ISLAND, MAINLAND AND THIRD SPACE:

Rethinking spatial community and Indigenous identity in Moniquill Blackgoose's *To Shape a Dragon's Breath* (2023)

[Received January 22nd 2026; accepted March 11th 2026 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.289]

Wang Xiteng

Guangzhou University, China <784767600@qq.com>

Liang Huan

Guangzhou University, China <2761129840@qq.com>

ABSTRACT: Following Homi Bhabha's Third Space theory, this study undertakes an analysis of Moniquill Blackgoose's fantasy novel *To Shape a Dragon's Breath* (2023), which skilfully delineates a multi-faceted, three-dimensional network of island-mainland spatial interaction via the protagonist's identity practice, cross-cultural negotiation, and power reconstruction. Through a fantasy narrative in which Anequs, an Indigenous girl from Masquapaug Island, enters an "Anglish" coloniser-dominated dragon academy, the book effectively unveils three profound colonial dilemmas: colonial spatial othering that constructs islands as backward and exploitable peripheries; colonial erasure of Indigenous history and traditional knowledge; and the fragmented identity predicament of Indigenous subjects trapped in racial, patriarchal, and cultural oppression. Simultaneously, the work displays the Indigenous subject's capacity for active resistance: Anequs rejects colonial mimicry and cultural subservience, upholds the Masquapaug traditions of human-nature symbiosis, ecological wisdom, and communal equality, and presents a pluralistic spatial community that transcends binary oppositions, respects cultural differences, and preserves communal autonomy.

KEYWORDS: island, third space, Indigenous identity, the Other, identity construction

Introduction

Islands have long been constructed as images of isolated spaces, appendages of colonial expansion or fantastical realms divorced from reality, with their pluralistic communal values and anti-hegemonic potentials often obscured. In Western imperialist discourse in particular, the island "was imagined as a remote and isolated space to be seized and possessed by white explorers"(Su et al., 2022, p.4) and cast as passive terrains awaiting civilisation by industrialised Europe—terrains for "various political, sociological, and colonial practices" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p.13). This colonial construction naturalised a rigid binary between 'advanced' mainland and 'primitive' island, entrenching a Western-centric cognitive framework that reduces islands to a homogenised, inferior category. More recently, an expanding

cohort of non-Western scholars has been actively pursuing intellectual decolonisation. Yaso Nadarajah and Adam Grydehøj (2016, p. 240) launched a decolonializing Island Studies project, warning that the difficulties in this process lie in the "attempts to balance the competing demands of a Western-oriented 'modernity'—of fitting into the globalised world—and the desire to maintain and revitalise indigenous, non-Western traditions". Building on that diagnosis, Luo and Grydehøj (2017, p. 40) insist that genuine decolonisation must "transcend efforts to adapt Western thoughts to non-Western contexts" and instead "consider alternative island and archipelagic epistemologies that predated, have existed alongside, or arose in spite of imperialism and colonial processes"—a reorientation that challenges the long-standing dominance of Western island imaginaries.

Notably, magical realism has emerged as a narrative mode deeply intertwined with decolonial aspirations, serving as a pivotal mechanism to destabilise Western-centric epistemological and cultural hegemony. As defined in *Magical Realism and Literature*, this mode operates through the deliberate conflation of "the real and the fantastic", naturalising supernatural elements within historical and material reality without explicit explanation (Warnes & Sasser, 2020, p.1). For Indigenous writers, it becomes a privileged vehicle to articulate hybrid cultural experiences rooted in their distinct worldviews (Warnes & Sasser, 2020, p.50). It condenses pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial temporalities, transversally examines firsthand narratives of colonised societies, forges connections between history and collective memory for the reconstruction of the postcolonial past, and acts as an instrumental force for the regeneration of Indigenous identity and cultural revitalisation (Ngom, 2020, p. 196, 197).

Moniquill Blackgoose, as an enrolled member of the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe of (what is today the north-east coast of the United States) and lineal descendant of Ousamequin Massasoit, centers Indigenous spatial sovereignty and ancestral land epistemologies in her literary practice. As she states (Jeffries, 2023), one of her "greatest goals in telling Anequs's story is to get the readers to comprehend how fundamentally different the European/colonialist perceptions of the world are from the Indigenous perceptions." In her narrative Blackgoose echoes the call for a decolonial Island Studies by centering Indigenous perspectives, restoring island subject agency, and deconstructing colonial spatial order through a magical realist narrative that synthesises the fantastic and the real. The sacred supernatural bond between islanders and dragons, and dragon breath's practical and sacred role as the "shapeless medicine" (Chapter 1, para. 1) that nourishes the land, heals nature and sustains the island's ecological balance are not mere fantastical inventions, but naturalised expressions of indigenous epistemologies that frame all beings—human and nonhuman—as inherently interconnected, with human-nature symbiosis as their core principle.

Set against the backdrop of Masquapaug—an island rooted in the ancestral homelands of the Seaconke Wampanoag, the Indigenous community of Blackgoose's own descent—this narrative reimagines a way of life shaped by reciprocal coexistence with the land, unfolding in an alternate 1840s timeline in southern New England, where the Roman Empire never existed and European colonisation proceeds differently. Grounded in her heritage as a direct descendant of Ousamequin (Massasoit), the Wampanoag leader who governed present-day Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and parts of Connecticut long before the arrival of Puritan colonists (Peirce, 1878, p. iii), Blackgoose constructs Masquapaug as a space

of Indigenous sovereignty and ecological wisdom. The island, with its constrained ecological carrying capacity, sustains a community that practices rotational agriculture, shares communal resources, harvests mussels and clams, hunts deer and turkeys, and upholds a self-sufficient system rooted in respect for the natural world.

