catch the language and the spirit of the First Nations, whereas others prefer to introduce a form of comparative poetology (Miner, 1990; Beaujour, 2017, p. 19). The comparative poetology avoids ethnocentric illusion and creates the possibility of translating and understanding the cultural and artistic productions of the First Nations. Hence, the historical novel is here an interesting genre as it contributes to the collection of fragments of oral tradition into a continuous narrative. Unlike comparative poetology, the focus is on how the author remembers some important actions from unknown ancestors to describe a forgotten genealogy. The concept of ‘remembering’ is used here to show how the text recollects some former fragments of the Beothuk nation (Premat & Sule, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> For the complex question of categorisation of First Nations’ writers in Québec, see Chapman (2013: 179).

<sup>2</sup> This chapter is the result of an oral presentation given on Bernard Assiniwi’s work during the 20<sup>th</sup> International Baltic Conference on Canadian Studies on 10 October 2020 at Vilnius University (Premat, 2020; see the abstract on <https://su.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A1474952&dsid=-2876>, last visit 10 June 2023). A similar presentation was also given in Swedish during a seminar of the Department of Romance Studies and Classics (Premat, 2021).

The word ‘remember’ is sometimes written ‘re-member’ to insist on the process of recollection of memories mixed with the literary imagination (Premat & Sule, 2018, p. 75). The book of Assiniwi is a fiction, which means that literature fills out what is not said in history. The living memory of the Beothuk is in fact reinvented.

It seems that Assiniwi describes an ancient form of *métissage* that was possible in the genealogy of the Beothuk. In previous studies on *The Beothuk Saga*, the hybridity of the narrative was analysed as well as the founding myths (Jeannotte, 2010; Gatti, 2010). The author wanted to tell the story of the Beothuk from the native point of view by revealing the details of their ways of living and thinking. Moreover, by being inspired by the origins of the novel or the founding myths or history of the Beothuk, Assiniwi reverses the aesthetic canons of the literary colonial tradition. The remembering process is all the deeper as it reintegrates parts of the colonial traditions. How does Assiniwi remember the Beothuk? Assiniwi is one of the few native writers who adopted the historical novel to tell the story and the tragedy of the Beothuk. The beginning of the novel is reused to transmit stories from the oral tradition as if the Beothuk’s story was not that different from other early European nations. Some of the characters embody this sense of living memory, as with the old man who inaugurates the second part of the novel: ‘He was the clan’s Living Memory, charged with keeping the past alive; he had been instructed to do this by his ancestor Anin, the first Beothuk to travel around the whole land now occupied by the Beothuk Nation’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 137).

Assiniwi chose the genre of saga to tell the story of the Beothuk from the mythological origins of the nation to their disappearance and elimination by colonisers.

To address the research question, the chapter will focus on the description of Beothuk from an ethnological point of view. There were a few works made on the description of this Nation that can be compared with the details that Assiniwi gave (Marshall, 1996, p. 240). The exogenous tradition has to be presented in order to contextualise the originality of Assiniwi’s work. Second, the genealogy of the ancestors will be studied in terms of lineages and *métissage*. They are connected to the spiritual drives of

an environment that is quite hostile. The relationship between the spiritual drives and the genealogy of the clan structures the first part of the novel. Then, the style of the saga will be analysed. There is no idealisation of the ancestors although there is a different chronological perspective for the ancestors. The chronology is linear whereas the story of the ancestors follows the natural cycle.

For the first time since he had set out on his journey of initiation, Anin was undecided. Should he cross the forest in the direction shown to him by Woasut, to rejoin his people, or should he continue and complete his circumnavigation of their land, as he had given his word he would do? (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 27).

Assiniwi used the historical novel to make the reader enter a new imaginary world in order to understand the beliefs, the dreams and the thinking of this former Nation as he imagined them to be. After a study of the background and a presentation of previous studies, the chapter will focus on the spirit of the Beothuk nation in the novel before analysing how gender relations are imagined by the author. Then, the collective dreams of the Beothuk nation will be highlighted before describing the characteristics of colonialism in the novel. Even if there are many historical sources in the novel, Assiniwi reconstructs and reimagines the relations of the Beothuk with other clans.

## **Background of *The Beothuk Saga***

The Beothuk are an indigenous people who lived in Newfoundland for thousands of years until their extinction in 1829 (Holly, 2000, p. 79). They were mainly fishers and hunters and the archaeological investigations showed that they have shared the island with other native groups such as the Innu and the Mi'kmaq (Holly, 2000, p. 80). They were in contact with the European colonizers after the arrival of John Cabot in 1497. The decline of the Beothuk is directly linked to the population increase of the settlers who in fact gradually destroyed the Beothuk way of life (Marshall, 1996, p. 25). In his novel, Bernard Assiniwi relies on historical figures like John Peyton known as the 'Indian killer' who captured many Beothuk (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 288), Cormack (Assiniwi, 2000,

p. 308), a scientist and the last of the Beothuk, Shanawdithit (Holly, 2000, p. 79).

Bernard Assiniwi (1935–2000) was a writer from the First Nations (Cree/Algonquin) and specialist in native studies (history, anthropology and literature). He was also a curator of ethnology and researcher at the Canadian Museum of Civilization at Hull. Bernard Assiniwi's work could be classified as history, cultural anthropology, linguistics and literature, as he wanted to write about the First Nations. He belongs to a tradition of cultural mediators and cannot thus be reduced to a single role of writer in the Western tradition (Premat, 2017, p. 96). In this regard, the role of cultural mediator is much broader and consists in transmitting traditions and a way of thinking and living (Cedergren et al., 2015, p. XIII; Premat & Sule, 2011).

