American Travel Narratives and the ‘Problem’ of History:
Diane Glancy, Compulsory Postcoloniality and Sacajawea

Pramod K Nayyar*

The form of postcolonial writing in Diane Glancy, this paper proposes, works to appropriate and fit the text into ‘compulsory postcoloniality’ where the postcolonial author discussing cultural encounters uses authenticating devices and prepares a ‘narrative society’ that demands such ‘authentic’ writing about the postcolonial condition and its revisionism of its past. Sacajawea’s narrative functions as a ‘narrative parasite’ because it formally disrupts and interrupts mainstream (white) information and induces a different order, asserting agency. The interaction of her narrative with the white man’s produces a ‘noise,’ but one which is agential in determining the shape of the overall narrative of the expedition. Sacajawea’s narrative rewrites the history of white exploration itself by showing the native’s individual as well as racial identity and mobility, without which the whites’ exploration would have been impossible. The novel works as a tale of postcolonial agency because it takes the central trope of Anglo-European travel—mobility—as a feature of the native woman. It generates a narrative where we are performe asked to acknowledge that one of the greatest exploratory expeditions was facilitated by a native woman’s role as well. All the authenticating devices that point to ‘true’ native/postcolonial identity are present in Glancy’s writing. The paper proposes that we can discern a society that has learnt to disbelieve the story of ‘heroic’ expeditions such as Lewis and Clark’s and looks forward to texts like Glancy’s that show another narrative as well.

Postcolonial reclamation of history is a theme too well rehearsed since the 1990s to require repetition. The forms of this reclamation, it has been suggested in the works of Jackie Huggins, Mudrooroo Narogin, Derek Walcott, Wilson Harris, and dozens of other postcolonial authors, are marked by a return to nonlinear, local (folkloric, mythic, oral, dreamtelling, spiritualized) storytelling forms that resist the cartographic, documentary, questionably secular, and categorical-classificatory forms of organized history-writing practiced by the Europeans. Diane Glancy refuses to reject the European tradition completely (as she points out in a 2002 interview, her mother was German-English) but relocates it in its relation vis-à-vis native history writing. This essay examines the narrative form of Glancy’s fictional account of

* Professor, Department of English, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.  
E-mail: pramodknayyar@gmail.com

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Sacajawea, the Native American woman who accompanied the Lewis-Clark expedition (1804-06), as it made the first overland journey across the United States to the Pacific Coast and back. Glancy’s *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea* (2003) seems to engage with the narrative contest between European and non-European forms of history-writing and, at the same time, cleverly reposition native forms so as to reduce this to a no-contest. Form, I want to propose, works to appropriate and fit into what I term ‘compulsory postcoloniality,’ where, unwittingly or consciously, the postcolonial author must (1) reduce cultural transactions to an encounter (with all its resonance of a binary, one-to-one, antagonistic relationship), (2) amplify already circulating authenticity devices such as folklore or myth to demonstrate distance from European (mainstream) writing, and (3) simultaneously create and feed into a ‘narrative society’ prepared for, demanding such ‘authentic’ writing. This last is, I propose, the construction of a body of readership for ‘authentic’ writing and, at the same time, the production of a body of writing to suit that (politically correct, ready-for-the-authentic-postcolonial) readership. A ‘narrative society’ is one that understands itself through stories rather than statistics, through autobiographies rather than government reports (Dawes, 1995, p. 38). Since the 1990s at least, America’s narrative society has constructed itself through stories of the legendary massacres of Native Americans, the marginalization of African Americans, the oppression of women and minorities, and other pernicious and historical evils of dispossession and exploitation. The form a narrative takes is, of course, conditioned by and contingent upon the society of readers. A narrative can be made to tell a story because of the conceptual apparatus of that particular society and age, where, even when the narrative does not make a meaning explicit, the conceptual apparatus of that society, its techniques of interpretation, and the conventions of meaning-making enable an unraveling of the story. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (cited in Waldman, 2004, p. 86) directs our attention to this context of meaning-making when she writes:

Individual narratives would be described as ... the verbal acts of particular narrators performed in response to—and thus shaped and constrained by—sets of multiple interacting conditions.

That is, a narrative is made to tell a story through social conventions of meaning-making. How such America’s narrative society, conducive to a postcolonial revisionism of its foundational myths (the westward expansion, in this case, or else, the great explorations, El Dorado, the quest for Northwest Passage, the frontier thesis, etc.), is constructed for the consumption of the postcolonial narrative of *Stone Heart* through its formal practices is the larger subject of the paper. That is, the paper proposes that a society of readership eager for postcolonial revisionism of its past is prepared by Glancy’s narrative and its ‘compulsory postcoloniality,’ even as this society of readership is itself only imagined and implied within Glancy’s text.
Framing History as the Parasite

Glancy’s text does not seek to provide an alternative history by presenting the native ‘version’ of the expedition. What she does is something far more interesting in formal terms.