Anequs, the heroine, is an Indigenous girl from Masquapaug Island whose enrollment in an Anglo coloniser-run dragon academy becomes a focal point for spatial and identity negotiation. With her supernatural bond with the dragon Kasaqua, Anequs rejects the "different" label of the Other imposed by colonial power (Said, 1978, p. 40), transcends the rigid mainland-island binary, and fosters the emergence of a Third Space—a dynamic realm where diverse cultures coexist rather than compete (Bhabha, 1994, p.36, 37). In this liminal space, Anequs's most striking trait is her complete break from the passive framework of "cultural subservience" (Wang, 2023, p. 327) proposed in postcolonial cultural negotiation theory: as the sole link between the island and the mainland, she rejects colonial mimicry, firmly upholds the island's traditions, and thereby escapes the category of "cultural subservience". For instance, when Anglo authorities demonstrate their colonial attitudes towards dragons, Anequs pushes back unflinchingly: "I don't possess her (Kasaqua), sir; it's not as if she's a thing I own." (Chapter 14, para. 8). In doing so, Anequs upholds Indigenous ecological wisdom and refuses to internalise the colonisers' framework of control over non-human life. Thus, the narrative of this novel carves out a new model of Third Space that goes beyond frameworks "analyzing the shaping of the Third Space form by the actions of subjects and objects in the process of mimicry" (Lu, 2024, p.69)—frameworks which, even as they acknowledge the agency of the Other, still confine the Other to a passive cultural adaptation framework and fail to break free from "cultural subservience" (Wang, 2023, p. 327).

Note: All quotations from and references to the novel in this article are derived from the Kindle version.

I. The Antagonistic Stage: Island Othering and Identity Fragmentation

Masquapaug is an outlying island off Lindmarden's eastern coast, part of a small archipelagic cluster that includes Slipstone Island and Naquipaug. Characterised by rocky hills, sandy shores, sheltered coves, tidal flats, dense pine stands and ancient temple mounds, the island maintains relative insularity—an isolation that shapes its seasonal subsistence practices, with islanders relying on harvests of corn, squash, berries, and wild game for sustenance. This aligns with documented Indigenous practices in early colonial New England, where communities cultivated these crops and utilised fish (such as herring) as natural fertiliser to enrich sandy soils, yielding bountiful harvests even with rudimentary tools (Peirce, 1878, p. 10). Its material culture is deeply rooted in subsistence-oriented communalism: livelihoods are sustained through farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering; possessions are practical and communally circulated (passed down or distributed to those in need), with no emphasis on wealth accumulation. With a modest population (approximately 1,000 individuals when whalers return from their voyages), the island fosters tightly knit

social relations: extended families play an active role in child-rearing, collective decision-making is overseen by elders and the *sachem* (tribal leader of the *skiltakraft*) (Chapter 4, para. 1), and cultural norms are anchored in respect for elders, reciprocal exchange, and shared responsibility. For Masquisit, dragons (*Nampeshiwe*) are sacred beings, their existence intertwined with the island's spiritual and physical survival, and their breath revered as "shapeless medicine" (Chapter 1, para. 1). Dragons were once integral to the community—dancing to ward off storms, aiding harvests—until a "great dying" (Chapter 1, para. 4) (the 1617 plague that devastated New England Indigenous tribes) (Peirce, 1878, p. 2)—wiped them out centuries prior. When a *Nampeshiwe* egg is found, the community gathers to sing, tell stories, and nurture it in the meetinghouse, letting the hatchling freely choose its *Nampeshiweisit* (human companion) (Chapter 3, para. 11)—one who belongs to a dragon.

Lindmarden is the continental mainland off the eastern coast of which Masquapaug, Naquipaug, Slipstone Island, and other outlying islands lie, part of the broader region of North Markesland. Set in an alternate 1840s, its colonial framework is defined by Anglish dominance (Anglish being a term referring to the collective Norse and Anglesland peoples who colonised this alternate North America, imposing centralised control over both human societies and dragon husbandry). Anglish authority manifests through institutional and ideological structures: key among these is Kuiper's Academy, which serves as a tool to standardise legitimate dragon training and focuses on s*kiltakraft*—a practice that shapes a dragon's breath via precise diagrams called *skiltas* and the manipulation of 24 known *athers* (the basic elements of *skiltakraft*) (Chapter 25, para. 21). Vastergot, Lindmarden's prominent urban hub, embodies Anglish industrial and social ideals: it features soot-choked cannery districts, stratified neighborhoods (from polished High Street storefronts to crowded, squalid tenements), and infrastructure such steamships and telegraph lines that tie it to outlying islands and other mainland settlements. Anglish attitudes toward dragons reflect their colonial logic: dragons are viewed as beasts to be tamed, registered with the Ministry of Dragon Affairs, and trained for utility (battle, labour, *skiltakraft* experimentation). Bonding is not a choice but a controlled process—eggs are purchased, hatchlings are presented to preselected candidates, and so-called "feral" dragons are liable to be destroyed. Dragon breath is reduced to a technical force (transmuting *athers*) rather than a sacred one, with *skiltakraft* framing it as a tool for colonial progress.

Thus, Masquapaug and Lindmarden embody sharply contrasting geographic imaginaries, social systems, material cultures, and ethical frameworks toward nonhuman life. Masquapaug is steeped in its people's tradition of natural symbiosis and mutual prosperity while Lindmarden embodies Anglish colonial order and industrial civilisation. In the novel, Masquapaug and Lindmarden have a treaty stating: "We (Masquisit) pay them (the Anglish) taxes and we follow their laws and they leave us alone." (Chapter 6, para. 24). This treaty echoes the historical 1621 treaty between the Wampanoag sachem Massasoit and English colonists at Plymouth, which established mutual non-aggression and reciprocal accountability for violent acts between the two groups (Peirce, 1878, p. 12). Yet the colonial logic of the Anglish, which treats islands as disposable resources for industrial development, is starkly exemplified by their military occupation of Naquipaug—a neighbouring

island of Masquapaug. Even with a treaty in place between the Anglish and the Naquisit, Anglish forces seizes the island by force upon discovering coal reserves there, exploit its mineral wealth to fuel their industrialisation, and even deploys dragons as weapons to slaughter the Naquisit. Furthermore, the material differences, based on colonial expansion, are used by the Anglish to strengthen the binary opposition between the mainland and the island. As Su and Wang (2024, p. 197, 198) argue:

