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## A Lesson to be Learned: Reclaiming the Region in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*

### Abstract

Eden Robinson's first novel *Monkey Beach* (2000) offers a complex representation of contemporary Indigeneity in Canada. Set on the northwest coast of British Columbia, it has often been read as an example of northern postcolonial Gothic, a genre operating mainly through the tropes of haunting in the context of a settler nation. This article aims to analyze the ways in which Robinson reclaims the region of the Haisla nation, particularly through "lessons" dispersed throughout the texts: they are geography "lessons" inviting the readers to re-assess the spatial markers of the territory that belongs to the Other and that has been exploited by the colonizers. Second, they are "lessons" in traditional Haisla knowledge that, by openly competing with popular culture references, also make readers aware of a profound cultural difference and thus de-familiarize the cultural space in question. And lastly, they are "lessons" in Indigenous spirituality that, by turning the ghosts and monsters into a familiar part of everyday Haisla reality, bring home the novel's implicit critique of Western skepticism and spiritual emptiness.

### Résumé

Le premier roman d'Eden Robinson *Monkey Beach* (2000) offre une représentation complexe de l'indigénéité contemporaine au Canada. Situé sur la côte nord-ouest de la Colombie-Britannique, il a souvent été interprété comme un exemple du roman gothique postcolonial du nord canadien, un genre qui agit principalement par l'intermédiaire des tropes de la hantise dans le contexte d'une nation colonisatrice. Cet article vise à analyser la manière dont Robinson revendique la région de la nation Haisla, notamment par le biais des «leçons» dispersées dans les textes: il s'agit des «leçons» de géographie invitant les lecteurs à ré-évaluer les marqueurs spatiaux du territoire qui appartient à l'Autre et qui a été exploité par les colonisateurs. Deuxièmement, ce sont des «leçons» de connaissances traditionnelles de la tribu Haisla qui, rivalisant ouvertement avec les références à la culture populaire, rendent les lecteurs sensibles à une profonde différence culturelle et par conséquent rendent insolite l'espace culturel en question. Enfin, ce sont les «leçons» de la spiritualité autochtone qui, en faisant apparaître les fantômes et les monstres dans un cadre familier de la réalité quotidienne de Haisla, éclaircissent la critique implicite du scepticisme occidental et le vide spirituel.

The novel *Monkey Beach* (2000), nominated for the Giller Prize and the Governor General's award, established the Indigenous writer Eden Robinson (Haisla nation) as a fine emerging voice on the Canadian literary scene. The book has been read and interpreted from various angles: a psychological thriller, a coming-of-age and initiation story, a narrative of a quest and

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a story of reconciling cultural clashes. Most profitably, I think, the novel has been framed as an example of the postcolonial Gothic, and even more specifically as the feminist postcolonial Gothic within the Native context (e.g. see Kulperger). This variety of interpretations attests to the textual complexity and multiple thematic and formal conventions that Robinson alludes to. In addition, *Monkey Beach* has provoked a number of scholarly concerns about the practices of cross-cultural writing and reading. While the novel is firmly anchored in the Haisla cultural space, it also deliberately resists some pre-conceived expectations of a “Native” text and much critical attention has been devoted to debating to what extent the novel resists commodification and how to interpret Robinson’s ambivalent and constantly shifting references to racial and cultural difference (e.g. see Dobson).

The novel moves between two time frames – the main story involves the futile search for the main protagonist Lisamarie’s brother Jimmy who is lost at sea. Through flashbacks, Lisamarie narrates the story of her childhood and growing up in the Haisla village Kitamaat situated on the northwest coast of British Columbia. Her extended family and local community consist of both conventional and less conventional characters: Lisa’s middle-class parents and her near-to-flawless brother Jimmy present a relatively functional and safe family environment, even though none of them has an understanding for Lisa’s main peculiarity – her visions, dreams and communication with the spirit world. On the other hand, there is Lisa’s paternal grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, a source of traditional Haisla knowledge who becomes Lisa’s teacher guiding her special skills, and Uncle Mick, a former AIM leader, who actively supports Lisa’s identification with and interest in contemporary Indigenous struggles. While Lisa’s story could be a story of almost any teenager, her skills of seeing ghosts and conversing with them turn her journey to adulthood into a quest to re-connect with and better understand her Indigenous heritage. However, the novel does not evade bringing forward less romantic elements of Haisla life: long-lasting effects of colonization, traumatic experience of residential schools, and destruction of Aboriginal youth through alcohol and drug consumption are all topics underlying Robinson’s depiction of Haisla community.