This is why it is important to analyse the work of Assiniwi instead of relying on perceptions that are dealt with in dominant discourses (Retzlaff, 2012, p. 9). Assiniwi wrote thirty four books, *The Beothuk Saga* being his last. *The Beothuk Saga* was published in French in 1996 and translated into English in 2000. Assiniwi received the France-Québec prize for *La Saga des Béothuk* in 1997. Publishing house Leméac has published most of Assiniwi's works.<sup>3</sup> Assiniwi's interested in the story of the Beothuk, using a structure that is similar to *The Beothuk Saga*, began in 1973–1974 when he published *Histoire des Indiens du Haut et du Bas-Canada*. This book had three parts, 'Mœurs et coutumes des Algonkins et des Iroquois', 'Deux siècles de civilisation blanche, 1497–1685' and 'De l'épopée à l'intégration, 1685 à nos jours' (Assiniwi, 1973–1974). In fact, the rupture between the traditions of the Algonkins and Iroquois and the invasion of colonisers can also be found in *The Beothuk Saga*. Other books dealing with the First Nations in the Americas also emphasised this rupture prior to the colonisation of the Americas (Mann, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Leméac is a publishing house that specialises in contemporary novels in Québec, publishing for example the works of Michel Tremblay and Marcel Dubé. See 'La maison d'éditions Leméac célèbre ses 50 ans d'existence cette année', *La Presse Canadienne*, 5 September 2007 and "Literary video" takes poetic peek at Montreals of Michel Tremblay', *The Globe and Mail*, 23 December 1989. The sources were accessed through the platform Nexis Uni.

In 1988, Bernard Assiniwi spent eight months in Newfoundland studying the cultural characteristics of this nation which disappeared. The book is not only about the Beothuk nation, it is about the current tragedy that all First Nations are experiencing in contemporary societies. This is why Assiniwi wanted to write the story of the Beothuk in order to show how they developed as a nation: ‘Suddenly, I found how to tell the story of the Beothuk. ... Instead of playing a violin and making people cry over that, I decided one morning I had to tell the story of Beothuk people when they probably formed “the people”, when they formed the first groups.’<sup>4</sup>

In other words, Assiniwi did not want to write about the Beothuk when they only were disappearing, he wanted to show the power of this nation from the beginning with the description of the ancestor Anin, the founder of the Beothuk. ‘Anin was neither a liar nor a trickster. He feared nothing and no one. At least he had never allowed himself to show fear’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 5). The Beothuk, as Assiniwi describes them all through the novel, had an openness and did not fear other communities and other people. The saga is about how to control the fear to gain self-knowledge: ‘Anin, the first warrior to explore the entire Beothuk territory and the uniter of clans, cautioned against Geswat, the fear of not knowing what will happen: “if you allow Geswat to control you, to determine your daily actions necessary for survival, she will slowly rob of your reason”’.<sup>5</sup>

The book is not only about a forgotten identity, it is also an example of spiritual strength that readers can have by following the journey of Anin and the Beothuk.

The genre of the book is worth a comment as it echoes the origins of the European novel with the *faits et gestes* of Anin and the ancestors.<sup>6</sup> Remembering the Beothuk means here re-empowering this nation by giving a stronger voice to the ancestors. In the

<sup>4</sup> Paul Gessell, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 6 September 2000.

<sup>5</sup> ‘A people long gone but not forgotten’, *Calgary Herald*, 14 October 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The reception of *La Saga des Béothuks* pointed out the notion of *faits et gestes*. In a recension of the book in 1997 for the newspaper *La Croix*, Frédéric Potet highlights the fact that the book is not a simple critic of colonisation, it reveals how the Beothuk could live in harmony with other people. Frédéric Potet, ‘À la découverte des écrivains indiens. La chanson de geste d’Anin le Béothuk’, *La Croix*, 23 June 1997. The sources were accessed through the platform Nexis Uni.

interview quoted by *The Ottawa Citizen*, Assiniwi expressed himself in the following way: ‘every bit of knowledge I have must be written somewhere so people can remember. Whether we like it or not, our culture is dying. People say, “Oh, yes, our culture is oral”. That is an excuse not to read today. We can all read today. If we don’t write it, it will be lost.’<sup>7</sup>

This quote is all the more important as it reflects the positioning of Assiniwi in a tradition of native studies. According to him, it is not enough to engage people in native studies through the idea of oral traditions. The history of the First Nations has to be written so that it really gives a stronger voice to these nations that were destroyed. It is always a challenge to write about a cultural genocide in a colonial context (Coulthard, 2014, p. 28; Fanon, 2008; Kuper, 2003, p. 390; Premat, 2019, p. 76). Assiniwi is aware of the Canadian context of recognition of the First Nations, although this still does not mean that colonial thinking vanished. There is also an autobiographical aspect with the suicide of John Assiniwi, who was the adopted grandson of Bernard Assiniwi. John Assiniwi was an Innu from the Newfoundland community of Davis Inlet.<sup>8</sup> The destiny of young Beothuk illustrates the current difficulties faced by young generations of natives (Premat & Sule, 2012).

Wayne Grady was the English translator of this book. Grady is a well-known Ontario writer and translator interested in natural history, ecology and extinction (Grady & Damstra, 2011). There is certainly a personal journey into the understanding of this cultural genocide for Grady even if some critics were eloquent about his personal style of translation (Kydd, 22 October 2000).