> *It (Western imperialist discourse) claims that the social, political, and economic experiments carried out by industrialized European powers on these islands serve to transform them into 'civilized' and capitalized lands, thereby bringing advanced Western civilization and capitalism to the localities. This discursive system is grounded in a binary opposition: islands, which stand for backwardness, primitivism, and marginality, versus the mainland, which represents progress, development, and centrality. Such an opposition provides legitimate excuses for European colonial conquest.*

This discourse precisely structures the colonial ideology enacted in the novel: drawing directly on colonial accounts of early settlement on Nack Island to justify their imperial ideology, the Anglish deems themselves "the enlightened and advanced species of mankind", while stigmatising the islanders as a "backward and primitive" group. They claimed the islanders "wholly lack ambition and desire for personal or social betterment", "are very like bees or wasps—content in their small industries if left undisturbed, yet violently resentful of any interference, even that which directly benefits them", and "lack the natural industry, intelligence, and desire for improvement that the gods in their wisdom have deigned to impart upon peoples of the white northlands". In doing so, the Anglish whitewashes their colonial expansion on the island as "only right and just" , arguing that "the enlightened and advanced species of mankind should supplant those that are backward and primitive" (Chapter 20, para. 16).

As the *nampeshiweisit* (dragon's companion) who travels to Kuiper's Academy to study, Anequs becomes the critical intermediary between Masquapaug and Lindmarden—and in this role, she bears the brunt of Anglish colonisers' racial, cultural and gendered domination. Officials at Kuiper's Academy subject her to blatant colonial discrimination: they not only label Anequs "the child of the lower classes" (Chapter 8, para. 28) but also dismiss Kasaqua as a "feral dragon" (Chapter 14, para. 39) deserving execution. Worse still, Anequs's admission to the academy is framed by some as a "little versuch"—a small experiment—aimed at answering demeaning questions: "Can savages become truly educated and civilised? Have they any place in a modern society?" (Chapter 20, para. 17). Such rhetoric posits Anglish culture as the sole benchmark of civilisation, constructing a colonial hierarchy that dehumanises the Masquapaug people. In addition, Anglish colonisers' gendered oppression of Anequs is equally blatant, rooted in a patriarchal system that perpetuates discrimination against women. A stark embodiment of this misogynistic colonial prejudice is Ivar Stafn, who, under the pretense of "exercising a natural curiosity into the roots of folkreckoning" (Chapter 32, para.

10), asks Anequs whether women of Anequs's ethnicity "engage in carnal congress outside of marriage, and to bear children outside of marriage". He even presses further in an overtly offensive manner: "Is a 'woman' of thirteen considered old enough to engage in such congress, with or without being married?" (Chapter 32, para. 12). In doing so, he wields patriarchal prejudice to reduce Anequs to a sexualised object of colonial scrutiny, subjecting her to invasive and dehumanising gender-based humiliation that reinforces the colonial construction of indigenous women as primitive and immoral Others within the Anglish imperialist worldview. This layered oppression of race, culture and gender consigns Anequs to the position of the marginal Other in Edward Said's theory—one who is "contained and represented by dominating frameworks" and whom colonial power constructs as "irrational, depraved, childlike, 'different'" (Said, 1978, p. 40).

In addition, as an indigenous dragoneer from Masquapaug Island who travels to the Anglo mainland to pursue education at Kuiper's Academy, Anequs embodies the precarious, oscillating mode of "walking in two worlds"—a condition vividly captured by the metaphor of "a high heel on one side and a moccasin on the other", as discussed in Enright's 2023 interview with Cara Romero (Enright, 2023). This state is shaped by the constant negotiation between her Indigenous island identity and the colonial norms imposed upon her by the Anglish. This tension manifests in tangible, embodied moments of discomfort and resistance throughout her journey: upon first donning the academy uniform, she feels a profound sense of alienation, frowning at her reflection and perceiving herself as "some other Anequs; an Anequs dressed up like an English woman" (Chapter 13, para. 41); similarly, when attending the Valkyrjafax ball, she describes herself as "very much like a paper doll" (Chapter 45, para. 3) while clad in Anglish formal attire. These embodied reactions signal her rejection of external cultural symbols and aesthetic norms that threaten her island identity, as she is repelled by the deliberate conformity to Anglish standards and the rigid observance of complex social etiquette. Her grandmother directly links her departure to the decline of their community: "This is how Masquapaug will die… slowly by bleeding away its young people. More and more of you every year" (Chapter 6, para. 42), implicitly equating Anequs's departure with the dissipation of the community's vitality. Thus, Anequs's experience epitomises the broader dilemma of contemporary Indigenous peoples navigating the tension between external engagement and cultural continuity. Existing in a liminal space shaped by colonial legacies, they are forced to reconcile their ancestral roots with the realities of a world that often refuses to see them beyond narrow, oppressive frameworks, their identities and ways of life in a state of perpetual flux and negotiation.

II. The Negotiative Stage: Cultural Translation and Identity Fluidity

As Wang (2023, p.9) identifies, Bhabha's concept of "cultural negotiation" represents "a complex process of interaction and transformation that takes place in postcolonial societies, wherein the direct collision between two heterogeneous cultures is viewed as 'negotiation rather than negation'" (Bhabha, 2004, p. 37). The colonised, through cultural negotiation, are able to appropriate, translate, rehistoricise and read anew shared cultural signs (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37), thus creating new meanings,

rearticulating identities, and dismantling the authority of colonial discourse. During the negotiative stage, Anequs evolves into a cultural translator and knowledge broker: she actively disseminates Masquapaug's Indigenous epistemologies while bringing to light the coloniser-defined history that erases the island community's pre-colonial agency. Simultaneously, she selectively absorbs Lindmarden's technical knowledge conducive to the island's survival. Thus, she forges a two-way interactive bridge between Masquapaug and Lindmarden and endowing "cultural negotiation" with a concrete, practice-based framework.