To begin with, it is written from the second-person point of view: Sacajawea refers to herself as you. This simultaneous distancing and intimacy of the fictional-autobiographical combine throws the reading awry—a strategy that is deliberate, to call our attention to the form.

Every page has two sets of narratives. Sacajawea’s is a free-flowing dream-narrative that records incidents, but often does so in what can be thought of as ‘mythic time.’ The explorers, Lewis and Clark, are looking for the sources of the Missouri and, possibly, a water route through the west. This is Sacajawea’s ‘record’ of the white man’s quest:

Why are they looking for the headwaters? Don’t they know the river starts with the Maker? His voice is the headwaters of the Missouri. (p. 15)

Events are not recorded in the date/time pattern in Sacajawea’s document. Sometimes, some natives try to adopt the language and register of the whites:

The Indians draw crooked lines in the ashes to show the explorers the mountains that separate the rivers. (p. 15)

“There is no Northwest Passage,” Sacajawea writes. The “land is vast. It is a place-where-the-Maker resides” (p. 109), thus interpreting the topography in a mythic time. The names given to the places the expedition passes are recorded in their native version: ‘the river-that-scolds-all-others’ (p. 34). Weather is measured and described in mythic terms: ‘the old spirits throw their blanket over the next morning. The day is cold and black’ (14). And, Sacajawea has visions almost continuously (in pages 37, 74, 81, and elsewhere). Gerald Prince has suggested that achronicity (in which events are deprived of all temporal connections with other events) and anti-chronicity (whereby the narration involves and exploits a multivalued system of temporal ordering) are temporal features characterizing the postcolonial narrating act (2005, p. 378). Glancy’s narrative thus asserts its postcolonial nature from the very beginning by narrating in mythic time.

If Sacajawea’s ‘record’ is in mythic time with nightmares, visions, dreams, and mystical elements that help her ‘frame’ the events of the expedition—the story of the expedition, in other words—then the white men’s narrative is completely different.

Glancy carefully positions Lewis and Clark’s narrative as diary entries (extracted from the 20-volume work) on the same page as Sacajawea’s.
The crucial formual experiment Glancy makes is, I think, a political comment and choice. The white men's narrative is set in boxes. The entries are dated: [Lewis] Wednesday August 21, 1805 or [Clark] Sunday March 23, 1806.' The entries are, expectedly, terse, and diary-like:

'Sent Shannon Labeish and frazier [sic] on a hunting expedition.'
(p. 107)

'A veryr [sic] cold morning wind from the West and cool until about 12 o'clock.' (p. 82)

My argument is: Glancy embeds the white man's narrative in the native-mythic one. Sacajawea's narrative runs unhindered and borderless, minus dates or calendar time. The white man's, on the other hand, is typographically closed in, framed and circumscribed. As a narrative strategy, this is brilliant. To see a page with Sacajawea's poetic prose running on and then the caesura of the white man's bounded text marks is, I suggest, a postcolonial narrative moment. The native is (set) free like the landscape Sacajawea describes, and the white man is limited, by type, format, epistemology, and even perhaps the language into a 'box.'

Glancy achieves, I think, a certain effect not always noticed in postcolonial writing (I am categorizing her work as 'postcolonial' because I see 'postcolonial' as a political-epistemological category where the narratives of any marginalized and the oppressed have begun to speak out and against their silencing). This effect is a complicated textual maneuver of undermining 'white history' precisely by giving it space. She does not choose to do away with the mainstream narrative altogether. Instead what she does is to embed and circumscribe it textually into a powerful narrative—Sacajawea's. Sacajawea's is the narrative of disruption, cutting into and hemming in Lewis and Clark's. In order to understand the significance of this narrative move of Glancy, I invoke the idea of the 'parasite.' The Lewis-Clark narrative, to put it differently, is literally limited by Sacajawea's.

Sacajawea's would be deemed an 'unnecessary' voice in traditional mainstream historiography of the Lewis-Clark expedition. Glancy mentions in her Afterward that they 'said little about her' (p. 151). She is thus the 'noise' in the history of the expedition. Yet, Glancy installs her as a 'parasite.' It must be noted that 'parasite' does not, at any point, imply either dependent or derivative. Michel Serres (1982) says of the parasite:

'It was only noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information ... A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. (p. 3)
Like a host and parasite, Sacajawea travels and interacts with the white men, and her narrative interacts with the white men's narrative when it assimilates and records the same events (in fact, on several occasions, she mentions Lewis and Clark actually writing).