## Previous studies and theoretical perspective

*The Beothuk Saga* is not only a sad history, or a complaint about the cultural genocide of the Beothuk, it expresses the need to create a counter-narrative for the indigenous communities by revealing the details of their spiritual energy and vitality (Bhabha, 1994, p. 66). There is a will of rewriting the history of the Beothuk, which

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gessell, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 6 September 2000. The source was accessed through the platform Nexis Uni.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gessell, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 6 September 2000.

was erased by the invaders (Jeannotte, 2010, p. 300), by converting the oral narratives of the Beothuk into a written novel (Gatti, 2010, p. 282). Assiniwi is aware of the image of the Beothuk which is always associated with a form of ethnographic curiosity. Henri Jouan (1827–1901), who was a famous sea captain, wrote the following text about the Beothuk, mentioning ‘Red Indians’.

One should not see in these small tribes, coming from outside, the remains of the aborigenes of Newfoundland, the Red Indians, or Bethuk, as they were called (Boeothicks, Beothucks following others), with whom Cabot was in contact when he discovered the island in 1497 (Jouan, 1841, p. 430).

The colonial narrative is characterised by the neutralisation of the context as if the contact with these populations is reduced to the discourse of discovery. All the colonial narratives are similar, with the emphasis on the arrival of John Cabot, such as was the case with the notes of Richard Hakluyt (1522–1616) (Hakluyt, 1966). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the geographer Élisée Reclus mentioned the extermination of the Beothuk and their sense of hospitality (Reclus, 1890, p. 655). The other descriptions refer to the objects that are present in museums. The *Annual report of the Bureau of American ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian institution* says:

Beothuk. Newfoundland. From colored drawings of ancient bone disks attributed to the Beothuk, and presented to the United States National Museum by Lady Edith Blake, of Kingston, Jamaica, it would appear that this tribe may have used gaming disks resembling those of the Micmac (Holmes, 1907, p. 97).

If the references to Hakluyt, Jouan, Reclus are not mentioned by Assiniwi, there is a bibliography at the end of the novel with all the sources that he consulted. Assiniwi based most of his ethnographic studies on the works of Ingeborg Marshall (Marshall, 1996).<sup>9</sup> This is why he could easily invent the past of the Beothuk with this specific knowledge (Sládek, 2014, p. 7).

The decolonial paradigm that is used here to understand the counter-narrative on the Beothuk is not only characterised by

<sup>9</sup> In the bibliography, the edition of the *History and the Ethnography of the Beothuk* used is the one of 1996 (Assiniwi 2000: 340).



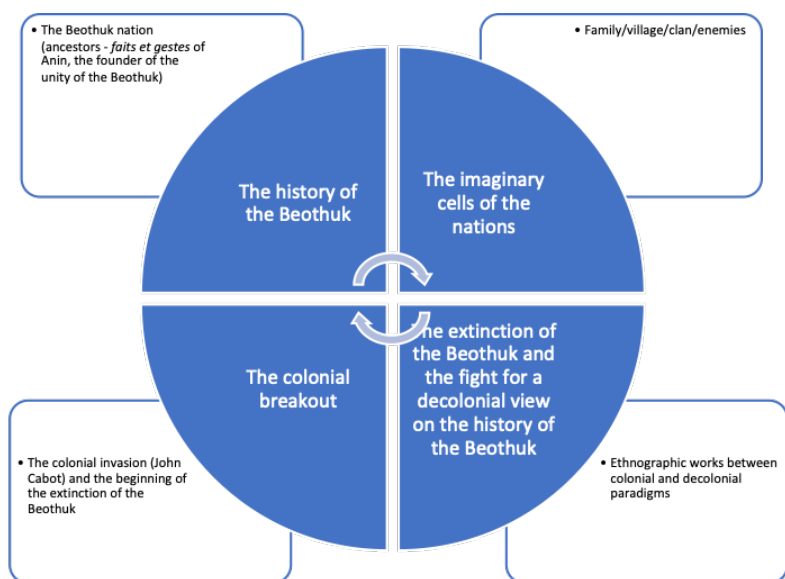
a deconstruction of a Western narrative (Vizenor, 1991, p. 5). It is rather an attempt to give a strong voice to the origins of the Beothuk. The start of the story cannot be the arrival of John Cabot, there is a long and decisive part about the ancestor Anin, who discovered the entire territory of the Beothuk.

Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, being, and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity (Mignolo et al., 2018, p. 17).

The idea is not only to decolonise the history of the Beothuk, but to re-empower the First Nations by writing them. The notion of 'nation-building' is thus illustrated by the classical choice of the literary genre 'novel'. There is a rupture here with ethnopoetics that tends to create a form of mimesis of oral narratives. The poetology where these oral narratives are transcribed is not used by Assiniwi who prefers to write a historical novel. Ethnopoetics is rather guided by the idea of lexicalizing cultural gestures and habits (Feld, 1982). The novel captures the flow of the oral narrative, it reintroduces another chronology and breaks the legacy of the colonial patterns. In addition to this, it re-members the forgotten parts of the history of the Beothuk. The notion of re-membering is characterized by the assemblage of forgotten pieces of texts (Premat & Sule, 2016).

## **The spirit of the Nation**

Because the history of the Beothuk is written by those who killed them, there is a need to produce a new collective memory so that the First Nations can also perceive themselves as nation makers. As Frantz Fanon wrote, 'reality, for once, requires a total understanding. On the objective level as on the subjective level, a solution has to be supplied' (Fanon, 2008, p. 4). It is possible to define Assiniwi's aim as an act of reconnecting the history of the Beothuk to a subjective tone according to which the real heroes are people from the First Nations. Consequently, the dramaturgy is built with the following scheme:



**Figure 1.** The construction of the Beothuk narrative in Assiniwi's work (Premat, 2020).

Source: own work (Premat, 2020; Premat, 2021).

The first part of the book is about the *faits et gestes* of Anin and his women as he has to know the limits of the territory of the Beothuk and prove to others that he can raise his spirit to the level of an ancestor. Anin has the difficult task of consolidating his leadership by coming back from his odyssey. Assiniwi used the origins of the novel to illustrate how the odyssey of Anin contributed to building the nation of the Beothuk.