One of the aspects of Robinson’s text I want to focus on in this article is the ways in which Robinson reclaims the region of both traditional and contemporary Haisla and appropriates it for her own purposes of providing a complex representation of the Haisla culture. In using the term “region,” I refer not only to a geographical area, but also to the historical, cultural and linguistic aspects intimately linked to a particular space and informing the identity of the people inhabiting this space. In this sense, the term evokes its Latin etymology: the noun *regio*, meaning “direction, boundary, district, country,” and the verb *regere*, “to direct, rule” (“Region”). Reclaiming the region comes in many forms in *Monkey Beach* but in this article I am going to briefly focus on three aspects, which Robinson chooses to present in the form of “lessons” dispersed throughout the text, and which preview the cross-cultural dimension of the novel and its effect on the mainstream, non-Indigenous readers. These are geography lessons, consisting in inviting the readers, presumably non-Indigenous ones, to re-assess the spatial markers of the territory that belongs to the Other and that has been seized and exploited by the colonizers. Second, they are lessons in what I call a counter-archive of traditional knowledge which, while openly competing with popular culture references, also makes readers aware of a profound cultural difference and thus defamiliarizes the cultural space in question.



And lastly, they are lessons in various elements of Indigenous spirituality that, by turning the ghosts and monsters into a familiar part of everyday Haisla reality, bring home the novel's implicit critique of Western skepticism and spiritual emptiness.

## A lesson in geography

Early in the novel, Robinson sets out to navigate the readers in her spatial setting. She uses an unconventional form of lesson, a didactic tool that provides the readers with a sensation of being at school or doing homework:

Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. This is Princess Royal Island, ... [which] is the western edge of traditional Haisla territory. *Ka-tee-doux Gitk'a'ata*, the Tsimshians of Hartley Bay, live at the mouth of the Douglas Channel and surrounding areas just north of the island. During land claims talks, some of this territory is claimed by both the Haisla and the Tsimshian nations—this is called an overlap and is a sticky topic of discussion. But once you pass the head of the Douglas Channel, you are firmly in Haisla territory. (Robinson 4)

Robinson goes on to provide a one-paragraph history of the region, alluding to the confusion over the name given by the colonizers to the main Haisla village, Kitamaat. Then she adds another paragraph which instructs the reader's eye to zoom in on the Kitamaat Village itself, "with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean" (5), and the house of Lisamarie Hill's family at the end of it.

This geography lesson previews Robinson's strategies developed later in the novel: it is what Shelley Kulperger calls an "interpellative strategy" which invokes in readers a "spatial awareness through details of cartography, landscape, and architecture" (Kulperger 106). This "spatial awareness," I suggest, is an ambivalent marker of cultural difference: on the one hand, Robinson uses a conventional map as a tool of introducing Haisla territory. The trope of the map, however, is intriguing here because mapping and mapmaking has been identified by a number of postcolonial scholars as a process of asserting colonial domination and as a site of exercising power and control over both territories and people (Boehmer 17–18; Huggan 21). For example, in her study of theories of space, Doreen Massey identifies our common notion of a map as a "coherent closed system," an "ordering representation" (106), a process of "stabilization" (109) that often operates as a "technology of power" (Harley qtd. in Massey 106). Thus, in the above passage from *Monkey Beach*, the map is a familiar trope for non-Indigenous readers to which they can relate within their comfort zone. Quite inconspicuously, however, Robinson defamiliarizes this territory by a powerful re-statement at the end of the paragraph: "you are firmly in Haisla territory" (4). The imperative instructions, as well as the directness of "you," make the readers immediately aware that now we are moving in an unfamiliar terrain. We are the outsiders here and as such we ought to be attuned to cultural difference. Kulperger, drawing on Deleuze and Guatarri's well-known characteristics of one of the features of a mi-



nor literature, identifies this “cartographic exercise” as Robinson’s strategic move to reterritorialize colonial space (Kulperger 107).

