The potlatch has never ceased to fascinate outsiders, who for more than a century have produced a huge literature that dwarfs writings concerning the other famous icon of the northwest coast First Nations, the totem pole. Authorship ranges from those who reviled the potlatch and sought to ban it to those who saw it as the epitome of our human nature. Clearly, these different perspectives often say as much or more about the writers as they do about an indigenous institution. Like totemism or the Kula, the potlatch tends to be revisited with each shift in intellectual fashion. There is thus a certain inevitability to Christopher Bracken’s postmodernist deconstruction of the potlatch literature.

Bracken defines the “potlatch papers” inclusively. However, he structures his analysis in terms of a conventional, if schematically presented, story of the fifty-year effort by the Canadian government to suppress potlatching and associated ceremonies. In effect, he narrows the potlatch papers to a select collection of published and unpublished writings on the “potlatch question” and one anthropological text, Boas (and Hunt’s) “The Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians” (1897). While Bracken occasionally acknowledges a diversity of opinions on potlatching within the First Nations, he does not discuss the wider social context of the anti-potlatch efforts, notably the horrifying epidemics that decimated aboriginal communities and the theft of Native lands.

Bracken likens the production of potlatch papers to a postal system. The writings began as missives mailed from the “western limit” of “Europe” which in turn prompted replies and counter-replies in which “Europe” obsessively attempted to define the “other” against itself. This writing produced “evanescent” effects. Seeking an “absolute other” at the “limits” of “whiteness” (which Bracken equates with “Europe”), “Europe” instead “folded” upon itself. As First Nations leaders protesting the potlatch ban repeatedly told regulators, “Europe” never understood what actually occurred in potlatches. Instead, “Europe” created a horrific potlatch
emanating from its own deeply repressed fears. The writing also had its “violent” effects. The “waste,” “destruction” and even “cannibalism” that “Europe” perceived in the potlatch reflected deep paradoxes in “Europe’s” own “metaphysics,” particularly the unsolvable contradiction between a freely given gift and a commodity. The effort “to put aboriginal cultures to death” was thus a defensive maneuver to save European “whiteness” from itself (pp. 64, 165).

The voice of “Europe” in this book is provided not so much by the potlatch authors as by Derrida and Heidegger (with some support from de Man and Freud). The result is a stinging endorsement of what has become a well-accepted indictment of the anti-potlatch law: that the law in effect created the very “crime” it was meant to suppress and that this image was based on European preoccupations rather than a reliable grasp aboriginal realities.

Too often, however, Bracken insists on extremely narrow and exaggerated readings of the texts. “Europe’s” tortured soul allows no room for ambiguity or diversity of opinion, only for self-defeating contradiction. Bracken frequently inserts language to bolster assertions that authors perceived the west coast peoples as “absolutely other”; that they were obsessed with “whiteness”; that they could not perceive the potlatch as simultaneously a “gift” and an “investment.” He neglects other complicating discourses, such as the missionary language of conversion and the multivocality of ethnographic texts. This treatment stands in stark contrast to his words of praise for aboriginal politics and what he calls “public opinion” against the anti-potlatch law. Bracken’s inconsistency is especially visible in his treatment of Boas. In what can only be described as a cheap shot, Bracken labours to imply that Boas read ritual cannibalism into his detailed ethnography of the *hamatsa* dance; yet here and elsewhere we find it is Bracken who quite unselfconsciously inserts his own ethnographic understandings of the potlatch to make it better conform with modern sensibilities (pp. 173-79).

Bracken’s embrace of Mauss’ radical distinction between archaic “gift” and modern “commodity” societies provides the greatest irony in this deeply flawed study (pp. 152-55). We find Bracken writing approvingly of a scholar who never sat at the feet of an indigenous teacher
and who posed a radical divide between “them and us” – the very sins of “Europe” belaboured in
*The Potlatch Papers*. And yet where else could this line of argument go, for it permits no
possibility of intercultural dialogue.

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