First, the Masquapaug people's human-dragon symbiosis tradition is rooted in their core cognition of harmonising with nature, respecting all living beings, and holding awe for the natural order—an indigenous approach to "understanding the world through indigenous ontological epistemology" (Warnes & Sasser, 2020, p. 63). This worldview is not abstract but is embodied in lived experience, most vividly in Anequs's extraordinary, supernatural bond with Kasaqua. Their innate mutual communicative connection allows Anequs to perceive Kasaqua's curiosity, fear, hunger, and fatigue, while Kasaqua keenly captures Anequs's emotional fluctuations, forging a soul-deep, intertwined rapport. On this basis, Anequs further deconstructs the Anglo logic of equating dragons with subjugated beasts and alienating dragon breath into an industrial tool for mining and military applications. When confronted with Captain Einarsson's interrogation—"You will tell us the circumstances which led you to possess this dragon" (Chapter 14, para. 7)—she publicly retorts, "I don't possess her, sir; it's not as if she's a thing I own." (Chapter 14, para. 8), directly challenging the colonial mindset that frames non-human beings as exploitable property; when Marta articulates the Anglish view of dragons as objects to be regulated, claiming that if dragoneers fail to prove themselves equal to the task, then "Dragons that are tame can sometimes be kept in wild animal collections and used for breeding, but most usually they're destroyed" (Chapter 19, para. 35), Anequs pushes back sharply, asserting, "Dragons are sacred to my people," and clarifying the cultural specificity of her community's relationship with dragons: "The word for 'dragoneer' in Masquisit is 'Nampeshiweisit'. It means 'person who belongs to a dragon'."(Chapter 19, para. 39); when Anglish asks: "What do you hope to achieve with your dragon, when you've completed your education?" (Chapter 41, para. 20), Anequs gives a clear answer (Chapter 41, para. 21):

> *I intend, when my education is complete, to go back to Masquapaug and to utilize Kasaqua's talents to assist my community—to produce zurfni*[1] *to enrich the soil, or to draw water from the air in a dry growing season. Our blacksmiths are always in want of quality isen*[2]*, as it can't be mined on the island, and I've read that isen can be derived from seawater with dragon's breath. I've entertained the idea that perhaps someday I could master the skilta that would allow me to produce strahlendstone, which is much desired by tinkers for the powering of tatkraftish devices. A tatkraftish gristmill could be of great use to my people, for example. We currently grind most of our corn by hand milling.*

[1] a basic ather equivalent to nitrogen.
[2] a basic ather equivalent to iron

Through these interventions, Anequs affirms the Masquapaug tradition of symbiotic coexistence with the natural world and dismantles the colonial episteme that reduces non-human beings to exploitable property or disposable tools.

Second, Anequs presents the Masquapaug understanding of interconnected ecological and communal ethics. During the natural philosophy interview at Kuiper's Academy, when Professor Ulfar raises the hypothetical scenario of "a patch of land where a crop isn't doing well" (Chapter 14, para. 22), she draws on her community's generational experience to outline practical solutions: examining soil quality (assessing sandiness, clay content, or salinity), observing sunlight patterns, following crop rotation cycles (e.g., arrowroot after corn, onions after arrowroot), and utilising companion planting (such as squashes shading corn and beans climbing cornstalks). She also suggests soil amendments like seaweed, dead fish, or autumn leaves for overly sandy soil, and sand for clay-heavy soil, noting that salty soil is only suitable for hardy plants like beach plums. When Ivar Stafn says that her people have no sense of property, Anequs explains, "We don't hoard things Those of us who have give to those of us who don't, because we care for one another." (Chapter 20, para. 15). In this way, Anequs articulates an understanding of the island as a living, interconnected socio-ecological system that encompasses both ecological dynamics and human communal relations—a system grounded in shared care and reciprocal responsibility.

Third, the Lindmarden people uphold an official historiography that disregards the long-standing presence of the Masquapaug people. In their official account, Stafn Whitebeard is a preeminent seafarer and mapwright who departed Vinberland in 1626 to chart the eastern coast of North Markesland. His voyage is purported to have yielded the discovery of "the Fishhook Headland, Nack and Mask Islands, Gannet Cove and the many islands therein, Narrow Island, and Narrow Cove" (Chapter 20, para. 49). During his return journey in 1628, a severe southern storm damages his vessel on a stony reef off Fishhook Headland; lacking the time and tools for repairs ahead of winter, Whitebeard and his crew makes landfall on the mainland. Finding the mainland of North Markesland "pleasant and fruitful" (Chapter 20, para. 49), some of these people are said to have established a settlement that would later be formalised as Vastergot. Confronted with this colonial narrative that erases Indigenous prior presence, Anequs asserts that before the arrival of Lindmarden people, Vastergot have long been inhabited by the Maswachuisit people—known as "the great blue hill people" who "were great friends of the Naquisit and Masquisit before the plague" (Chapter 20, para. 50) . Later on, she further explains that their collective memory is anchored in tangible evidence: this includes the "great dying" (Chapter 52, para. 34), an event within living memory (dating to her great-great-grandmother's childhood) that can be corroborated by "paintings and carvings and such" (Chapter 52, para. 37). It also encompasses evidence of a large pre-event population on Masquapaug, substantiated by physical ruins "on Slipstone Island, and on Beachy Hill and near Great Sweet Pond", as well as "on Naquipaug" and "on the mainland" (Chapter 52, para. 39). In doing so, she challenges Lindmarden's colonial erasure of her people's past and sovereignty. This practice of reestablishing Indigenous historical discourse aligns with the deconstruction of Western biased perceptions of islands argued by Su and Wang (2024, p. 203, 204):

> *Moreover, a close observation of the global distribution of islands reveals that islands do not exist in isolation. In fact, long before the advent of Western colonial era, a vast and dynamic network of exchange had already taken shape among islands…Indigenous islanders' imagination of their homeland is not confined by coastlines; instead, it is based on the connections between islands, regarding the ocean and surrounding islands as important components of their homeland.*

Anequs's actions mirror this deconstructive logic: just as Western discourse stereotypes islands as insular and isolated, it similarly erases the pre-colonial existence of the islanders and their inter-ethnic connections. By reaffirming the pre-colonial history of indigenous peoples, she "counters the colonialist discourse that denies history and culture to the colonised" (Ngom, 2020, p. 196) and challenges the colonial-centric framework that distorts both the true attributes of islands and the lived experiences of indigenous peoples.