What it suggests is the extraordinary relationship between the host and parasite. As we read the white men's diaries, we are also directed, by the framing strategy Glancy uses, to Sacajawea's. The interaction of her narrative with the white men's produces a 'noise,' but one which is agential in determining the shape of the overall narrative of the expedition. The parasite lives in proximity to the host, but overturns the relationship. It is a noise generated by the mechanism, but also disrupts the mechanism's function through its own order of noise. This is precisely what Sacajawea's narrative achieves.

**Remaking History Through Travel (Narrative)**

Glancy's work purports to be a work of fiction. However, despite the 'invention' of Sacajawea's story, the work also reads like a travel narrative. There are three forms of mobility that help reassign historical responsibility for the overland route: that of (1) the white men, (2) the individual woman (Sacajawea), and (3) the individual woman as native traveler.

Travel writing, especially of explorers, as Pratt has so eloquently demonstrated (1995), involves the 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' approach to the landscape. Many of the 'traditional' travel narrative's features—the acts of naming, the counting and cataloguing (Sacajawea notes that they 'calculate,' p. 77), mobility, the romanticization of danger, the conquistadorial stance of the white male 'observer'—figure here as well. Mobility has always been the white male's privilege (Mohanram, 1999). This feature, in particular, is central to Glancy's narrative. What it does is to blur the borders between the white man's travel diary and the fictionalized version of the travel of Sacajawea. It thus breaks the genre of both fiction and travel writing.

In the telling of Sacajawea's travel, Glancy treats mobility as an act of agency. This is particularly significant because she makes Sacajawea, a native woman, an agent alongside the white men. The novel works as a tale of postcolonial agency because it takes the central trope of Anglo-European travel—mobility—as a feature of the native woman. By converting her 'novel' into a travel account, showing Sacajawea participating in the dangers and thrills of mobility like any white man, Glancy redefines the role of the native: the native is not just the observed, but an observer as well; the land is not just what is enumerated in the European travelogue, the land is also what is described in a whole new visual-mythic regime, that of the native.

Sacajawea's act of mobile agency begins in the opening moments of the expedition and the novel. Lewis and Clark are inquiring the distances they
might need to travel and the lay of the land, but they are unable to understand what the Indians tell them. It is Sacajawea who has to interpret: “they listen to your voice as you tell them what the Indians say” (p. 16). The inaugural moments of a travel are made possible through the native’s act of interpreting the land and a further native role: Sacajawea’s translation. The white men’s mobility is thus initiated (of course by the orders of President Jefferson, whose note is appended at the beginning and end of Glancy’s tale) not on their own, but as dependent upon the natives’ agency.

I have already referred to Sacajawea’s enacting strength (“when you can, you walk to the gate to show the men you will be able to travel in the spring”). There are no references to Sacajawea being forced to or ordered to travel. It is she who decides she will accompany the men. Mobility in Sacajawea’s case is, therefore, willed—as an individual.

Sacajawea’s then does something else as well: she points to her indispensable role as a native: “they need you to ask for horses [from her tribe which they hope to encounter later on their trip]” (p. 27). Two things are to be noted in Glancy’s clever imbrication of the travel narrative and the novel. Sacajawea’s travel/exploration is embedded within an individualism, but also within a racial identity. She is the Indian who chooses to travel—and upon whom the white men are dependent—into the interiors. What I am suggesting is: Sacajawea’s narrative is one that rewrites the history of white exploration itself by showing the native’s individual as well as racial identity and mobility, without which the whites’ exploration would have been impossible.

Glancy reworks the colonial exploration narrative by positioning Sacajawea’s travel on the same plane as Lewis and Clark’s monumental expedition. The native individual who travels, Glancy suggests, has the same amount of agential mobility, observational role, and participatory responsibilities as everybody else on the expedition. The myth that Sacajawea ‘led’ the white men to the Pacific is perhaps exaggerated, as Glancy herself suggests (p. 152). However, what cannot be denied is that by locating the history of the expedition as the conjunction of three forms of mobility—that of (1) the white men, (2) the individual woman, and (3) the individual woman as native traveler—Glancy assigns the individual native woman’s travel, with its markedly subjective responses to the landscape (as opposed to the catalogue and diary of the white man), a significant role.