He was a wise man, who saw his people expand their territory until they occupied the whole island, so that they could protect their land and keep it intact. He withstood great hardships and much danger, which until that time had been unknown to the Red-Ochre people. Protected by Gashu-Uwith the Bear, he had established his own clan and the Beothuk nation (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 240).

By choosing the historical novel, Assiniwi restructures the Beothuk's mindset and reintroduces a form of equality between the colonisers and the First Nations. He consulted the works of

Oxenstierna on the Vikings (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 341; Oxenstierna, 1976) with the result that the style of the book is inspired by some very ancient sagas, illustrating the story of the ancestors in a realistic and chronologic manner. There is a relationship between saga studies and oral cultures with two literary traditions, one privileging the ‘bookprose’ approach based on the different versions of vernacular texts related to the sagas, and the other, ‘freeprose’, reflecting the Romantic view of equivalence between sagas and popular culture (Clunies & Ross, 2020, p. 40). A strong connection between the written novel and the idea of nation appears. In other words, Assiniwi writes the First Nation of Beothuk by illustrating the spirit of the ancestors and following subsequent genealogical investigations.

The ancestor of the Beothuk, Anin, is presented as a traveller who circumnavigates in order to explore the limits of the territory of the Beothuk: ‘If he crossed overland to his village, he would never know if the earth were round, like an island, or just a long, narrow spit of land that stretched endlessly out to sea. And he would be going back on his promise not to return until he had found out’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 27).

Anin is presented as the founder of the nation, the one who reflects on the cultural characteristics of the Beothuk. The first part of the book is written as if Anin had assimilated a spiritual force that allowed him to accomplish this journey of initiation. The odyssey is here necessary as the founder of the nation is not the first man of the clan, but the first man who accepts the challenge to survive alone for a few cold seasons in order to explore the island.

He could easily have travelled a few days’ journey from his village, kept himself hidden for a time, and when he returned, told everyone that he had visited all the regions of their vast land. His uncle had tried that. But one day, fishermen from the village had ventured from their usual fishing grounds and discovered the trick: they had seen his uncle’s camp and found several objects belonging to him (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 5).

The book has a humorous opening with some of Anin’s previous attempts to endorse the privilege of being the founder of the nation. Anin’s goal is to accept the implications of the odyssey by

facing the coldness of the winters and meeting new challenges and people on his way.

The internal focalisation creates a feeling of empathy between the reader and the character as the reader has access to the feelings, doubts and desires of the character. The implicit contract with the reader follows the principles of transparency and authenticity. At the same time, the author interferes with the reader by commenting on Anin's actions: 'If he followed the edge of the round Earth, it was clear that he would end up at the place of his departure. And so Anin would return; older, certainly, perhaps too old to find a companion with whom he could add to the number of his people, but he would return' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 6). His journey is also guided by the will to understand Gashu-Uwith, which is supposed to be the protective spirit of the Beothuk. Many passages show that Anin finds it difficult to interpret and decipher properly the apparitions of Gashu-Uwith, who is embodied in a bear (Assiniwi, 2000, pp. 41–42). There is no idealisation of this spirit as Woasut and Anin do not perceive it in the same way. Some passages are comical, such as when Woasut wondered if they could kill the bear to have enough meat before the cold season: 'Woasut said nothing, understanding her error. She had forgotten that Anin thought of Gashu-Uwith as his spirit protector, which made the bear a member of his immediate family, equal in status to his brothers and sisters, uncles and cousins' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 43).

Woasut is also frightened by the presence of Gashu-Uwith, with the novel describing her feelings and her point of view. Woasut's emotions are presented in a detailed manner showing how she can question the presence of this weird imaginary entity. 'She did not dare to suggest another fat-laden animal, such as Appawet the Seal, for fear of re-igniting Anin's anger' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 43). Woasut deeply respects the fact that Gashu-Uwith is a spirit protector for Anin who offered meat to him (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 18, p. 39). Gashu-Uwith guides the actions of Anin and provides some very useful indications so that Anin can survive. When Anin presents himself to people from other clans, he names Gashu-Uwith. The diplomatic relations with other clans are important to determine the borders of the Beothuk nation.

But I am Anin, chief of the Clan of Gashu-Uwith, and I have no connection with any other clan. I therefore do not know where to land so that I may not offend one clan or the other. I and the other members of my clan will stay in our tapatooks until the village has resolved this dilemma (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 103).

Contrary to the history of European countries (the colonisers), the Beothuk did not have to make war in order to define their territory. An agreement was made with the other clans to protect the peace among the different clans. 'The villagers had thought of everything in advance, with but one exception: on which side of the river the newcomers should disembark' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 104).

### The Beothuk's perspective on gender

The first part of the book is the more significant, with 134 pages devoted to the narrative of the Beothuk during the precolonial age. The size of the nation is the mythical village of Baétha (Laporte, 2013). Anin rescued another Beothuk (the name Addaboutik is also used instead of Beothuk) during his journey. Her name is Woasut (which means woman) and she escaped the clan of the enemies of the Beothuk, the Ashwan. 'I am Woasut, Beothuk woman. I have heard of the Addaboutik. They are our cousins and live on the other side of the land, two moons towards the setting sun, along the rivers and lakes' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 25). Woasut has a knowledge of the surroundings and began a journey to explore the world much earlier than Anin. If Anin is the one who re-empowers the Beothuk nation, this shows a wilful breaking of the common narrative of the great man. In fact, the novel illustrates premodern conceptions on feminine leadership among the Beothuk. Woasut is the real leader in the narrative: she teaches Anin how to paddle and survive. Assiniwi insists here on the notion of *métissage*, the Beothuk nation is in fact the product of transcultural relations with other clans. The women in the novel show this openness to other lineages, which constitutes the strength of the Beothuk.