Fourth, Anequs actively articulates the island's perspectives on gender and marriage, which stand in stark contrast to the patriarchal norms of the mainland. In Lindmarden society, a rigid gender regime prevails: women are confined to narrow, passive roles defined by marriage and domesticity, their worth measured by their ability to marry well and fulfill social expectations. In response to Marta's account of this patriarchal ideology, Anequs explains that Masquapaug rejects such rigid binaries, recognising non-binary identities such as *mupauanakausonat*—"a little girl who grows up to be a man, or a little boy who grows up to be a woman" (Chapter 21, para. 52)—without stigma. She also elaborates that love on the island is framed as an equal bond between mutually attracted individuals, unconstrained by skin color, gender, class, or property; women exercise full autonomy in choosing partners; same-gender relationships are accepted as natural and valid. This sharp contrast between Masquapaug and Lindmarden epitomises the argument of island feminism proposed by Karides, which holds that "in the pre-contact Pacific, non-binary expressions of gender and sexuality were customary and, in many instances, revered until the arrival of British imperialists and US missionaries imposed the patriarchal logic of their gender and sexuality regimes" (Karides, 2016, p. 34). By centering the Masquapaug's gender traditions, Anequs rearticulates women's "identities/subjectivities and womanhood" in a patriarchal society world where "women are still denied their social and sexual rights and that is fraught with patriarchal structures of violence, suppression and exploitation" (Ahmad & Shafiq, 2020, p. 949).

As Anequs spreads Masquapaug's wisdom to Lindmarden, Lindmarden's technological knowledge and systematic methodologies also gradually benefit Anequs, providing support for Anequs's identity practice and spatial integration. Professor Ulfar guides Anequs to grasp the basic methodology of natural philosophy through situational questioning: starting from observing phenomena, formulating hypotheses, and designing verification pathways. He poses the question, "Let us suppose that you have a patch of land where a crop isn't doing well. What would you do?" (Chapter 14, para. 22), prompting Anequs to reason from the perspectives

of her community's crop rotation experience. Professor Ulfar then summarises her insights into a hypothesis-based experimental design. This interaction not only helps Anequs understand the logical structure of observation, hypothesis, and verification but also equips her with systematic thinking to decompose complex phenomena.

More critically, Anequs gains access to *skiltakraft,* the core curriculum at Kuiper's Academy, where she learns that a dragon's uncontrolled breath "reduces all things that it touches to their most fundamental stable components" (Chapter 25, para. 19), whereas properly directed *skilta* can channel this power toward productive ends. Through mastery of *ather*-channeling figures and transmutation sequences, Anequs acquires practical competencies directly applicable to Masquapaug's needs. These technical foundations are subsequently extended through Anequs's engagement with Niquiat's tinker co-op. There, Zhina presents core engineering drawings of engines salvaged from sunken ships, demonstrating power generation through the interaction of copper coils and iron cores. The members emphasise the functional centrality of *strahlendstone* (a luminescent substance derived from dragon breath) and *loodglas* (a lead-based glass for isolating radioactive elements), both refined through *skiltakraft* processes. Their discussions foreground the feasibility of utilising dragon breath and associated technologies for energy conversion and material processing. When spatial constraints in Vastergot impede further development, Anequs proposes: "Build it on Masquapaug." (Chapter 34, para. 26). This proposal indicates Anequs's emerging capacity to identify how her homeland might accommodate technical experiments utilising the very competencies she is acquiring.

During the process of the above-mentioned knowledge exchange, Anequs's identity is not a static construct but unfolds dynamically amid the tension between upholding her island's cultural roots and engaging with external systems—with her sense of islander identity as the core, she evolves from passive resistance to external influences toward the active reconstruction of identity boundaries and spatial meaning. Ultimately, she forges a hybrid identity that centres on island culture while integrating knowledge acquired from the academy. The essence of this dynamic evolution lies in Anequs's initial engagement with the Third Space, as conceptualised by Homi Bhabha. Bhabha argues that minority or marginalised groups can transcend the one-way identity discipline imposed by dominant systems within the Third Space, enabling them to negotiate cultural meanings and redefine their identities (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37, 38). Anequs's identity transformation precisely embodies this process: she moves from being positioned as a "different" Other (Said, 1978, p. 40) under external framing to emerging as an active negotiating subject—a shift manifested specifically in two dimensions:

Regarding Anglo festivals and clothing, Anequs's attitude evolves from outright resistance to selective acceptance and cultural dialogue. Upon initial exposure to Anglish formal attire and prescriptive social rituals, she manifests pronounced alienation and physical discomfort. Yet as she gains a more nuanced grasp of Anglo cultural practices, she shifts from dismissal to a stance of cultural inquiry and mutual recognition. This transformation is particularly evident in her engagement

with the Anglish Jule festival, as she proactively shares, "My people don't celebrate Jule; we celebrate Nikkomo I don't really know much about Jule, since I've never known anyone who celebrates it. Are gifts customary?" (Chapter 61, para. 10). She not only listens carefully to Sander's introduction to Jule—asking follow-up questions about its traditions—but also prepares gifts for her friends in line with the custom, weaving this external practice into the Masquapaug ethos of reciprocal care. In this way, she develops what Yang Liu (2025, p. 155). terms "judgment and selective recognition of the value of foreign cultures"—a stance that guides her to embrace only those Anglo customs (like Jule gift-giving) that align with Masquapaug people's ethos.

A more significant change is reflected in the upgrading of Anequs's cognition of identity value from passive protection to active knowledge production. When she first leaves the island, her core goals are twofold: one is to avoid Kasaqua being destroyed as a feral dragon, and the other is to find someone who could teach her to shape Kasaqua's breath. To achieve these two goals, she chooses to enter the academy—this was essentially an attempt to obtain the technical means to protect the island by integrating into the academy system and adapting to external rules. Later, however, during an interview, she takes the initiative to propose (Chapter 41, para. 21):

> *Kasaqua's breed isn't well described or documented in any of the available lore, and my observations of her growth and behavior might be of interest to those who make comparative studies of dragons.*

In doing so, she integrates her identity as an islander with a scholar's perspective. This transformation—from safeguarding the island to contributing to cross-cultural knowledge production—signifies that her identity is no longer confined within her community but evolves into a bridge connecting the island and the mainland. She thus reclaims her colonially defined identity, reconstructing its worth in the Third Space as both a guardian of her people's cultural traditions and a producer of cross-cultural knowledge.