‘Compulsory Postcoloniality’ and Sacajawea’s Narrative Society

Thus far I have argued that Sacajawea’s narrative presents a disruption by its very proximity to the mainstream one. It has demonstrated acts of agency by its power to generate another order within, yet against, the Lewis-Clark one.
The use of mythic time (noted above) and the various authenticating devices to deliver Sacajawea’s ‘story’ of travel to us reinstates the primacy of the native in the history of the United States. The deliberate interweaving of the ‘realities of this world and time with that of other worlds and other times’ (which Kimberley Blaeser, 1997, sees as characteristic of native women’s writing) that Glancy’s narrative undertakes, for example, is an excellent authenticating device.

It generates a narrative where we are perforce asked to acknowledge that one of the greatest exploratory expeditions was facilitated by a native woman’s role as well. It was not, therefore, conquistadorial alone, but perhaps a participatory-collaborative one (and I am not even addressing the fact that Sacajawea’s ‘husband,’ Toussiant, was French-Canadian, that she had been kidnapped by another tribe, complicating matters even further).

I would like to conclude by suggesting that texts like Glancy’s are made to fit into a ‘compulsory postcolonialify’ paradigm, but also contribute to a rewiring of the American public sphere. ‘Compulsory postcoloniality’ is a condition whereby a ‘Third World’ or native writer must adopt postures, codes, and themes that align them within the postcolonial paradigm. One cannot not be a subaltern (re)writing the story, in other words.

All the authenticating devices that point to ‘true’ native/postcolonial identity are present (and I run an abbreviated catalogue here) in Glancy’s work: native resistance and agency, unequal racial relations, the native attitude towards the land, native forms of storytelling, and the mysticism. When Sacajawea asks: ‘How can they put a new nation over yours? How can they just come and announce it theirs?’ (p. 39, emphasis in original), she has asked the kind of questions ‘writing back’ in postcoloniality entails.

Sacajawea’s voice is the voice of her community; she records the expedition in the language of her tribe, and thus denies the white man’s voice totaling validity. This also ensures her participation in the ‘compulsory postcoloniality’ paradigm. However, by situating these in and around the thus far dominant and canonical white men’s narrative, Glancy achieves what I think is a rare postcolonial effect—of narrative ingenuity—despite the excessive attempts to stay ‘truly’ postcolonial. In other words, what I am suggesting is that it is her powerful formal experimentation, rather than her thematic alliances, affiliations, and resonance with hundreds of postcolonial writers, that signals Glancy’s ‘rewriting,’ ‘reclaiming’ history, and ‘writing back.’

This problematic and yet powerful location between ‘compulsory postcoloniality’ and something more radically revisionary is partly to do with the availability and continual reinforcement of a narrative society that actively seeks out narratives such as Glancy’s. I do not mean here to belittle Glancy’s
(or any other postcolonial author’s) work. What I want to emphasize is that ‘compulsory postcoloniality’ is instituted by a particular conceptual apparatus through which these texts are studied (for instance: ‘Native Americanism’ and the spiritual approach to landscape) and which need not be directly addressed by the text. The implicit meanings of a text are gleaned by the narrative society because a framework for reading such texts already exists. I am proposing that we can discern a society that has learned to disbelieve the story of ‘heroic’ expeditions such as Lewis and Clark’s and looks forward to texts like Glancy’s that show another narrative as well. The contemporary narrative society—which, let me hasten to add, can only be speculated upon as a particular kind of public sphere—desires such narratives that disturb the mainstream ones.

This kind of text is what enables a public sphere to reflect on itself, making itself into (1) postcolonially inflected (because of the attention to racial inequalities, dispossession, and oppression), and (2) recursive.

A recursive public is defined by Chris Kelty (2008) as:

a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives. (p. 3)

The United States keeps the chances of it being a free space open through the circulation of a carefully textualized discourse, of which Glancy’s work is an instance. The publishing of a book does not imply the existence of a public—a public comes into being for the book when people read that book, which is addressed to this imagined public in the first instance. An enlightened audience (aware of the historical wrongs on which the United States was founded) for Stone Heart is created through the book’s publication, even though this enlightened audience itself is imagined by the book. This means, to cut a long theoretical story short, the United States ‘turns’ postcolonial through the availability of texts such as Glancy’s, which, through their ‘compulsory postcoloniality,’ still serve the purpose of redefining the very public sphere that is imagined into existence within Glancy’s pages.

References


American Travel Narratives and the ‘Problem’ of History: Diane Glancy, Compulsory Postcoloniality and Suchajawa