The switch of hero is in fact an interesting break in the masculine narrative. Woasut also remembers other clan people in order to connect them to the life of the nation. 'She remembered her

mother, her father, and all the young people of her village, not as she had last seen them, but as they had been when they were alive' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 31). Assiniwi points out the fact that the Beothuk had women leaders, such as Great Iwish (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 153).

There are some other mentions of feminine leadership towards the end of the book with the presence of a council composed of women (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 242). The women are even the last ones who take decisions in order to save the Beothuk nation:

the female movement had grown from the despair of the nation's males. Broken and demoralized, the men had let themselves become soft, and were afraid to make the smallest decision. The women saw this and got together to form a new council. They did not elect a chief, saying that the people had fallen into the habit of relying too much on one person, and of therefore neglecting their own personal responsibilities to the community. They decided unanimously to govern by consensus, as all the councils of the nation had done since the creation of the Beothuk people (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 243).

The women show a particular ability to govern the affairs of the Beothuk when the nation is endangered, making collective decisions and criticising single masculine leadership. By sharing difficult decisions, they can reinforce the cohesion of the community and propose concrete alternatives. 'The elders worried, but the women were young and had an unshakeable faith in the human spirit' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 243).

The women tried to establish good relations with the colonisers to preserve peace and harmony on the island. They are also ready for *métissage* as the Beothuk always had this multicultural background, which is quite unusual for the First Nations. For instance, in the first part of the book, the Beothuk are presented in their openness to strangers like the Vikings. The strangers in the first part are the 'Bouguishamesh', the white men who are reluctant to encounter other people. 'The beings with the pale skin and hair the colour of dried grass were still following him, but he was young and agile, and his endurance allowed him to go many days without eating' (Assiniwi, 2000, pp. 13–14). Those Bouguishamesh who are the Vikings have similar life conditions (Gatti, 2010, p. 292). The

specificity of the Beothuk is in fact characterised by the hybridity of the clan. They accepted the presence of 'Bouguishamesh' in order to sustain the growth of the nation. The colour of the skin is here commented on when Anin and Woasut met the woman. 'Woasut regarded this strange woman critically. She was not bad-looking, but she was as pale as a trout's belly' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 57). There are some erotic initiations as Anin has to satisfy both women, but the polygamy is totally accepted, due to a rational consideration on the population. 'Beothuk women had long ago learned to accept one another and to share their men; between men, however, there was always rivalry and conflict over women' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 59). Women and men share common views among the Beothuk, they are not under the control or the possession of men. For example, Anin cannot translate the word 'slave' into the language of the Beothuk; as a matter of fact, he expresses a code of conduct:

in this country there are no slaves. There are only males and females. Males are stronger than females, but females are very useful and good companions. No one gets down on their knees to beg. Knees are for coupling, or for wrestling, for satisfying our needs among ourselves (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 68).

The critics of European habits prevails here as Assiniwi points out how women were progressively enslaved and subject to the power of men. At the same time, Assiniwi does not resist a form of *self-exoticism* (Lüsebrink, 1996, p. 57) when he presents the mindset of the Beothuk. Scottish slaves are then adopted by the Beothuk, who show an interesting sense of open-mindedness. They assimilated these slaves and gave them a new liberty. Anin has four wives in order to sustain the growth of the nation, Woasut, Gudruide, Gwenid and Della. The comparison of cultural habits is here made by Della, the Scottish slave who was adopted by the Beothuk.

"In our land," she thought, "a man can have only one wife when he is at home, but when he is voyaging he takes mistresses. The woman Freydis, who tried to have us killed, was the bastard daughter of Erik the Red, and the illegitimate sister of Lief, Erik's son. Our men behave much like the Addaboutik, but they are hypocritical about it. They do not act openly, and they are often

jealous of their women. I prefer the way things are done here” (Assiniwi, 2000, pp. 76–77).

This is a value judgement on the habits of the Vikings. Bastards reveal the problems of nations that do not recognise polygamy. In the case of the Beothuk, they did not perceive polygamy as an absolute rule, it depended on the size of the population. Anin has to share time with his wives and has to ensure the prosperity of the clan. There are no predatory feelings of possession in these relations. ‘The affection we feel for each other does not come from any desire to possess each other to the exclusion of others, does it, Della?’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 119).

In the novel, Anin’s four women initiate him into erotic games, they teach him how to behave. Furthermore, Assiniwi describes scenes of lesbian love between the women. ‘For the first time in Beothuk and Addaboutik memory, two women loved each other passionately and yet tenderly’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 100). The relations of love and loyalty are important for the women of Anin to reach a certain stability. Other scenes of lesbian love appear towards the end of the novel. ‘That night, Wobee te Malouin watched Ooish and Obosheen making love-between-women while he was honouring the tall dancer, Badisut. Everyone went to sleep feeling happy’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 199). The passage illustrates the perception of female love in the eyes of Wobee te Malouin. The voyeuristic perspective is quite unusual in the literature of the First Nations, an aspect that shows how Assiniwi renews the traditional views on native studies by including a modern reflection on gender issues.

Finally, Anin clarifies the institution of Beothuk rules and customs:

a clan chief may choose one woman one sun and another the next. Only the first wife is given preference, according to our custom. If the number of women becomes less than the number of men, then the first wife would be the only wife. And second and third wives must also attend to the needs of other men, so that there will be no disputes among brothers or other male members of the clan (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 81).

There is a rational perception of natality as women have to ensure the reproduction of the clan. The institutions have to be adapted to this reality; this is why Assiniwi gives clear edicts about the code of conduct of the clan.