III. The Emancipatory Stage: Spatial Community and the Atypical Other

In this stage, Anequs undertakes two pivotal acts that fundamentally shift Masquapaug's standing in relation to Anglish authority—moving the island from a position of marginal invisibility to one of recognised autonomy. First, Anequs articulates Masquapaug's stance on coexistence while contextualising the reasons behind the earlier attacks on Naquipaug (Chapter 83, para. 22):

> *We on Masquapaug have no interest in fighting anyone, but I don't think anyone would be especially pleased if Norsfolk decided they wanted to come and live on Masquapaug in numbers, the way they do on Naquipaug. We're more interested in keeping to our own affairs.... Naquipaug didn't have anything that anyone wanted, either, until the coal was uncovered.*

By speaking openly about Naquipaug people's "real sufferings covered by colonial powers" in front of the authority figure, Anequs secures "visibility" (Deng, 2023, p. 2292) for

the community's unspoken trauma and reclaims their suppressed historical narrative. Anequs also secures the *jarl's* understanding of her community's dual core: their complete lack of intent to attack others and their desire for self-governance—laying critical groundwork for the island's revised status.

Second, midway through Anequs's exchange with the *jarl,* an assassin suddenly appears and opens fire, wounding Anequs, Kasaqua, and the *jarl* in quick succession. In this moment of crisis, Anequs and Kasaqua surge into a merged, anguished unity. With ferocious speed yet deliberate restraint, Kasaqua neutralises the assassin by reducing him to ash and crucially stops short of harming any bystanders—all because Anequs, through their shared connection, urgently willed it to "stop it stop it stop it!" (Chapter 83, para. 28). Kasaqua's controlled defense directly disproves the Anglo myth that Indigenous-bonded dragons are feral and ungovernable and affirms Masquapaug's ancient ethos of human-dragon symbiosis. The magical realist fusion of Anequs and Kasaqua mirrors the island's long-standing ethos of symbiosis between humans and the natural world, rather than domination, revealing "the cultural traditions of indigenous people and the basis of their identity building, shaking the stereotypes established by the dominant culture" (Deng, 2023, p. 2292). Anequs's sustained identity practices and political advocacy pave the way for Masquapaug's transformation from a colonially marginalised space to an equal participant. From a political perspective, the island's status achieves a qualitative leap, which is concentrated in the realisation of political rights and basic human rights. Previously, the island long faced the threat of infringement from the mainland, had no right to speak politically, and the islanders were labelled as savages, overall wandering outside the mainstream society. Today, driven by Anequs's efforts, Jarl Joervarsson issues an official statement that all residents of the outlying islands are citizens of Lindmarden, their rights and interests are clearly protected by law, and any violent acts against them will be dealt with in accordance with the law. Furthermore, Jarl Joervarsson promotes the construction of a dragonhall in Theodore's hometown. Functioning precisely as Bhabha's Third Space "where differences can be celebrated, and new possibilities can emerge" (Shalini & Batta, p. 66), the dragonhall embodies both Indigenous human-dragon symbiosis and adapts mainland standardised governance, destabilising the colonial binary of 'civilised mainland vs. savage island'.

Anequs's interactions with Theodore, Sander, Liberty, and Marta embody the social coexistence between the island and the mainland—a microcosm forged by individuals from marginalised identity camps outside the colonial mainstream. Anequs is an Indigenous islander denied by the colonial system; Theodore is a Naquisit orphan stigmatised as the son of a traitor; Sander is a sickly child dismissed as defective by his noble family; Liberty is a Black indentured maid oppressed by both race and class; and Marta is an Anglo upper-class woman for whom Anglo societal norms prescribe participation in social circles as her proper path—yet she elects to serve as a dragon companion, a role traditionally reserved for men. None of them fit the "dominant majority group" scholar Bosco (2024) describes (p. 83), for whom the aspiration toward a Third Space devolves into a form of collectivism, and even cosmopolitanism (p. 85). As Bosco further contends (p. 87):

> *Instead of an epiphanic moment of reconciliation or negotiation of cultures, we will see that the migrant subject in her quest for liberation from ethnic exclusivity is finally absorbed into mainstream society. So, the third space, instead of serving as an agency of negotiation, becomes a tool manipulated by the forces of neocolonialism (the larger dominant group).*

Anequs and her companions defy this trajectory: they do not "seek liberation from ethnic exclusivity only to be integrated into mainstream society", nor do they succumb to the "unjust homogenisation" that "disregards ethnographic and cultural boundaries" (Bosco, 2024, p. 84). Instead, they form a pluralistic, symbiotic marginal community within the mainland's colonial hierarchy—one that preserves their distinct identities while fostering mutual empowerment. Anequs shares the island's dragon culture and survival wisdom, acting as a cultural bridge between the island and the mainland; Theodore, invited by Anequs, steps out of isolation to return to the island, channeling mainland knowledge back to his ancestral home; Sander rejects his family's pressure to conform and embraces his differences, evolving from an object to be corrected into a self-identifying subject; Liberty resists indenture oppression—working part-time to repay debts and seize personal freedom with her own hands; Marta confronts her cognitive biases and advocates for fair treatment for Anequs to her father. Their interactions weave the island's indigenous cultural understandings with the mainland's diverse perspectives, forming a highly inclusive community that embraces differences in cultural background, social identity, personal traits, and lived experiences.

The formation of the spatial community between the island and the mainland, achieved through multi-dimensional endeavours: institutional safeguards and empowerment, the construction of dragonhalls as a platform for exchange of culture and knowledge, and the symbiotic coexistence of marginalised groups, is not accidental or spontaneous. Instead, it is enabled primarily by Anequs's successful dissemination of the island's ethics of symbiosis between humans and nature, values of mutual aid, suppressed local history, as well as its inclusive understandings of gender and love.