This reterritorialization of space through writing the Western map in and out at the same time at the beginning of the novel is complemented by other features of regional geography, this time more local and personal, such as when an abandoned graveyard at Kemano is depicted, presumably in Lisamarie’s narrative voice, by giving instructions to follow a path from her house:

Wonder slowly, careful where you step. No neat row of crosses, no meticulous lawn, no carefully tended flowers will guide you. ... Headstones carved into eagles, blackfish, ravens, beavers appear seemingly at random. In the time of the great dying, whole families were buried in one plot. Pick wild blueberries when you’re hungry, let the tart taste sink into your tongue, followed by that sharp sweetness that store-bought berries lack. Realize that the plumpest berries are over the graves. (82)

Again, the instructions directed at the reader function as an interpellative gesture to contextualize the spatial history. We learn about the local history, perhaps a disease or a military conflict resulting in many deaths, about cultural practices (headstone carvings), as well as about personal memories (the taste of berries). However, the instructions have a different impact here, as they are much less explicit and require that we do some additional homework about the history and culture of Haisla to be able to fully appreciate them. The final invitation to stop and “realize” is a poetic (and defamiliarizing) indication of a cultural difference: what we are supposed to realize here is not clear – perhaps the living presence of ghosts and spirits which the novel foregrounds, perhaps the deep interrelation between the past and present for contemporary Haisla.

The lessons in spatial awareness are extended implicitly through Lisamarie’s trip in a speedboat to meet her parents who are given news about the missing Jimmy. As she travels alone through the waterways that serve as a connecting link between Kitamaat and the surrounding world, she maps the territory for the reader, providing a detailed topography:

The coming squall is near *Ga-bas’wa*, the mountain in the middle, which divides the channel in half: the English name is Hawkesbury Island. Going north around *Ga-bas’wa* will take you right to Hartley Bay and the ocean. But going south is faster even though the channel twists and turns, because I’m aiming for the inside passage, a stretch of water sheltered by islands from the extreme surf and chancy weather of the open Pacific Ocean. To get there, I’ll be traveling down the Verney Passage. I’m going by Ursula Channel so I’ll pass Monkey Beach first, then the ghost town of Butedale, then Bella Bella and finally Namu. (180)

This is yet another lesson in mapping the Haisla territory, though this time it follows the personal quest of Lisa setting out to save her brother who she saw drowning in one of her visionary dreams. The journey is both educational and narrative as it forwards the plot. It is counterbalanced, nevertheless, by another set of descriptive short paragraphs dispersed throughout the depiction of Lisa’s travel; these fragments reflect, in a lyrical fashion, various kinds of, predominantly, seascapes – their moods, seasons, changing light, invisible move-



ments, such as when “[a] sea otter dives. Long streams of sunlight wash through kelp trees, undulating like lazy nelly dancers” (131), or when “[t]he tide rocks the kelp beds, the long dark leaves trail gently in the cloudy green water” (294), or when “mountains slope into the water, where the waves foam against the barnacle- and seaweed-encrusted rocks” (316). Hence Robinson reclaims the region of British Columbia’s northwest coast in all its complexity, both geographically *and* aesthetically, by “overturn[ing] the southern Ontario focus” and turning it into “a new narrative centre” (Andrews 213). It is a space that she knows intimately and that she offers to translate for and share with the readers, but on her own terms.

## A lesson in traditional knowledge

Robinson’s text is instructive not only in providing spatial coordinates of the Haisla region but also in presenting it as a site of traditional knowledge. Similarly to the lessons in geography, Robinson integrates lessons in locating and collecting Native plants, preparing traditional foods and retelling Haisla myths. Some passages provide very detailed, encyclopedia-like descriptions of various kinds of berries (salmonberries, thimbleberries, soapberries), their tastes, their picking time, the differences between them. For example, Lisa recounts her regular trips to the woodlands with both Uncle Mick and Ma-ma-oo: “Mick took me *q ° alh’m* picking in the spring. ... We scanned the ground for the serrated, broad leaves of thimbleberry and salmonberry shoots, *q ° alh’m*. You had to be careful not to pick the ones higher than your knees, because once they were that tall the stalks became woody and no amount of chewing would make them soft” (73). Here Robinson again defamiliarizes the cultural space through introducing and retaining Haisla terms throughout the text – terms that an average reader will most likely be unable to even pronounce, let alone understand all their semantic connotations. In this light, the lessons in Haisla traditional knowledge are complemented by linguistic exercises, through which the readers can learn not only about the Haisla language but also learn fragments of the language itself, which mirrors the process of Lisa’s learning the language from Ma-ma-oo. In a longer passage on the history of the Haisla language, Robinson does not hesitate to insert detailed instructions as if taken out of a language textbook, inspiring the readers to do as they read:

The actual word for the Haisla language is Xa’isla’ala, to talk in the manner of Xa’isla. To say Xa’isla, touch your throat. Say the German “ach” or Scottish “loch.” When you say the first part, the “Xa,” say it from far back in your throat. The apostrophe between the syllables signals both an emphasis and a pause. Say “uh-uh,” the way you’d say it if you were telling a child not to touch a stove. Put that same pause between the first and last syllables of Xa’isla. (193)

This is a performative act that may be read as a genuine proposition to share this knowledge and an invitation for us to participate actively in this cultural exchange. On the other hand, it is no doubt that what is being offered is a very limited access to cultural knowledge and non-Indigenous readers should by no means feel assuaged by such an offer. In spite of these gestures of hospitality, Robinson’s position of cultural host remains ambivalent. Kit Dobson



even argues that Robinson refuses to play the role of the “familiar figure of the Native informant” and rather insists that the “final unspeakability of Haisla life in English acts as a barrier to cross-cultural appropriation” (54).

While some lessons in traditional knowledge teach Lisa (and readers) to safely recognize Native plants and name them in Haisla, others function as recipes for preparing Haisla delicacies – most prominently oolichan grease, not only a staple of Haisla diet but also a source of trade in the past (93). Once again, very precise instructions, imitating the genre of a cookbook, follow:

Fill a large metal boiler with water. Light the fire pit beneath the boiler and bring the water to a boil. Then add the ripened oolichans and stir slowly until cooked (they will float lightly off the bottom). Bring the water to a boil again and mash the fish into small pieces to release oil from the flesh. A layer of clear oil will form on the surface. Scrape out the fire pit and keep the boiler covered. Let simmer... (85–86)

Passages like these serve multiple functions: they provide yet another fragmentary insight into the repertoire of ethnographic knowledge and also, I believe, consciously allude to the project of multicultural writing in which food is often a signifier of cultural difference. The oolichan grease recipe fits into the paradigm of Haisla cultural “primer” (Soper-Jones 17) and certainly the attention that is paid to oolichans throughout the text foregrounds their important role in shaping Haisla identity as it used to be one of the defining features of their life style. In this sense, Robinson reclaims the fragments of traditional knowledge and contributes both to the renewal of this knowledge as well as to inscribing cultural difference in a relatively subdued manner. But the recipe also functions as a mighty reminder of the devastating effects of colonization and industrialization of the Haisla ecosystem which saw oolichans slowly disappear from the rivers contaminated by Alcan, a nearby aluminum factory. Lisamarie comments that while her mother remembers oolichan runs being “so thick, you could walk across the river and not touch the water,” now “you’d have to be pretty dense and desperate to eat anything from that river” (92). Robinson strategically does not fictionalize the place names or the name of the factory and since the whole issue can be easily looked up, the readers can obtain relevant information both from the official Alcan website and opposing eco-activists. Robinson’s use of non-fictional markers helps to raise social awareness about the controversial industry-developing project and Robinson is persistent in her critique of the consequent ecological degradation of the region. In her logic, which is often and rightfully adopted by a number of Indigenous authors, the ecological devastation of Indigenous land has been a continuing part of European colonization and one of the reasons for the disintegration of Indigenous communities: the disappearing fish lead to irrelevance of not only the recipes for oolichan grease but also to the futility of complex storytelling about the fish, which in turn contributes to the decline of Haisla traditional knowledge. Lisamarie does not know what to do about her “gift” because she does not have the requisite knowledge and after Ma-ma-oo’s and Mick’s deaths there is no one else to guide her. The recipe for oolichan grease and other lessons in traditional knowledge, therefore, play a more significant role than just providing colorful background. Rather, they work implicitly to draw attention to and criticize the still



prevailing colonizing approach of the Canadian authorities to contemporary Indigenous communities.