## Dreaming the destiny of the First Nation

The remembering style is expressed by the accurate description of Anin's dreams. The reader understands the way the ancestor projected himself into the future: 'He dreamed of expanding the clan, of the creation of new villages in order to take better advantage of the resources of the island. He saw people living again on the coast of the rising sun, where there was plenty of game and berries' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 95).

Anin had in mind a vision of the development of the Beothuk given the resources of the island. The relationship between the journey and the dreams is important. The first human dream of using the resources of the island was not a coloniser but a Beothuk who imagined the destiny of his nation. The dream is a projection of the spirit of the nation with an inclusion of *métissage* with other clans. It is possible to analyse the description of these dreams with the help Carl Jung's theories on the relationship between images and unconsciousness: 'all the contents of our unconscious are constantly being projected into our surroundings, and it is only by recognizing certain properties of the objects as projections or images that we are able to distinguish them from the real properties of the objects' (Jung, 1986, p. 50).

The dream is characterised by the presence of the spirits. Anin sees Gashu-Uwith in his dreams and Gashu-Uwith warns him about the possible dangers that he might encounter (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 107). The spirits are important in the mental mindset of the Beothuk; they are also projections of deep drives that can help or threaten the existence of the nation. In the novel, there is also a mention of Washi Weuth, which Woasut perceives as a threat to the Beothuk.

She was as afraid as she had been the first time she heard Washi Weuth, the night spirit, the god of thunderstorms. Washi Weuth the unknown one, the mysterious one, he without body who could smother thought on long sleepiness nights. Washi Weuth, the enemy of female Beothuk children, whom even the male children hated. Washi Weuth whose name no one dared say aloud for fear of calling forth his dreaded apparition (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 44).

The anaphora puts emphasis on the construction of the curse for the Beothuk. The nation is here consolidated by the rejection of

this night spirit that embodies the possibility of destruction. This passage illustrates how imaginary significations are built for the Beothuk. The notion of imaginary signification was elaborated by Castoriadis when he analysed the way societies were created in a constant flow of significations. From these significations, the institutions are built, deconstructed, questioned and renewed. 'The social imaginary is, primordially, the creation of significations and the creation of the images and figures that support these significations' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 238). The assemblage of core representations of the nation is also the purpose of the first part of the book. Anin collects all the images that have meaning for the Beothuk as they constitute the principles of organisation. Castoriadis refers to the Greek notion of *teukhein*, 'assembling-adjusting-making-constructing' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 238) when it comes to the elaboration of the social institutions. This is indeed a culturalist approach as specific imaginary significations are linked to specific institutions. An imaginary signification is an assemblage of actions that provoke representations, emotions and intentions. For someone outside the Beothuk nation, Anin's odyssey can be perceived as meaningless, but for the Beothuk, the journey is crucial. In addition to this, the dreams connect generations of Beothuk with each other. 'He learned that his dreams could very well remain dreams, and that to realize them would take longer than the lifetime of one man' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 116). Assiniwi describes and invents the *ethos* of the Beothuk throughout generations; Anin embodies this *ethos*, which is why he is the founder of the Beothuk nation.

## Colonialism, invasion and genocide

The climax occurs in the second part of the book with the arrival of John Cabot, spelled 'Kapitan Jon Kabor' in the text. This is a turning point in the narrative as there is a contrast between the hospitality of the Beothuk and the disloyalty of the invaders who dominated and progressively eliminated the Beothuk.

The young people did not remember this lesson, and so the Living Memories of each clan were charged with reminding them of this sorrowful incident, as well as telling them of all the dangers

experienced by their ancestor Anin during his voyage around the land of the Beothuk (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 144).

The notion of ‘living memory’ is dealt with in several passages in this second part of the book, illustrating the perpetuation of the heritage of the Beothuk. In other words, the ‘living memory’ is a part of the Beothuk re-membering process, it is the transmission of oral narratives throughout times that support the survival of the nation (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 165). The use of the future in the past echoes to the experience of time (Koselleck, 1985, p. 11) where the future is described by Anin as a perfect harmony between the Beothuk and their island. The invasion of colonisers is presented as a traumatic rupture that broke the dreams of the Beothuk.

The dramatisation of the chronology at the end of the book shows different commentaries in which historical facts are compared to those of the historian Ingeborg Marshall (Assiniwi, 2000, pp. 323–330; Marshall, 1996, pp. 250–253). Table 1 illustrates some of the quotes from both books.

**Table 1.** Comparison of some commentaries on the history of the Beothuk (Premat, 2020).

| Quotes from Assiniwi  | Quotes from Marshall   |
|---|--|
| <p>‘1497, June 24, 5.00 a.m. John Cabot (Jean Cabot, Giovanni Cabotto) sails into Bonavista Bay. When he returns to England, he takes three Beothuk with him and presents them to King Henry VII [...].</p> <p>1534, May 10 – Jacques Cartier sails into Catalina Bay, which he names Sainte-Catherine. He also visits Port de Rapont (Quirpont), where he finds Beothuk habitations covered with sailcloth, but does make contact’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 323, p. 324).</p> | <p>‘1497 Discovery of Newfoundland by John Cabot’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 251)</p> <p>No mention of Jacques Cartier.</p> <p>‘1560s–1700s Conflict between Beothuk and Inuit’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 251).</p> |

(Continued)