With the formation of the spatial community, Anequs's identity practice transcends the geographic and symbolic boundaries of the island, expanding into multifaceted domains including cultural preservation and innovation, and collaborative knowledge co-creation. More importantly, amid the interplay between the island and the mainland, she breaks free from the passive paradigms imposed on the colonial Other: she transcends the framework of "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86)—which theorises the subordinate positioning of the colonised—and escapes the trap of "cultural subservience" (Wang, 2024, p. 327):

> *Cultural subservience refers to the process of obedience and servility of the colony to the imperialist culture, which is also a process by that colonial residents changed the imperialist culture from external and intrusive culture to internal and intrinsic culture with the deepening of*

> *colonization. In this process, the forms of imperial power and domination, including education and language, can oppress people (most often those Oriental Others, but also anyone who is not Western and white) and keep them oppressed, since they internalize the destructive self-doubts and hierarchical inferiority which such values, practices and discourse suggest.* (Wisker, 2007, p. 109).

Through intentional practices of historical redress, decolonial knowledge construction, and Indigenous cultural narration, Anequs ultimately breaks free from "cultural subservience" and forges an atypical Other identity defined by four core tenets: resisting passive marginalisation, dismantling colonial binary oppositions, upholding indigenous epistemological roots and fostering pluralistic coexistence. In this way, she emerges as a central agent in cultural negotiation. The practical path of her identity construction is specifically reflected in the following three dimensions:

First, in resisting colonial discourse, she undertakes historical correction centered on ethnic memory. She counters the colonial framing of the island as "remote and isolated" (DeLoughrey, 2007, p. 8) by reconstructing its pre-colonial interconnectedness with mainland Indigenous communities (the Maswachuisit people) and reclaiming the history of "the great dying" (Chapter 52, para. 34), supported by tangible evidence of pre-colonial civilisation. Faced with the colonial stigmatisation of Indigenous resistance as illegitimate rebellion, she reframes the 1825 events at Naquipaug, rejecting the colonial label of "rebellion" (Chapter 82, para. 43) and clarifying that the islanders' actions were a reactive response to settlers' illegal land seizures, treaty violations, and murder—echoing the empirically documented, foundational history of settler violence in the region, where "raids on Indian communities, kidnappings, and further enslavement" (Hauptman, 2019, p. 160) persisted through the early colonial period. In so doing, Anequs deconstructs colonial historiography and restores the suppressed Indigenous past.

Second, Anequs dismantles the patriarchal and colonial stigmatisation of Indigenous womanhood, directly confronting the dehumanising stereotypes imposed by Anglish discourse. As exemplified by Ivar Stafn's invasive inquiries, Anglish society frames island women through a degrading, paternalistic lens—pathologising their coming-of-age and marital customs as evidence of moral depravity. Stafn's questions about the age of sexual maturity reduce Indigenous women to objects of colonial fantasy, conflating cultural difference with sexual licentiousness. Against this backdrop, Anequs remains steadfast in her commitment to the Indigenous values of autonomy and mutual respect, which she embodies through her radical engagement with Liberty, a Black indentured servant confined to the lowest rungs of Anglo society. When Liberty expresses her desire to become a seamstress, Anequs affirms her skill and extends a personal invitation to her island: "We're always in want of women with skill." (Chapter 51, para. 48). Furthermore, she openly declares her interest in courting Liberty once she is free, rejecting the Anglish framing of Black women as disposable servants and instead positioning Liberty as a skilled, autonomous individual worthy of love and respect. In doing so, Anequs deconstructs the colonial myth of Indigenous primitivism and reclaims

the legitimacy of her people's gender practice. Additionally, facing the colonisers' dehumanising label of 'savage' for the islanders, Anequs demonstrates academic abilities far exceeding expectations through independent learning. Professor Ezer once openly dismissed her and Theod, stating, "You are each being tolerated in this class. I don't expect either of you to gain much of anything from it" (Chapter 25, para. 10). In response, when given the choice, Anequs withdrew from the course and turned to self-directed study: she "read all the books in the library" and "practiced drawing *skiltas* until I got blisters from the quill" (Chapter 84, para. 35). In the subsequent *skiltakraft* exam, she accurately completed questions involving "things from the second-year texts, and from library texts that hadn't been assigned to her" (Chapter 84, para. 21), demonstrating a thorough grasp of *skiltakraft* principles. Her achievement stems not from mimicking colonial knowledge systems, but from autonomous exploration and persistent practice—ultimately shattering colonial prejudices with tangible evidence.

Third, Anequs consistently resists the colonial discourse's othering of island culture and its attempts at enforced "assimilation" (Wang, 2024, p. 327) by upholding her cultural roots and remaining unwaveringly committed to her Indigenous identity. Specifically, Anequs rejects the colonial myth that assimilation into Anglo society equals 'progress'—a cornerstone of colonial assimilationist logic. When Marta probes her post-education plans, asking, "Do you intend to simply go back to your island, then, once you've completed your education?" (Chapter 29, para. 5) and suggesting, "You could increase your station in life if you'd just—" (Chapter 29, para. 7), Anequs responds with unwavering resolve, and adds, "I am not at all discontent with 'my station in life' as you put it, and I have no desire whatsoever to become a member of Anglish society" (Chapter 29, para. 8). This refutation undermines the colonial assumption of Anglish social superiority. Similarly, when Frau Kuiper urges her to integrate into the dragoneer social circle and frames assimilation as "exposure to civilization" (Chapter 72, para. 37), Anequs clarifies, "There is nothing uncivilized about my people, ma'am" (Chapter 72, para. 38) and reaffirms her cultural identity and rejects the implicit charge of island barbarism (Chapter 72, para. 36):

> *I am a Masquisit woman, a native of Masquapaug. Kasaqua is a dragon native to the land that you call North Markesland. I am not a dragoneer, I am a Nampeshiweisit. When I've learned all that I can learn here, ma'am, I am going to go home.*

Her commitment to returning home is realised at the narrative's close, as she "went home, to Masquapaug" with Theodore (Chapter 87, para. 19, 20)—a final act of resistance that prioritises cultural belonging over colonial notions of upward mobility. Anequs's series of actions fundamentally transcends the limitations of Other as defined by Bhabha's mimicry theory. Bhabha (1994, p. 86) conceptualises mimicry as "a sign of double articulation; it is both a strategy of power and a mode of appropriation and resistance, both complicity and subversion". Typical Other figures in literary works often embody this mimicry through behaviors such as "wearing Western-style clothes, taking pride in speaking French, and submitting to European colonial ideas to a certain degree" (Lu, 2024, p. 70)—actions that, while seemingly resistant, remain entangled within the framework of colonial discourse.