The precise location of the berries and fish activates another, bioregional form of geography. In other words, our textualized movement through the Haisla territory is not facilitated by alluding to the map but according to where the oolichans or salmonberries are. We are presented with a different, Indigenous way of navigating space, a way that is juxtaposed to the figure of the conventional map from the beginning of the novel. This bioregional cartography is then complemented by the re-telling of myths and stories that “run in the family”. Thus Lisa’s mother tells her a story of the Stone Man, a topographic feature in the landscape around Kemano (113), Ma-ma-oo tells Lisa the story of the B’gwus, or sasquatch, a story set on Monkey Beach (211), or the text integrates a postmodern version of the old story of Weegit the raven (295). This knowledge, however, is intimately connected to language; Ma-ma-oo tells Lisa at one point that “to really understand the old stories, ... you had to speak Haisla” (211). As was already pointed out, individual Haisla words are dispersed throughout the text, mirroring Lisa’s language lessons. Even though this allusion to a linguistic recovery may be read as a positive signal, Robinson is simultaneously skeptical about the potential of Lisa to actually learn the Haisla language and become a fluent speaker, as Lisa complains: “She [Ma-ma-oo] would tell me a new Haisla word a day, and I’d memorize it. But, I thought dejectedly, even at one word a day, that was only 365 words a year, so I’d be an old woman by the time I could put sentences together” (211).

Cultural markers of traditional Haisla life are employed by Robinson to point out both “social disintegration and dynamic adaptation” (Soper-Jones 16). Ella Soper-Jones, who frames her reading of Robinson’s novel within the anthropology of Haisla spiritual and cultural practices, argues that this knowledge is preserved through social cognitive maps and that Robinson’s objective is to demonstrate what happens when these “cognitive maps of a traditional culture are compromised by new realities” (16). While the detailed accounts of Haisla cultural practices may be taken to contribute to what Soper-Jones calls “salvage ethnography,” defined by her as the “aesthetic (re-) construction of pre-contact Indigenous experience,” Robinson simultaneously undermines this problematic ideology (Soper-Jones 16). I suggest that one of her strategies of doing this is juxtaposing the lessons in Haisla traditions to popular culture and mainstream Anglo-Canadian life style. Even the characters who function as sources of traditional knowledge and teachers to Lisamarie perform acts of cultural hybridity: Uncle Mick, a former Native activist, is addicted to Elvis Presley’s music to the point of obsession (for example, Lisamarie is named after Elvis’s daughter and Mick experiences a serious looking fit of rage and despair when he learns of Elvis’s death). Similarly, Ma-ma-oo, Lisa’s grandmother and the community elder, who throughout the novel operates as a dignified bearer of culture, passing her knowledge on to Lisa, is also an avid consumer of TV soap operas and regularly and passionately expresses her concerns about the well-being of her favourite Dynasty characters. Scholars have also argued that another strategy that Robinson adopts in order to contest the commodification of her text as an “authentic” Other is her use of “elision, tactical irony, and unanswered questions” (Appleford qtd. in Soper-Jones 18). This is presented, for instance, through the incomplete dialogues that Lisamarie eavesdrops on as a child. These adult conversations often reveal an aspect of Indigenous history or culture (e.g. through references to the





residential school system, Haisla spiritual beliefs, etc.) but they rarely provide the full context. It has been frequently noted that in one of the interviews Robinson admits that she deliberately evaded detailing specific practices so as not to potentially harm her community (Methot, n.pag.). This strategy of withholding a certain type of information, actually quite common among Indigenous authors, may be interpreted as a resistance to the consuming gaze of the Western reader and consequently to the easy assimilation of her text into the categories marketed as “postcolonial literature,” “multicultural literature,” or “ethnic minority literature”. Thus Robinson, in the words of Soper-Jones, “deliberately frustrates, to an instructive end, the reader’s attempts to infer stable meaning from her variously charged motifs” (18).

## A lesson in spectrality

Apart from the lessons in topography and traditional Haisla knowledge, Robinson interweaves elements of Haisla spirituality into her novel. Spirits and ghosts populate the novel as much as other characters do. They come in various sorts: there is the little red-haired man who reappears in Lisa’s bedroom from time to time and Lisa interprets his visits as “death sendings” before someone in her family dies. Then there is the sasquatch, the forest monster, whose actual existence is presented in very ambivalent ways. On the one hand, Robinson takes the sasquatch seriously by having Lisamarie feel, rather than see, his presence on Monkey Beach. On the other hand, the sasquatch’s existence is mocked by Robinson’s references to popular discourse and the media obsession with “recent sightings”:

B’gwus is the focus of countless papers, debates and conferences. His Web site is at [www.sasquatch.com](http://www.sasquatch.com). Grainy pictures, embarrassed witnesses and the muddy impressions of very large feet keep B’gwus on the front page of tabloids and the cover of books which are dismissed as the results of overactive imaginations or imbibing too much alcohol or ingesting funky mushrooms. (317)

Sasquatch has a female counterpart in the novel: T’sonoqua, the ogress, becomes an object of Lisa’s interest in a school project, and is presented as a more powerful counterpart to the consumerist craze inspired by the male sasquatch. Jennifer Andrews interprets Lisa’s ultimate leaning towards this female monster, neglected and marginalized even in the ghost world, as a source of her distinct Haisla identity, one that “can be resurrected productively to serve the needs of Haisla women in particular” (Andrews 221). Further, when Lisa’s parents take her to a psychiatrist, Lisa sees another monster – this time a slimy thing that feeds both on the psychiatrist and herself. Finally, the most potent and dangerous to Lisamarie’s life are the voices of the dead that Lisa keeps negotiating with as she gradually realizes her powers as a shaman.

Interestingly, Lisa’s visions and communication with the spirits are interpreted as the result of an overactive imagination. This would not be surprising, were the skeptical souls not her own parents who, in spite of having an assumed insight into Haisla traditions and even in spite of Lisa’s mother’s supposed (and suppressed) proneness to similar visions, discourage and pathologize Lisa’s encounters with the spirit world and at one point even arrange a meet-



ing with a psychiatrist in order to normativize their daughter's social behavior. Early in the novel, Lisa complains about the lack of understanding shown by her father: "Sometimes I want to share my peculiar dreams with him. But when I bring them up, he looks at me like I've taken off my shirt and danced topless in front of him" (20). Equally, her mother's reaction to her declaration about hearing the crows talk to her consists in only one laconic note recommending Lisa "a Prozac" (3). On another occasion, when Lisa confesses to her mother about the little man visiting her at night, her mother "gave [her] a hug and said everyone has bad dreams and not to be scared of them – they were just dreams and they couldn't hurt [her]" (21). In a peculiar way, this reaction is later echoed by Ma-ma-oo who says something similarly comforting to Lisa but with a completely different emphasis, acknowledging the presence of spirits as a part of *normality*: "You don't have to be scared of things you don't understand. They're just ghosts" (295). So should the parents be interpreted as assimilated and disconnected, preferring, perhaps as a self-defense mechanism, to have nothing to do with the traditional Haisla spirit world? Understandably, the parents might want to protect Lisa from the disillusionment caused by the reality of the mainstream Anglo-Canadian world. Their skepticism may be also read as a more subversive indication that not all Indigenous people must inevitably insist on preserving traditional Indigenous beliefs and some, like Lisa's parents, might simply want to provide a reasonably safe environment for their children to be able to function in mainstream society. In "Learning to Talk with Ghosts," Jodey Castricano provides a different interpretation, though. While framing her reading of *Monkey Beach* by discussing the genre of the European Gothic in relation to the Indigenous context, she examines closely the scene at the psychiatrist's and argues that Lisa's encounter with Western psychology should be read as the novel's effort to invite the readers to "reflect upon the ontological, epistemological, and spiritual consequences of Western culture's materialist drive that has attempted to eradicate 'superstition' or 'mysticism' in the name of psychology" (808). According to her, the novel "challenges the Eurocentric version of Gothic as the signifier, *par excellence*, of psychological unease, perceptual disturbance, or atavistic, and, therefore, pathological tendencies to be explained – and, perhaps, normalized – in terms of hysteria, neuroses, or 'uncanny' primitivism" (Castricano 806). In this reading, Lisa's parents are complicit in the Western pathologization of Indigenous spiritualism, represented by Lisa's visions and communication with the dead, and, by extension, in the continuing colonization. Somewhat similarly, Cheryl Suzack relates the novel's Gothic exploration of both extra- and intra-communal violence with "intimate ruptures that occur in the lives of women and in the relationships among them" (456). She argues that Lisa is confused about her powers due to the "historical erasure of women's intergenerational knowledge," represented in the novel by the loss of a meaningful connection with her female ancestor, who was a powerful shaman exiled from the community after she attempted to use her spiritual knowledge to resist settler invasion (Suzack 456). Again, Lisa's mother would be, in this light, interpreted as complicit in the rupture of these intergenerational links as she refuses to accept the inheritance and pass it on to her daughter.