**Table 1.** *(Continued).*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>‘1768, August – some trappers encounter another Beothuk woman and her six-year-old child. She trips while trying to run away and is killed. Her son is taken prisoner and displayed in Liverpool that winter, for a fee of two cents. He is called John August, making the month of his capture. Much later he returns to Catalina to seek the men who murdered his mother, and dies in 1785. It is known whether he succeeded in avenging his mother’s death’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 327).</p> | <p>‘1768 Furriers capture the Beothuk boy and kill his mother’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 252).</p>  |
| <p>‘1803, September 17 William Cull captures a Beothuk woman near Gander and is given a reward for not killing her. At a former ball she is exhibited to the island’s upper-class inhabitants, who admire her light hair and pale skin. She prefers the company of children, with whom she plays’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 328).</p>   | <p>‘1803 A Beothuk woman is captured by William Cull and returned to the Exploits River the following year’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 252).</p>   |
| <p>‘1829, June 5: Shanawdithit dies of tuberculosis’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 30).</p>   | <p>‘1829: On June 6 Shanawdithit dies of pulmonary tuberculosis. Though some of her people would still have been alive, either in the interior of Newfoundland or in Labrador, the Beothuk tribe as cultural entity has become extinct’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 253).</p> |

Table 1 makes it possible to measure the change of tone between the historical novel and the history book. Marshall uses neutral words ('discovery') and a factual description whereas Assiniwi gives details on what the colonisers observed and did when they came to the island. Assiniwi introduces Jacques Cartier and shows how the colonisers perceived themselves as the first people by giving names to the different geographical locations. Assiniwi insists on the capture of Beothuk by colonisers such as Gaspard de Corte Real: 'Gaspar de Côte Real returns to Lisbon with seven Beothuk, who are painted red. His second ship arrives two days later with fifty more Beothuk. All are sold as slaves' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 323).<sup>10</sup> This mention is all the more important as the Beothuk would be identified as red skins by the colonisers. Assiniwi gives specific details on the capture of the Beothuk and describes the way the Beothuk were exhibited in human zoos in Europe: 'he was the first Beothuk child to be exhibited in England like an animal in a zoo' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 238). The human zoo is presented here as an extreme period of loneliness where the individual experiences a radical cultural exclusion. The comments of Assiniwi here are overwhelmingly sad: 'At the age of seventeen, he had had six years of freedom, eight years of captivity, and three years of hell. A hell worse than death, a hell of not knowing who he was, of never seeing his own family, of losing even his language, of having no friends in whom to confide' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 238). Cultural erasure was achieved by colonisers who wanted to see the Beothuk as a savage close to the animal condition, deprived of any social and cultural contact. The anaphora 'a hell' illustrates the terrible conditions of these human zoos where the last descendants of the Beothuk lived.

Some researchers worked on the exhibitions of these human zoos for the Inuit of northern Labrador and underlined how the cultural objects of these nations were exhibited in museums (Rivet, 2018, p. 138). If the Inuit are not among the First Nations, the First Nations were also victims of these human zoos. Assiniwi described

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<sup>10</sup> In historical writing captain Gaspard de Corte Real is presented as a merchant interested in sea expeditions (Harrisse, 1883, p. 28). There seems to be a variation in the spelling of the name as Assiniwi wrote Côte Real.

the tragic, brutally humiliating end of the Beothuk: 'Thus died the last descendant of the hero of the island of Newfoundland, Anin the Voyager. John August was the final chapter in a sad family saga, a family that had influenced the whole culture of the island for nearly eight hundred season-cycles' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 238).

The contrast between the initiatory journey of Anin and the captivity of John August is striking here and reflects the social condition of most of the current young generation of the First Nations. Assiniwi inserted his own judgment on the treatment of Beothuk by the colonisers.

What I find the strangest thing of all, however, as the Living Memory of my people, is that the colonists of the island of Newfoundland did not try to use these two young men as go-betweens, or even as interpreters, when they sent their military expeditions into the interior of the island to establish contact with our people (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 238).

The author condemns the absence of curiosity and the disappearance of the Other in colonial thinking. There was never a real encounter between the Beothuk and the colonisers, which is why it is important to tell the story of this First Nation. Remembering the spirit of the Nation is a duty for First Nation writers, who have to reinvent a future after the cultural genocide of the past.

However, Assiniwi makes a distinction between the attitude of the English and the French colonisers in the novel. He tells the story of Jean le Guellec, who married a Beothuk woman. Jean le Guellec was a sailor serving under Jacques Cartier who came from Brittany. He was given the name Wobee when he decided to live with the Beothuk. Le Guellec was also impressed by the sophistication of Beothuk culture, which is why Assiniwi shows that some European people could be welcomed and live among the Beothuk (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 196, p. 204). There is this trans-cultural aspect in Assiniwi's novel when he described the possible *métissage* with the Beothuk (Laporte, 2013).

Assiniwi describes the destiny of a Beothuk child, Ou-Bee, who was sent to England to learn a new language and new rules. Ou-Bee resisted the acculturation process.

Ou-Bee was sent to England, where she was adopted by a family named Stone. They tried to give her an English name, but she

steadfastly refused to respond to it. She responded only when they called her Ou-Bee. Whenever Mr. Stone was alone with Ou-Bee he tried to kiss her, but then she would scream like a terrified animal (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 246).

The acculturation process seems to be prevailing here as the child is compared to ‘a terrified animal’ resisting the aggression of the colonisers. The child survived the treatment of the Stones and the colonisers. She learned English quickly and taught a Reverend how to speak some Beothuk words.

He said she learned faster than any English child her age, and that after only two years of instruction the English language held no secrets from her. In fact, Reverend Clinch even began to learn the Beothuk language from Ou-Bee, and compiled the first collection of Beothuk words. Ou-Bee lived until the year 1788, when she died of tuberculosis, a disease to which native people have no resistance (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 247).