Ultimately, as the Third Space collapses, such figures often regress into "passively mimicking white colonisers and imposing the power discipline they once endured (at Brussels Airport on the Tutsi people)" (Lu, 2024, p. 72). This phenomenon exposes that even when mimicry carries resistant intent, its essence remains tethered to the residual logic of colonial discourse, trapping individuals in a self-perpetuating cycle of internalising and reproducing the oppressive logic they seek to escape. As Ngom (2020, p. 206) observes:

> *Ali explains mimicry as a lack of self-esteem that compels those around him to imitate other people, killing their own civilization and culture. This is the cultural suicide he conceptualizes as merchandising one's soul.*

Bride in *God Help the Child* similarly exemplifies this trap: after being "branded by cultural postcolonialism", he "becomes obsessed with the mainstream world, pursues whiteness paranoically and morbidly, suffers from 'cultural albinism'", allowing "whiteness to pervade every detail, striving to package himself as white and erasing the black skin he sees as a symbol of inferiority" (Wu & Li, 2023, p. 87). This choice—total capitulation to colonial culture and active abandonment of one's cultural roots—amounts to unqualified acceptance of colonial discourse. For those unable to break free from the colonial power structure, assimilation often reduces them to mere appendages of that system, as they remain confined within the restrictive boundaries of the discourse that marginalised them in the first place.

In stark contrast, Anequs's path of resistance embodies a decisive breakthrough: she neither engages in "obedience and submission" by mimicking the colonisers' lifestyles or thought patterns, nor internalises the "destructive self-doubts and hierarchical inferiority which such values, practices and discourse suggest"—thus refusing to concede to assimilation attempts that demand "obedience and servility of the colony to imperialist culture" (Wisker, 2007, as cited in Wang, 2023, p. 327). Instead, she reconstructs historical cognition through her community's ethnic memory, forges subjective value via knowledge and abilities gained through independent exploration, and participates in cross-cultural dialogue through unwavering identity affirmation and active cultural narration. She not only rejects the predetermined fate of passive marginalisation and dismantles the cultural binary oppositions of the colonial context but also upholds indigenous cultural roots and advances a model of pluralistic coexistence—ultimately contributing to the creation of "a space where differences can be celebrated, and new possibilities can emerge" (Shalini & Batta, 2024, p. 66). This form of resistance, completely decoupled from the colonial discourse framework, enables her to truly break free from the colonial dependence inherent in mimicry, escape the contradictory predicament of resistance intertwined with reliance, and emerge as an independent subject unshackled by colonial logic. In doing so, she offers a new paradigm for colonised communities' resistance—one that operates autonomously, outside the constraints of the colonial discourse system.

Conclusion

Anequs's atypical Other identity transcends the inherent passivity, dependence, and marginalisation of traditional Other figures. Centered on her identity practices, the island–mainland spatial relationship breaks binary opposition and moves beyond the colonial hierarchy to establish a pluralistic spatial order that respects cultural differences and upholds communal autonomy. This process also affirms the atypical Other's pivotal role in spatial reconstruction: initially, the island was framed as a remote, isolated space in colonial discourse; then, through practices of historical correction and cultural dialogue, Anequs gradually deconstructs the colonial hegemony and removes spatial barriers between the island and the mainland; finally, the two break free from their confrontational dynamic. In this way, the novel also realises its decolonial vision through magical realism, which allows the marginalised Indigenous voice to speak and be seen.

In her interview, Cara Romero articulates Indigenous futurism as an intellectual tradition that centers Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to planetary survival. As she states, "we can never imagine a viable future without the original instructions." She frames "life-giving power of Indigenous women" and the "slow-growth heirloom seeds of corn knowledge and corn technology" (Enright, 2023) as irreplaceable to any meaningful vision of tomorrow. These ideals of ecological relationality and gender sovereignty—grounded in land stewardship, communal reciprocity, and fluid egalitarian gender norms—find profound articulation in *To Shape a Dragon's Breath*. By understanding the land as a living, reciprocal system rather than an exploitable commodity, and by upholding relational gender ethics beyond rigid binaries, these Indigenous worldviews provide a forward-looking foundation constructing a sustainable and balanced world.

In the current context of globalisation, the emergence of the Third Space and cross-cultural negotiation has become a powerful trend. The Third Space advocated by Bhabha is a fertile ground full of creativity, which can help different groups break away from the constraints of their respective origins and achieve equal dialogue. Yet in reality, some organisations, "like WTO and SMNs, which operate in the conceptual ground of the third space in creating transcultural and transnational connectivity functions in favour of the powerful nations by sustaining and reinforcing the neocolonial oppression in the present context" (Abou-Agag, 2021, as cited in Bhandari, 2022, p. 177), act in opposition to the core appeal of the Third Space. From the perspective of this article, constructing a genuine Third Space requires confronting "the material conditions and the role of ideology that structures the exploitative relationships between the colonizer and the colonized" (Bhandari, 2022, p. 179), and granting vulnerable groups like the Anequs sufficient right to identity expression and cultural communication. This enables them to hold a space "to deconstruct essentialist identity and binary opposition of the coloniser and colonised or the East and the West" (Bhandari, 2022, p. 177), rather than becoming appendages of the powerful or objects of assimilation. Only in this way can the Third Space truly break through the hegemonic logic of centre-margin and become an effective carrier for resolving inequality and achieving pluralistic coexistence in the era of globalisation.

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