Apart from depicting Lisa's encounters with ghosts and monsters, Robinson integrates short passages, also in the form of lessons, that imitate a how-to-manual, but the subject is nothing less than "contacting the dead" (139). There are three lessons in contacting the dead: the first one gives instructions on how to approach the spirit world: "Contacting the dead,



lesson one. Sleep is an altered state of consciousness. ... To contact the spirit world, you must control the way you enter this state of being that is somewhere between waking and sleeping” (139). The second lesson provides instructions on how to draw the spirit’s attention by calling its name because “names have power” and if you “call out the name of a supernatural being, ... you will have its instant and undivided attention” (179). The third lesson instructs both Lisa and the reader in the art of concentration: “Contacting the dead, lesson three. Seeing ghosts is a trick of concentration. You must be able to concentrate on nothing and everything at the same time. You must be both asleep and awake. It should be the only thing on your mind, but you can’t want it or expect it to happen. It’s very Zen” (212). While these lessons can be taken in earnest and are actually mirrored in Lisa’s gradual awareness of her shamanistic powers and learning to come to terms with them, Robinson simultaneously undermines, similarly to the lessons in geography and traditional knowledge, the seriousness and “authenticity” of these instructions by mocking allusions to the consumerist mass popularity of New Age and Zen Buddhism: “Lie down. Wear loose clothing. Don’t play any music. Especially don’t play any of that New Age, sounds-of-the-humpback-whale music” (212). This parody comes complete with a comforting pat on the reader’s shoulder in concluding lesson three: “If you have not contacted the dead after several tries, examine your willingness to speak with them. Any fear, doubt or disbelief will hinder your efforts” (212). These lessons in spectrality invoke, I suggest, multiple meanings through complex references – references to notions of authenticity and appropriation, in this case of the Indigenous belief system; to the Western obsession with superficial forms of New Age movements to cover up spiritual emptiness and the accompanying tendency towards skepticism; and also to the “spectral turn,” to use Roger Lockhurst’s term to characterize the resonant and recurrent themes of haunting in literary and critical production (qtd. in Kulperger 121, ft. 1). At the same time, however, these lessons are instructive in drawing our attention to “other” realities in unusual ways: Robinson does not fully explain these short insertions; structurally they seem to function as a pause for reflection. They are a part of the mode of spectrality in the novel that points to the decline of Indigenous spirituality and the need to re-interpret it as something that could be activated as a source of cultural renewal.

In conclusion, the present analysis of selected aspects of the novel’s complex structure draws attention to several formal and thematic peculiarities that contribute to reading Robinson as an author who deliberately dwells upon ambivalences, who privileges unstable meanings and who challenges non-Indigenous readers’ expectations shaped by historical misconceptions of Indigeneity as well as by mainstream marketing of Indigenous literature. The “lessons” dispersed throughout the text serve Robinson not only to position the readers as “learners” (above all, *Monkey Beach* is a lesson in cross-cultural reading) but also to re-work some of the common models of relating to Indigenous realities. In some cases, the lessons of the text “transform the reader from a passive consumer to an active participant” (Lane qtd. in Castricano). In other cases, they function as a reminder of epistemological limitations. So while the lessons do offer an invitation to share the knowledge in a limited way, they also work to resist the commodification and co-option by mainstream multicultural literature which effaces cultural difference in the name of universality. Even though Robinson presents a severe critique of both European colonization as well as contemporary Canadian neo-colonialism by employ-



ing the tropes of spectrality “as a counternarrative to the brutalities of colonialism” (Kramer-Hamstra 112), she does not, however, wallow in the nostalgia of pre-contact Indigeneity. On the contrary, when she introduces an element of the traditional Haisla knowledge or a piece of ethnographic information, sooner or later she undermines it – which is why it is problematic to conclude whether the novel is meant to promote cultural reconciliation or, on the contrary, cultural incommensurability. In the end, Robinson, in my view, successfully reclaims the region in its spatial, cultural and spiritual dimensions; she reclaims it for the Haisla, not for non-Indigenous readers, precisely because she does it in a way that occludes essentialism and rejects the romantic nostalgia for lost origins in favor of a more unresolved cultural heritage that stems from complex negotiations between the past and the present.

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