Ou-Bee proves her intelligence and her ability to adapt to a different culture. The end of the sentence illustrates the generalisation of Beothuk conditions in relation to the diseases that killed so many native people. Assiniwi transcribes a story that was reported to him. ‘Her story was later told to the Paul family in Bay d’Espoir by a soldier who had met the Stones, and I heard it directly from Mary Paul herself’ (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 247). The author inserts these snippets of individual stories in the novel, recalling the testimonies in order to remember the end of the Beothuk.

The end of the Beothuk began when one of them, Bawoodisik, committed suicide by eating poisonous mushrooms.

No Beothuk had committed suicide in the hundreds of season-cycles known to the Living Memories of the community of the Red Men, because our instinct for survival was too strong. Bawoodisik’s death brought darkness to the heart of the survivors of the Beothuk nation (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 242).

The presence of the possessive adjective ‘our’ reveals the empathy of the author for his people. The suicide is a strong gesture showing the loneliness of the Beothuk.

It is said that at the end of the eighteenth century there was one man who came to the defence of the Beothuk. His name was

G. C. Pulling, a lieutenant in the English navy. He apparently wrote a report in which he strongly denounced the atrocities and acts of barbarism that had been committed by the colonists, fishermen, and fur trappers in the northeast quadrant of our island (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 251).

Ingeborg Marshall shows that Pulling was the first who tried to be impartial by investigating the behaviour of the fishermen and the settlers (Marshall, 1996, p. 76, p. 97). Pulling had collected all the stories from the settlers on their relations with the Beothuk. He 'reported that not everyone was hostile towards the Beothuk' (Marshall, 1996, p. 105). For Assiniwi, Pulling is a coloniser who could have distance to all the settlers' stories. The last part of the book gathers all the reports and the stories of the colonisers who met the last Beothuk. The author describes the shift of power between the first French and the English colonisers.<sup>11</sup> 'It seems that the English took over this region without the permission of the French, and there was much ill feeling between them, although not as much as there was against us' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 262). The resistance of the Beothuk against the English colonisers is highlighted by Assiniwi as there is a difference made between the French and the English in the book. The English are described without compassion: they never tried to understand the way the Beothuk lived, whereas the French had more openness. The author refers to the 'Beothuk killers', the mercenaries who took advantage of the situation: 'If George Cartwright and Buchan and Glascock had been honest soldiers, and if John Peyton Jr. was a humanitarian, why did they come to us in the company of people who could never be trusted by the Beothuk?' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 276).

The author elaborates on a counter-narrative by remembering the point of view of the Beothuk.

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<sup>11</sup> The author did not try to question the sources related to the first colonisers. If John Cabot was presented as the first, some writers highlighted alternative narratives of previous meetings with travellers from the Basque country (Lavolle, 1974, p. 19). Lavolle is well-known for her youth literature books and so it is interesting to see how she tried to promote this thesis in her novel *L'Expédition de l'Intrépide*.



The author interferes by rehabilitating the point of view of the natives at the end of the novel when he inserts a table illustrating the perception of facts for the natives.

That is how the last survivors of the proud race of Red Men saw things. They had lived on this island since the beginning of time, longer than memory. The elders said that non-native people have always been afraid of wolves, and tell many stories about those animals in Europe. Their wolves seem much different from the wolves we know on our island. Here the wolves feed on caribou and other animals. They do not eat Beothuk. Non-natives have always been afraid of Beothuk, and they have killed almost all of us (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 276).

There is an inversion of judgements in this sentence which is a condemnation of the genocide made by the invaders (Vizenor, 1991). The subjective point of view is eloquent when the author mentions 'the proud race of Red men' and he shows how the invaders were much worse than the animals. The invaders were afraid of this new culture and never made an effort to understand its characteristics and peculiarities. 'I knew that the Beothuk would live forever because there are still real men on the earth even if they do not have red skins' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 322).

## Conclusion

There is a strong legacy of the Beothuk with many historical works on their culture. For Assiniwi, remembering the Beothuk means incorporating the living memory of diverse clans that had a fair deal when they shared territory. This agreement was broken by the invaders who colonised the island and completely eliminated the Beothuk. Assiniwi perceives his role as a transcription of the 'Living Memory of the Beothuk people' (Assiniwi, 2000, p. 286). He has to elaborate a historical novel for the counter-narrative of native people, and this is why the novel is built around the idea of a living memory circulating among characters who are Beothuk heroes. Then, in the last part, the author connects himself to all the stories and became a voice for the last Beothuk. The captivity of Beothuk, their humiliation when they were shown in human zoos, reveals the cruelty of the invaders, who missed the

opportunity of a real encounter. Assiniwi wanted to present the multiplicity of cultural representations of the Beothuk and defend the point of view of the Beothuk. The last part of their story was never told by a native writer and the use of the historical novel serves to balance most of the ethnographic and historical works that were based upon the narratives and reports of European colonisers. From this perspective, the work of Bernard Assiniwi contributes to studies of 'Americity' focused on living archives and on the survival of the First Nations (Durand, 2014, p. 271). At the same time, Assiniwi shows that the natives have very similar concerns and representations to the European colonisers. Had the colonisers had some interest in this nation, they would have learnt a lot. The French are described in a more positive way, as one of them became Beothuk in the novel whereas the English never showed the slightest interest in meeting and knowing the Beothuk. On the whole, the novel reflects this dramatic encounter between the Beothuk and the Europeans, and for contemporary readers might be the opportunity to reflect on this cultural elimination. In reality, this counter-narrative shows that the Beothuk were a very ancient civilization present long before the arrival of European settlers. Revealing this point of view allows them to be reinscribed as main subjects in Canadian history (Thobani, 2007, p. 238). Assiniwi's novel is an important contribution to the fight against the invisibilisation of the natives and their exclusion from Canadian history. Since this novel, other works have affirmed this wish to assume the history of the First Nations as a properly Canadian history (Bécharde & Kanapé Fontaine, 2018).

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